Introduction
How has the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as IS, ISIS, or ISIL) managed to take over such a large swath of territory in the Middle East? The answer to this question is fundamental not only to understanding this group’s recent sensational success in Iraq and Syria, but also to identifying strategies to defeat it.

The Islamic State’s success can be attributed in large part to sectarian violence and oppression in these two states. In Syria, demonstrations in favor of democratic governance devolved into a civil war that, in the context of a minority-Shia government ruling a majority-Sunni population, quickly took on sectarian contours. In Iraq, the Shia-dominated government systematically oppressed the Sunni minority, generating frustration and anger among the latter. Fundamentally, the Islamic State capitalized on existing frustrations, sectarian violence, and oppression in these two states to develop and expand its power in the region.

Islam’s Schism
There are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world today, divided into two primary sects: Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. Sunni means follower of the sunna, or “way” in Arabic, of the Prophet Mohammed. Sunnis are opposed to political succession of caliphs based on Mohammed’s bloodline. The word Shia is a term that stems from shi’atu Ali, Arabic for “partisans of Ali”. Shias believe that only Mohammed’s descendants should be caliphs because they are part of a divine order. Sunniism is Islam’s dominant sect, making up 85% of the world’s Muslim population while the Shia compose the remaining 15%. Ultimately, Shia identity is rooted in victimhood due to the killing of the Prophet Mohammed’s grandson, Husayn. Iraq, with a Shia-majority population, is currently under a Shia-dominated government. The Assad family, who is Shia, has led Syria even though the majority of the population is Sunni. Over the past several years, violence between Sunnis and Shias has been increasing in these two countries. Shia Muslims usually view Sunnis with suspicion and extremist Sunnis believe Shias are heretics and apostates.

Iraq Under Maliki
With the fall of Saddam Hussein’s government in 2003, the Shia majority (consisting of 60-65% of Iraq’s population of 24 million) began to assert a predominant role in government after decades of suppression and torture under Hussein’s Sunni rule. In April 2006 Nouri al-Maliki (a Shia) was appointed prime minister but found it difficult to govern because the position lacked the power and coherent institutions needed to rule. Over the next several years, however, his rule became increasingly authoritarian as he increased his power through the creation of the “Malikiyoun” (a cohesive group of officials with close personal ties to Maliki) and the use of Iraq’s security services to protect him personally and politically.

Sunni-majority provinces feared the rise of an autocratic Shia-led government and under Maliki’s rule, Iraq’s Sunni minority has been marginalized and sectarian violence has increased. In December 2011 Maliki exiled Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni. The government detained and severely tortured three of his bodyguards until they made dramatic confessions on national television denouncing the Vice President for paying them to commit assassinations and bombings. It was apparent that extreme torture was used to extract these “confessions” and one of the bodyguards died in custody. Maliki also arrested the Vice President’s Sunni Deputy Prime Minister, Rafi al-Issawi. Ayad Allawi, head of the Iraqiya coalition of which al-Hashemi and al-Issawi were senior members, wrote, “The country is slipping back into the clutches of a dangerous new one-man rule, which inevitably will lead to full dictatorship.” In February 2011, December 2011 and 2012, and January 2013 Maliki used Iraq Special Operations Forces to strike down and immobilize political opposition protest movements. This only resulted in the further fracture of Iraqi society. Maliki’s rule was characterized by the increasing sectarian polarization as his Shia-dominated government systematically removed Sunni officials from office and arrested hundreds of Sunnis in response to bombings of Shia neighborhoods.

Syria’s Civil War
The Assad regime has ruled Syria since 1970. The Assad family is Alawite, a heterodox sect of Shia that makes up 13% of the Syrian population. During the 2011 Arab Spring, Syrians took to the streets in protest of their government and called for the institutionalization of democratic ideals rather than an authoritarian government riddled with corruption. Assad was determined to crush the demonstrations. When he re-
sponded with force and violent crackdowns, the protestors gathered with arms. What began as non-violent protests for a more democratic system of governance turned into a civil war that has left hundreds of thousands dead, created more than 3 million Syrian refugees, and left millions more internally displaced.

At the onset, it was thought that extremist groups would attempt to exploit the conflict, especially groups such as al Qaeda and their regional franchises. Furthermore, a distinct divide in affiliation became visible, with Shia groups like Hezbollah supporting the regime while Sunni Muslims (including al Qaeda) fought with the opposition against the regime. Eastern Syria developed into a sanctuary for extremists and foreign fighters aligned with al Qaeda. The open border between Iraq and Syria has allowed jihadists to travel freely between countries. The al Nusra Front, who was al Qaeda’s official franchise in Syria, was seen as a legitimate rebel fighter group against the Assad Regime. It was the fastest growing and most effective opposition group due to its relatively easy access to supplies and resources. There was substantial support for al Nusra among the Syrian population because of their ability to provide government services in opposition-held territories. It is important to keep in mind, however, that many fighters in Syria have been fundamentally Syrian nationalists.

