VI. Connecting the Continua: The Dynamics of ISIL Success (Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois,163 NSI)

A survey of media reports, current research, and indeed this volume, generates a wide range of explanations for ISIL’s apparent magnetism and successes. While nearly all acknowledge the multi-factor complexity of the issue, owing to the choice of analytic approach, prior experience or intuition, most of this work focuses on a single or a very few explanatory factors. Having looked in depth at individual explanations of ISIL’s appeal and durability along the five continua of the Evolution & Longevity Framework, this paper employs causal loop diagrams164 to combine these and to provide an easily digestible, multi-factor summary of the diverse efforts described in this volume. In addition, creating loop diagrams forces us to examine the direct and indirect relationships among the factors associated with ISIL successes and, in so doing, uncover both the dynamics that drive continued success and those that encourage failure. A clear grasp of the dynamics of the situation is the key to devising effective countering strategies and operations.

Qualitative Loop Diagrams. Loop diagrams consist of entities, or “nodes” and “edges.” In this case, nodes consist of the five continua from the Longevity Framework plus the factors that explain variation in each. Edges are the lines that connect nodes and indicate the relationships between them. As used in this paper, edge lines should be interpreted as representing correlative rather than strictly causal relationships. Unless indicated by a minus sign (-), all edges indicate positive relationships between connected nodes, meaning that as the antecedent or “parent” node increases or decreases, the successor does likewise. Edge lines carrying a negative sign indicate that the antecedent node has a reverse impact on its successor; as it increases or decreases, the successor does the opposite. As a result, feedback loops representing recursive relationships between nodes can take two forms: they can be either negatively or positively “reinforcing” (indicated by an “R” in the diagrams below) where change in one node propagates through a single or series of other nodes that ultimately return to magnify the effect on the initial node or “balancing” (indicated by a “B”) in which the impact of change on a node is dampened or its direction changed as it propagates through the system.

Caveats. The loop diagrams presented below are neither predictive nor computational models but graphic depictions of the work produced by the SMA effort. They are concept “maps” intended to illuminate complex relationships among explanatory factors on multiple levels of analysis. The relationships are unweighted, conditional, and there is no precisely delineated scale of time in the models. It is also important for readers to note that for the purpose of presentation, the diagrams discussed below are shown as simplified portions of the larger and more complete system diagram.

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164 While these types of diagrams are often referred to as “causal loop” diagrams, no presumptions of direct causation are made in these analyses.

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The Dynamics of Encouraging Regional States to Oppose ISIL

The loop diagram shown in Figure 1 highlights a few of the more interesting relationships connecting the intangible elements of support or sympathy for ISIL among regional populations and the factors that drive support or opposition from regional states.\(^{165}\) A number of feedback loops demonstrate the dynamics of this system. The first is a reinforcing loop (indicated by a black R) that links ISIL support among regional populations (i.e., those outside Iraq and Syria) with the legitimacy ISIL gains as a potent organization. Akin to a bandwagon effect, popular sympathy or support among the broader Sunni community enhances the general perception of ISIL as a credible force, which in turn generates more support among those populations. (Some of the reasons this occurs are detailed in the discussion surrounding Figure 3 below.) ISIL legitimacy/credibility also is indirectly connected to the unwillingness of some regional Sunni states to oppose ISIL (orange R in Figure 1) via its usefulness to those states as a proxy force against the persistent perceived security threat from Iran or Iranian influence in the region. In fact, ISIL’s value as a proxy force acts as a counter weight to US or other international diplomatic pressures to engage in activities to defeat the group. The dearth of forceful opposition from local states makes ISIL success on the ground relatively more likely. Moreover, the more ISIL succeeds militarily, the greater its apparent potency and the greater its value to Sunni states. Because ISIL has value as a proxy in the Sunni battle against Shia/Iranian influence in the region, the vigor (or lack of vigor) with which these states engage in opposition to ISIL is conditioned by the balance between the direct threat to their

\(^{165}\) Please refer to “Introduction to the Conceptual Organization: Longevity & Evolution Framework” starting on page 15 in this volume for definitions and thorough discussion of the five framework continua: external state support, umma support, capacity to control, civilian support, and elite power base support.

