CISTP comprises the viewpoints of twelve subject matter experts with Ph.D.s in fields spanning intelligence analysis, the social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and education. Out of our collective discussion emerges an overarching framework through which to view the current challenges posed by the aggression of ISIL/ISIS, as well as a menu of possible strategies in line with this framework.

I. Background Analysis of ISIL/ISIS

We begin with the recognition that the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, European allies, and affiliated other nations around the Middle East, Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa, urgently require a strategy for dealing with ISIL/ISIS. Calls for a strategy, especially one from the U.S., have filled political and media spaces. CISTP maintains that a multinational, five-year or longer strategy is indeed a strategy and is necessary for stemming ISIL/ISIS extremism and violence. Even if short-term airstrikes prove effective in degrading ISIL/ISIS capabilities, only such a long-term, interdisciplinary analysis and multinational commitment will be able to inform the prevention of the reemergence of the group and its sympathizers.

ISIL/ISIS, like all terrorist organizations, arose out of systems of discontent that made extremist ideology appealing. We suggest that countermeasures begin with a thorough examination of both the social contexts out of which ISIL/ISIS arose as well as the religious ideology that frames its worldview. That is, a proper understanding the origins of the terrorist group is key. We further suggest that an inadequate appreciation of the second, third, and fourth order effects of past actions contributed to the present crisis and that all present actions include an examination of future, systemic effects.

The social contexts that allowed for the rise of ISIL/ISIS include post-conflict unrest in Iraq resulting from the U.S. 2003 pre-emptive invasion of Iraq, which left anywhere from 130,000 to one million dead by 2011 and resulted in the displacement of millions. Importantly, this conflict and its civil war aftermath also left approximately 5 million child orphans in Iraq, including one half million living on the street. These orphans have grown up lacking proper education, family ties, community bonds, infrastructure, positive self-identity, and hope in their individual and collective futures. This generation also inherited the resulting state of affairs in Iraq, which includes the exclusion and increasing marginalization of Sunnis in the political and social processes, high unemployment, sectarian divides, and inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. This has combined with the desperate oppression in Syria of the Sunni populace under the Alawite

---

1 This paper reflects the collective counsel of the Faculty Fellows of CISTP but does not reflect any official position of James Madison University.
regime of Bashar Al-Assad, with a documented death toll of over 191,000\(^3\) and millions of refugees, including 1.1 million children and thousands of orphans.\(^4\) Thus, the regions of Syria and Iraq include millions of children, teens, young adults and adults living under systems of grave discontent and insecurity, potentially making them susceptible to extremist ideology.

The extremist ideology of ISIL/ISIS is an aberration of Islam marked by radical apocalyptic (RADAP) thought. This religious lens maintains that evil forces currently govern the world, resulting in the suffering of the true believers, the RADAP group itself and its sympathizers. Hence, they divide the world simply into good and evil persons, those on their side and those against them, and believe that the two sides are locked in a cosmic war. The RADAP group believes that they will play an active role in triggering events that will result in the ultimate victory of good, resulting in divine governance or intervention. It believes that through its actions it is enacting the harsh judgment of the divine. It is vital to recognize that the RADAP group therefore justifies any violent means as leading to a divinely sanctioned state that is better for the righteous and in accordance with God’s will. This reasoning is supported by an authoritative interpretation of an existing revelation and/or ongoing revelations that a leader may claim to receive. It is also helpful to recognize that the RADAP group typically hates and acts against moderate members of its own religion or ideology who do not affiliate with them even more than it hates their opponents whom they believe work on behalf of evil.

In the particular case of ISIL/ISIS, open source statements indicate the leaders see themselves as bringing about a trans-state Caliphate that represents a true, strict form of Islam that rules over the Sunni world. In their eyes this goal is so important and divinely sanctioned that it justifies any violence against those who would oppose them, including moderate Muslims. Analysts and policy makers should not assume that earthly concerns, humanitarian values, or national goals motivate key leaders of ISIL/ISIS, although they may indeed inform the views of participants. The terrorist group’s position is antithetical to mainstream Islam, which maintains that all Muslims must vote on a Caliphate, that only Allah can act to dispense judgment, and that there is no violence allowed against innocents, including women, children, non-combatants, and fellow Muslims.

