V. Objectives and Scenarios for ISIL (Drs. Ali E. Abbas, Richard S. John, Johannes Siebert, Detlof von Winterfeldt,162 University of Southern California, Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events [CREATE], DHS)

Abstract

This study addressed the following three questions:

1. What are the objectives of ISIL?
2. What are the objectives of ISIL’s followers?
3. What are the scenarios and associated uncertainties for the success or failure of ISIL?

To address these questions, we analyzed the transcripts of interviews with 59 subject matter experts, and we also conducted an extensive review of Internet and other open sources. The results indicate that ISIL pursues four strategic objectives “Establish a Caliphate in Iraq and the Levant,” “Control and Govern the Caliphate,” “Expand Islam and Sharia Law Worldwide,” and “Recreate the Power and Glory of (Sunni) Islam.” The followers’ objectives can be partitioned into three strategic objectives: “humanitarian fulfillment,” religious fulfillment,” and “personal fulfillment.” The scenario analysis identified several key events that may lead to the success or failure of ISIL, including the success of the Iraqi government to include Sunnis and the fate of the Assad regime in Syria.

Introduction

Understanding the values of ISIL and its followers is critical to predict their future actions and ISIL’s eventual success or failure. We characterize values in terms of strategic and fundamental objectives, and contrast them with means (or tactical, instrumental) objectives. While means may evolve to fit the resources and terrain of the moment, strategic and fundamental objectives are relatively stable and less susceptible to change over time. Such strategic and fundamental objectives provide a lens through which ISIL and ISIL followers evaluate possible outcomes of all actions and future events. In addition to identifying and structuring ISIL objectives, we also identified key uncertainties to represent how the future of ISIL depends on critical future events and the resolution of incomplete knowledge.

Specifically, we addressed the following three questions:

1. What are the objectives of ISIL (i.e., what does ISIL’s leaders want to achieve)?
2. What are the objectives of ISIL’s followers (i.e., why is ISIL attractive to followers)?
3. What are the scenarios and associated uncertainties for the success or failure of ISIL? (i.e., what are the uncertainties about achievement of their objectives)?

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To address the first two questions, we used a decision analytic methodology for identifying and structuring strategic and fundamental objectives and related them to the means and actions to achieve these objectives. In particular, we conducted two separate efforts, one based on transcripts of interviews with 59 subject matter experts (SMEs) and one based on statements by ISIL leaders published on the Internet and selected open source reviews of ISIL by Western academics and journalists. To address the third question, we reviewed the same SME interview transcripts and used this information to develop an event tree representing possible future scenarios for ISIL. ISIL objectives and scenarios should be useful for developing plans and strategies for countering ISIL’s efforts to establish and expand a stronghold in the Middle East.

Methodology

Objectives are usually identified in personal interviews with decision makers and stakeholders (Keeney, 1992; Keeney and Raiffa, 1976; von Winterfeldt and Edwards, 1986). However, direct personal interviews with ISIL leaders and their followers were not available to us. Instead, we used an indirect methodology of reviewing existing source materials, similar to studies that were previously used to identify and structure the objectives of al Qaeda (Keeney and von Winterfeldt, 2010) and Hezbollah (Rosoff and von Winterfeldt, in preparation).

Keeney and von Winterfeldt (2010) state, “Strategic objectives provide guidance for all decisions. They serve as the mechanism by which leaders can guide decisions made by different individuals and groups within an organization.” In contrast, “fundamental objectives concern the ends that decision makers value in a specific decision context” (Keeney 1994). Strategic objectives can be achieved by pursuing fundamental objectives. Means objectives refer to actions that can be pursued to promote fundamental and strategic objectives.

Two independent efforts were conducted to identify and structure objectives. The first effort used only the transcripts of interviews with 59 SMEs, conducted for the overall study described in this white paper. We identified and highlighted every statement of each SME that referred to a value, a goal, a preferred direction, a grievance or a desired end state. We then used standard decision analysis techniques to sort these statements into strategic, fundamental, and means objectives. Finally, we structured an objectives hierarchy, with strategic objectives at the top, fundamental objectives just below them, and means objectives below the fundamental ones. The second effort used the same technique but examined only open source materials of publications or statements by ISIL leaders, ISIL Internet postings, as well as articles by mostly American-based media that were available in the Internet. After completing the two separate efforts, we combined the two objectives hierarchies into a single hierarchy. We highlighted differences between the objectives derived from the two approaches and related them to the five intangible factors of ISIL support assessed throughout this white paper.