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security posed by ISIL and their long-standing regional security interest in curbing Iranian influence and activities.

Coalition, Syrian, or Iranian military gains against ISIL further diminish Sunni state incentives to oppose ISIL. This effect could be magnified if, for example, these gains convinced ISIL leaders to take action to keep local Sunni states out of the fight; namely, moderating their antagonism toward those regimes, thereby reducing the downside and retaining its value to Sunni states’ efforts to retain a favorable Sunni balance of power in the region. In other words, coalition actions that weaken ISIL, reduce its ability to directly threaten local Sunni Arab regimes, which removes one of the key reasons these states might oppose ISIL. This is a subtle balance, but one that so far Sunni states seem to believe they can manage.

“Tipping” or obstructing the dynamic that disincentivizes sincere opposition from regional Sunni states requires that these states see ISIL, its program, and ideology as posing a greater threat to their regime security than its value as a tool in regional power struggles. In general, this might occur in two ways: 1) continued growth in ISIL legitimacy and potency fuel its capacity and willingness to engage directly with Sunni regimes, e.g., by deploying fighters beyond Iraq and Syria and by seizing territory or assets; or 2) ISIL’s successes arouses sympathy among the segments of their populations at odd with the regimes to the degree that they pose a direct threat to the domestic stability of Sunni states (green B). A key vulnerability for ISIL then rests in the balance involved in maintaining its growth including the support it has gained among important segments of the Sunni populations in states it considers apostate on the one hand and threatening those regimes credibly enough to cause them to seek ISIL’s destruction on the other. In terms of readily observable indicators then, this analysis suggests that moderation in ISIL rhetoric condemning the local regimes it currently demonizes may be an indication that ISIL leaders are becoming concerned about the group’s durability or longevity.

ISIL’s Reputation and Credibility: a Source of Resilience to Military Setbacks

It is not uncommon that the appearance of a revolutionary movement’s success itself breeds further support for the cause. As shown in Figure 2, this dynamic appears to be at play with ISIL. One of the key features of the relationship between ISIL appeal to the local elite power base and the intangible sources of its ability to control populations and territory are the number of reinforcing loops (black R’s in Figure 2) that flow through ISIL’s reputation and credibility as a potent fighting force. A positively reinforcing loop (center bottom R) magnifies the effect of ISIL’s credibility as a force has a positive impact on local elite belief that ISIL’s presence will endure for some time—one of the key factors encouraging elite support—and, in turn, ISIL’s capacity to control the population. This is important for two reasons: 1) a reputation for effective and credible authority allows an organization such as ISIL to maintain control over populations farther afield than its material capacities alone would support, and 2) it allows the organization to begin to institutionalize its control or governance and begin to provide services like education, security, justice, etc., that enhance its capacity to govern without using as much violence and intimidation.

Although there are factors that can diminish the effects of those reinforcing loops (i.e., the degree to which intimidation and violence are used to control populations and the stringency with which its interpretation of Islamic practice is imposed), by this point in its campaign, ISIL leadership has the power to regulate two of the three negatively related factors; it basically controls this dynamic. The implication
is that ISIL has an untapped, intangible source of resilience in this area should its reputation as a potent and inevitably victorious movement begin to wane. Moreover, this portion of the analysis suggests that even if ISIL is weakened militarily, it has other ways of retaining local elite support and its ability to control the populations in its areas that can be enhanced by its own decisions to limit violence and/or ease up on harsh interpretations of its version of sharia. In addition, and as will be discussed in the subsequent section of this paper (see Figure 3), there is a psychological element tied to Sunni grievance that could actually enhance ISIL legitimacy as it suffers certain types of military losses.