Rise of the Islamic State

The Islamic State had its beginnings as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, an al Qaeda affiliate) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, became the leader of AQI. Al Qaeda in Iraq was a group of puritanical Sunni militants who plagued Iraq with suicide bombings, beheadings, and kidnappings that targeted both Shia and Sunni Muslims. It pursued a unified Islamic nation that believed Shias were apostates who must be fought. AQI’s goals included waging “jihad in the cause of God in order to exalt his word, liberate all Muslim territories from infidels and apostates [Shias], and establish sharia law in these territories,” as well as establishing “a wise caliphate similar to the theocracy established by the Prophet Mohammed.”

In April 2013, al-Baghdadi expanded into Syria, a move very much in keeping with traditional al Qaeda patterns of moving into conflicts where they claim to support the opposition. They use their resources to gain new recruits and radicalize the opposition to create a strong presence within the country. However, the decision also brought him into conflict with al Qaeda, as entering Syria meant Baghdadi encroached on al Nusra’s (another al Qaeda affiliate) turf. Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al Qaeda since the death of bin Laden, ultimately disavowed al-Baghdadi over his refusal to adhere to
demands he return to Iraq (as well as his divisively brutal methods). Al-Baghdadi went on to declare that the two al Qaeda groups would merge under a single name: the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (translated as “the Levant” or “Greater Syria”), or ISIS.

The Islamic State made significant military and territorial gains despite being disavowed by al Qaeda in February of 2014. The territory that ISIS carved out of Iraq and Syria allowed them to create a haven for training recruits and planning attacks. For recruitment, ISIS has drawn from the pool of foreign fighters already in Syria fighting for jihad. In June 2014, they captured Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul. The speed with which ISIS has taken territory suggests that it has been cooperating with Sunnis who were faithful to Saddam Hussein and who continued to fight against Maliki’s Shia-dominated government. In July 2014, Baghdadi declared himself the caliph of his new Islamic State. The last Islamic caliphate to exist was dissolved by the modernist reformer Atatürk in 1924 with the founding of the modern Turkish Republic. Much of the Muslim world came to recognize that the continuation and revival of the caliphate was not a realistic prospect due to the shifting world order. They believed the moral system of Islam could be realized within the confines of the nation state. The Islamic State, however, does not believe this. Since its beginnings as AQI, its goal has been to establish a caliphate; its main objectives are to “spread monotheism on earth, cleanse it of polytheism, to govern according to the law of God, [and] to repulse the aggressors.”

The violence al-Baghdadi carried out in Iraq under ISIS has become even more prevalent under the black banner of the Islamic State. ISIS conducts savage beheadings and executions of captured soldiers and men in conquered towns and villages. Christians and Shia Muslims have been slaughtered and non-Sunni shrines and places of worship destroyed. ISIS views women as second-class citizens that are to be used for sex and then discarded or sold as slaves to other men. Young girls are given as brides to men more than twice their age. Women and girls are forced to undergo genital mutilation in ISIS-controlled towns.

Because of their brutality and radical interpretation of Islam, the Islamic State has little support from the Muslim ummah, or community, in the region. Al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen, the mainstream Sunni religious community, including Cairo’s al Azhar seminary, and Yussuf al Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric who serves as a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, represent just a few of the many Muslims who have denounced the Islamic State.

**Conclusion**

President Obama has vowed that the U.S. will “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State because it threatens American interests in the Middle East, as well as national security at home. However, in September 2014, President Obama and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry implied that local and regional actors would be expected to play an important role in the defeat of ISIS by engaging in ground combat operations while the U.S. focused on providing logistical support and training for Iraqi forces. Looking ahead, addressing the immediate security and human rights concerns of the people living under ISIS control is a key objective for the U.S. and its allies. At the same time, however, identifying tools, structures, and programs to address the underlying sources of the Islamic State’s success will be paramount to ensuring long-term security, stability, and ultimately prosperity. A solution to the challenge of the Islamic State is not currently evident, and may not even be possible, but that does not mean the world should not attempt to at least manage the problem of extremist forces waging a civil war in two countries. Doing so is in the interest of all humanity.

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