To identify and structure uncertainties and events that influence the eventual success of ISIL in achieving its objectives, we reviewed the transcripts of the SME interviews only. In these transcripts, we highlighted any SME statements related to events and uncertainties. We then structured these statements in the form of an influence diagram and an event tree (Clemen and Reilly, 2014).
Results

The raw data of the review of the SME transcripts consists of approximately 270 statements referring to ISIL’s and its followers’ values, concerns, and objectives. These statements were structured into a hierarchy of strategic, fundamental, and means objectives using standard decision analytic techniques. The open source review resulted in a similar set of statements directly attributable to ISIL and its followers.

Figure 1 shows the combined objectives hierarchy for ISIL. The high level strategic and fundamental objectives (in light blue) reflect the long-term goals of ISIL as stated by the SMEs and by ISIL leaders. Moving from top to bottom, the objectives become more specific. Moving from left to right, we see a changing emphasis from establishing and governing the caliphate (left) to religious objectives (right). Generally, the objectives obtained from the SME interviews were very similar to those obtained from the open sources. Both approaches identified the strategic objective “Establish Caliphate.” However, the objectives hierarchy derived from open sources emphasizes that ISIL does not only want to “Establish a Caliphate” but also want to “Control and Govern the Islamic State.” Regarding the means objectives, there were quite a few objectives that were identified only in the open source review (shown in Figure 1 by the red border). These included several means objectives related to military strength and to radicalize followers. In contrast, there was only one objective found in the SME interviews, but not in the open sources literature: the objective to “Provide Military Leadership and Resources” (shown in Figure 1 with the green border).

We related the objectives in Figure 1 to the five key intangible factors of support for ISIL that provided a framework for the overall study. The question we asked was: Are these objectives consistent with one or more with the five key factors. This is indicated by color-coding the objectives. For example, the green colored objectives are consistent with attempting to obtain Umma support. All objectives could be related to the five factors.
We were not able to assess relative importance of the objectives in Figure 1. It is interesting, though, to note that the SMEs did not seem to agree on the importance they thought ISIL attached to some objectives. For example, there is an open question about the relative importance of regional occupation and control (left side of Figure 1) vs. expanding the caliphate and Sharia law worldwide (right side of Figure 1). It is also interesting that neither SMEs nor the open sources provided much support for objectives related to attacking Israel or aiding the Palestinian cause.

Figure 2 shows the combined objectives hierarchy for ISIL followers. The highest-level objectives relate to the fulfillment of an otherwise unfulfilled life. The open source search produced more followers’ objectives than the SME search. The SMEs did not make any reference to humanitarian objectives for the followers (left side of Figure 2) and very few SMEs referred to personal objectives (right side of Figure 2). Examples of humanitarian objectives obtained from open sources are: “End the War in Syria” and to help “Alleviate the Humanitarian Crisis in Syria and Iraq.” Examples of personal objectives are to “Improve Material Situation” and “Improve Self-esteem.”
Another important observation is that only a few of the followers’ objectives could be related to the five intangible factors of ISIL support used in the overall framework of this White Paper (as indicated by objectives with filled in colors relating them to the five factors). Many other objectives (in white) have no direct relation to the five factors of support.

The results of our third analysis are shown in event tree form in Figure 3. A review of the SME transcripts revealed nearly thirty uncertainties relevant to the future of ISIL and more specifically to the five intangible factors of ISIL support. While many of the uncertainties concern lack of current knowledge (limited intelligence) about ISIL, most involve uncertainty in predicting future actions, events, and outcomes related to ISIL. Seven key uncertainties were identified upon which the future of ISIL is contingent. These uncertainties are represented in an event tree, in which each node represents one of the uncertainties. The tree presented is simplified, in that it does not show all possible combinations as paths through the tree. (Note that for only 3 outcomes for each uncertain event node, there are over 2000 unique paths.) Instead, a schematic version of the event tree is presented, in which only extreme endpoints for each uncertainty are labeled.