**Why is ISIL legitimacy important?** The perceived legitimacy of a group’s or government’s authority—even if it is not popular—is a key factor in its ability to control populations (and institutionalize that control) over the long haul. At present, the intangible feature of ISIL control over populations appears to be centered in intimidation or coercion rather than a popular preference for its leadership (although in areas of Iraq this may be aided by a popular sense that there are no viable Sunni-led alternatives). Control by means of intimidation and fear, however, is a double-edged sword: while it indirectly enhances legitimacy by demonstrating “victory,” it directly diminishes governing legitimacy as well. This suggests that unless other control capacities (e.g., patronage to elites, provision of social services, control over markets, etc.) can be expanded, ISIL’s basis for governance over a widening area will remain weak. Conversely, one indicator of ISIL’s confidence in its legitimacy and ability to control an area is evidence that ISIL is switching from demonstrating its legitimacy as a fighting force or revolutionary movement to growing its governing legitimacy, for
example, by putting increased energy and resources into providing public services and other things that governments do. As these endure and become institutionalized, the legitimacy and, perhaps, staying power of the Caliphate becomes more likely. This is not to say that an ISIL-led caliphate would necessarily look like any government that Western analysts would call “legitimate,” it means that ISIL succeeds in convincing populations not to resist without its suffering the negative consequences of prolonged violence and oppression.

**Sympathy and Support for ISIL among the Broader Muslim Community**

The diagram shows that sympathy/support among regional Sunni communities will grow as ISIL military successes can be claimed. Once again, however, military success is not ISIL’s only path to gaining this support; as shown in Figure 3, there are intangible factors that drive support for ISIL from the Sunni community both in the region and more broadly that are independent of its military successes and failures.

The depth of Sunni grievance and the perception that ISIL represents Sunni empowerment, even if its tactics are not ideal, are very important sources of sympathy and support. Indeed, common themes of Sunni Arab angst or grievance were highlighted in the SME interviews and thematic and social media analyses conducted for this SMA effort. These include a deep-seated sense of Sunni Muslims having been denigrated or oppressed by Shia governments in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, and, particularly in Europe and North America, by discrimination based in Western arrogance and presumptions of cultural and social superiority. It is clear to see how these grievances easily could be fueled by certain Western military activities. The implication is that simply...
“killing members of ISIL” or even significantly degrading its militarily forces is likely to be sufficient to neutralize the movement; other reasons for support must be addressed as well.

Although not part of a reinforcing loop, news of Sunni casualties either caused by, or attributed to, coalition, Iranian, or Syrian government forces feed the positive loop that magnifies the credibility of ISIL’s branding as warriors against Sunni oppressors, which in turn can generate sympathy if not support for ISIL among members of that community. As depicted in Figure 1 above, up to the point that it poses a direct domestic threat, as sympathy for ISIL grows within regional populations, state willingness to engage in direct opposition to ISIL falls. This dynamic also relates increased coalition kinetic activity and “success” with hesitance from Sunni states either to oppose ISIL forcefully or to bar its citizens from supporting the group.

**ISIL’s Psychological Appeal Allows it to Control the Dynamics of its Success on the Ground—Even While Suffering Military Failure**

Figure 4 depicts the intangible factors driving civilian support/ acquiescence to ISIL, elite support, and ISIL’s non-material means of controlling populations. As discussed previously, key vulnerabilities in ISIL’s bid to establish governance (i.e., a durable caliphate) appear to be tied not so much to what it represents, as to how it implements its program. In other words, while its message has psychologically appealing aspects for a potentially wide audience across the region, its reliance on fear, intimidation, and harsh application of its version of Islamic principles may neutralize its appeal; ISIL’s own tactics

Figure 5. Intangibles linking local elite and civilian support to ISIL capacity to control

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represent possible vulnerability in its ability to achieve one of its stated aims: establishment of durable governance.

The perceived lack of a viable, pro-Sunni alternative authority is only one source cited to explain civilian support for or acquiescence to ISIL, especially in Iraq but as ISIL gains against other groups in Syria as well. ISIL messages of Islamic purity and its ability to tap into highly resonant Sunni grievances, plus the perceived inevitability of its victory are additional drivers of ISIL’s appeal to civilian populations. Pertaining directly to efforts to arm alternative fighting forces, these intangible sources of local support are ones that newly-strengthened “moderate fighters”—even if militarily successful, may not be able to claim as credibly as ISIL and so would have a difficult time supplanting these aspects of ISIL appeal. Related to this, efforts to encourage young Sunni males to join and remain loyal to the fight against ISIL may be more successful if they offer the same types of psychic benefits to recruits (e.g., a means of acting on long-standing grievance, regaining lost Muslim glory, dignity, respect) without the down sides associated with ISIL.