One can think of a “worst case” scenario, represented by the lower branches for each node, in which (1) the Iraq central government remains divisive, (2) Northern Iraq Sunni tribes support ISIL, (3) moderate Arab nations remain uninvolved in resisting ISIL, (4) Assad is deposed and ISIL establishes control in Syria, (5) Iran remains uninvolved in resisting ISIL, (6) ISIL funding increases, and (7) ISIL recruitment increases. Conversely, a “best case” scenario would include the upper branches for each node, in which (1) the Iraq central government becomes more inclusive, (2) Northern Iraq Sunni tribes oppose ISIL, (3) moderate Arab nations actively oppose ISIL, (4) Assad remains in power in Syria, (5) Iran actively...
opposes ISIL, (6) ISIL funding is disrupted, and (7) ISIL recruitment is severely attenuated. For each unique combination of future event outcomes, a different future scenario for ISIL is realized. The future strength and threat level from ISIL will depend on the unique path through the event tree, defined by the particular combination of events that eventually occurs.

Figure 3: Event tree of possible scenarios for the future of ISIL

Conclusions

ISIL pursues four strategic objectives “Establish a Caliphate in Iraq and the Levant,” “Control and Govern the Caliphate,” “Expand Islam and Sharia Law Worldwide,” and “Recreate the Power and Glory of (Sunni) Islam.” Their aspiration for power and control can also be seen in several means objectives. ISIL wants to “Derive Legitimacy as Heirs/Descendants of Mohammed” and wants to “Be Recognized as the Leader of the Jihad.” Furthermore, they have clear ideas about how they want to achieve their strategic objectives and how an Islamic State should be structured. ISIL wants to “Implement a Pure and Strict Version of Islam.” Instead of collaborating with other Islamic groups that are not as radical as ISIL they try to “Radicalize and Align Followers” and “Take over other Islamic Movements.” ISIL’s key means objectives are “Generate Revenue” and “Kill, Frighten, and Convert Infidels.”

The followers and recruits of ISIL have a complex set of objectives that can be partitioned into three strategic objectives: “Humanitarian Fulfillment,” “Religious Fulfillment,” and “Personal Fulfillment.” This is consistent with many observers’ opinions that potential followers and recruits are “damaged,” “empty,” or “unfulfilled” in a very personal way. The humanitarian objectives are often overlooked by observers, who mainly focus on the abnormal and vicious aspects of ISIL. This may be due to a selection bias and the unwillingness to attribute any “good will” to people who are essentially perceived as evil.

The open source search produced a much richer picture of the followers’ objectives than the SME search. In particular, the open source search found many personal fulfillment objectives, not explicitly mentioned by the SMEs. Personal fulfillment objectives like “Have Power,” “Improve Self Esteem,” and “Become Part of a Brotherhood” suggest that we are dealing with people who are disenfranchised, feel discriminated against, and are often marginalized in their own environment. The personal objectives
“Improve Material Situation” and “Pursue Sanctioned Violence and Brutality” suggest that followers are poor and often have criminal backgrounds. The religious and humanitarian fulfillment objectives provide a romantic rationale for these personal objectives.

One specific means objective is “High Likelihood of Success When Trying to Access and Join ISIL.” It suggests that joining ISIL is more attractive to followers than, say, joining al Qaeda or Hezbollah, because followers have relatively easy access through Turkey and a fairly simple process of gaining access to and being accepted by ISIL.

Possible future steps of this analysis of the objectives of ISIL and its followers are

1. Validation of the objectives by interviewing analysts and ISIL recruits
2. Construction of a utility function for ISIL and its followers, including an assignment of the relative importance they attach to the objectives
3. Use of the objectives and utility function to determine consistency with past ISIL actions and to predict future actions

The SMEs identified a substantial number of variables (both present states and future events) that are potentially critical to the future of ISIL. Furthermore, these experts identified substantial uncertainty related to each identified variable. They were not asked to quantify or otherwise characterize the identified uncertainties, but there is no indication of consensus among the SMEs regarding likely outcomes. It is clear that the seven uncertainties identified map directly to the five intangible factors of this White Paper and that there are complex dependencies among the five uncertainties.

Possible future research on uncertainties and events are:

1. Characterization of dependencies among key uncertainties
2. Estimation of uncertainty, i.e., rank ordering likely outcomes for each node
3. Identification of information sources that could be used to better estimate likelihood of outcomes
4. Determination of the value of information for different characterized by both the cost of information and the diagnosticity of information at each node

References