Regardless of the absolute popularity of its rule, ISIL leaders will need to achieve some degree of civilian support or acquiescence in order to expand over territories beyond its material capacity to occupy. As shown in Figure 4, because local Sunni populations and elites have other reasons to accede to ISIL authority, ISIL leaders could advance local support or acquiescence in the short term by softening its tactics on the ground. Disturbingly, however, the dynamics of the intangibles of the system shown in Figure 4 also suggests that civilian acquiescence also might be achieved over the course of time without ISIL having changing its tactics. This is because even when civilian acquiescence or control is based in coercion and violence, it feeds a reinforcing loop where ISIL’s demonstration of control reinforces popular belief in its ultimate success, reinforcing and enhancing and ISIL’s claims to legitimacy (what one study participant called the “legitimacy of winning”). ISIL legitimacy spurs civilian support both directly and indirectly via local elite leaders. The implication is that the longer ISIL is in control in an area, it should have less need for fear and intimidation tactics in order to maintain control, potentially freeing up fighters to move to new areas.

While there are many positive reinforcing relationships underpinning local support/acquiescence, the analysis suggests two dynamics that might dampen their impact. The first involves the impact of ISIL’s strict interpretation of Islamic practice on local elite support. If ISIL’s capacity to maintain elite support is diminished, the relative likelihood of ISIL military success wanes and along with it, popular perceptions of the inevitability of ISIL victory (green R) and pressure on local leaders to give in to ISIL control lessens as well. How this would play out, however, is dependent on the dominance of the other factors that promote elite support, namely ISIL capacity to provide a consistent flow of patronage and other material support as well as the availability of acceptable alternatives. Second, weakening ISIL’s credibility as self-proclaimed defender of Islamic purity and the Sunni cause can also propagate through the model to reduce the sources of civilian support.

Conclusion

The goal of the broader SMA effort was to investigate, gain knowledge and insights, and engage in a competitive analysis of this incredibly complex social movement. We cannot know if we are succeeding if we do not understand the root causes of conflict and the social dynamics that support and sustain it.

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This effort represents one way to push through traditional analyses based on capabilities and motivations to reach into the underlying dynamic emotional, organizational, psychological, and cultural explanations of ISIL’s success.

As demonstrated above, constructing loop diagrams is useful for integrating findings to discover unanticipated or non-intuitive interaction effects among the “intangible” drivers of a group’s popularity and success. Illuminating these dynamics may help reduce strategic surprise and the likelihood of taking actions that unintentionally strengthen an adversary’s hand. Another way these loop diagrams can assist planners and decision makers is to help identify indicators of variation, successes or setbacks. Clearly no single indicator can or should be used to draw conclusions about issues and relationships as complex as those reviewed in this paper. Nevertheless, indicators implied by these analyses would add nuance to the physical measures of coalition “success” versus ISIL that are currently in use. Examples of these types of indicators based on the four loop diagrams discussed in this paper are shown in Table 1 below. Additional measures could be derived from examination of the complete model.

**Table 1 Linking indicators to effects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect (If this is true ...)</th>
<th>Observables/Indicators ... we may see this</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ISIL Leaders Feeling Weakened</strong></td>
<td>ISIL leaders moderate antagonism in rhetoric aimed at Sunni Arab states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIL leadership feeling weakened; concerned about the durability of the organization; capacity to control local populations</td>
<td>ISIL military activities avoid attacks on Sunni states</td>
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<td>ISIL leadership easing ferocity with which it institutes Islamic law, especially where local power elites (e.g., tribal heads, etc.) are concerned</td>
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<td>Relative shift in emphasis on recruiting “fighters in place” or alliance with local groups (who do not require ISIL supplies, logistic support, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ISIL Leaders Feeling Strengthened</strong></td>
<td>More resources spent on providing social services than on violence and intimidation measures in areas under ISIL control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIL leadership feeling more confident in their ability to control an area/ population</td>
<td>Institutionalization of services and governing processes, e.g., courts, schools, even tax collection, currency control</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIL rhetoric emphasizes the immediate need to overthrow Sunni “apostate” regimes</td>
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<td>Deployment of core fighters to new areas inside or outside Syria and Iraq</td>
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