Believing that it acts on behalf of Allah, the leadership of ISIL/ISIS is resolutely uncompromising in its rule over those it conquers, giving them three choices: live under IS rules and suzerainty and pay a tax, convert to their form of Islam, or die. It will despise and act against moderate Muslims, Shia, and “people of the Book” in its orbit more than it even hates the U.S. and its allies, which it has decided is Evil incarnate. It will also work to eradicate “pagans” such as the Yazidis, and is a threat to all polytheists,

---


animists, agnostics, atheists, and secular peoples. It seeks to instill an Islamic Caliphate, run by strict religious law, the sharia, which it alone determines. The leadership sees this as an enactment of Allah’s judgment.

The terrorists’ motivation is high due to their ideology; key leaders feel that even if the earthly battle is lost, Allah is on their side and they cannot ultimately lose. Some members likely also believe that their Caliphate will inaugurate the Yawm-ad-Din, the end of the present world and the Day of Judgment in which Allah presides over the whole earth to reward the righteous (ISIL/ISIS) and punish the wicked (the rest of humanity) in the fires of Jahim. They arrive at these interpretations through selective readings of the Qur’an, hadith, and sunna that are at odds with established readings in the rest of Islam.

II. CISTP Recommendations for Strategy
CISTP recognizes the need for military and/or intelligence efforts to degrade the capabilities of ISIL/ISIS. However, understanding the religious worldview clarifies that ISIL/ISIS is not only a group of militants now controlling key spots in a region, but is an ideology that must be countered from within Islam and in other cultures at the grassroots level. CISTP recommends a four-pronged, simultaneous strategy, as follows:

1. An inclusive conceptual paradigm that governs state policy and rhetoric, in which the U.S. in particular, as well as other allies, strongly identifies with the Muslim world in ways that articulate our shared values and humanity.
2. A vigorous counter-messaging campaign at both the state-sponsored and grassroots level.
3. Grassroots efforts that foster peace and social resilience.
4. A serious commitment to economic and social development in Syria, Iraq, and other regions of potential ISIL/ISIS recruitment.

CISTP also recommends that these efforts focus on aiding children in post-conflict or recruitment areas, including promoting children’s physical safety as well as their psychological health, material resources, transmission of cultural values, and the security of their ecological environments. This recommendation stems from ethical concerns, since across cultures humankind places a high value on our children as both innocents and as our future. It also stems from practical realizations that children grow up to present a population that is either an opportunity or threat within a decade.

A more detailed explanation of our recommendations follows:
1. An inclusive conceptual paradigm that governs state policy and rhetoric.
   The key concept of this strategy is Inclusion. First, any language resulting in the simple bifurcation of societies into “us vs. them” or “good vs. evil,” as well as descriptions of the ISIL/ISIS group in dehumanizing terms (e.g. a cancer, a virus, vermin), should be avoided since it reinforces the worldview of the group’s ideology. Instead, language should clearly and consistently focus on the horrific violence of the group’s actions and should carefully distinguish between degrees of sympathizers.
Second, as it has already begun to do, the U.S. in particular, as well as Canada, Europe, and other non-Muslim majority countries, must identify firmly with the people (i.e. not just with nations) of the Muslim ummah. We must express loudly and consistently that we share humanitarian values with Islam. We must articulate those shared values (including: non-aggression, protection of innocents, care for children, acting as stewards for the earth, and respect and tolerance of all peoples of the Book) frequently in official speeches, media, and public discourse alike. The U.S., Canada, and NATO should highlight instances in which we fought to defend Muslims, especially in Kosovo in 1999 and in Bosnia in 1993-1995, particularly since radical Islamists such as ISIL/ISIS, other Al Qaida offshoots, and Al Qaida misrepresent the social memory of those conflicts to cast “the West” as aggressor.

Third, as U.S. Field Manual 3-24 recommends, states should carefully discriminate between leadership, combatants, auxiliary, and passive bystanders. While the core leadership and recruits are strongly committed to the terrorists’ goals and RADAP ideology, many participants do not subscribe fully to the ideology or are ambivalent. This is an opportunity. Many persons associated with ISIL/ISIS may have their own goals of securing power or resources, be functional victims who find they have no other viable option other than to act as a sympathizer, or be misled into believing a beautiful story about Islamic State that is not the violent, sadistic reality.

In fact, hundreds to thousands of pious recruits have emigrated from the U.S., Canada, Europe, Kosovo, Australia, etc., to Syria and Iraq in the belief that ISIL/ISIS is fighting a good fight on behalf of oppressed Muslims, only to encounter the “ground truth” – the gruesome reality that the group kills scores of innocent Muslims. Such recruits who realize “this is not my dream” must be allowed, with proper ongoing monitoring, some mechanisms to return home to become spokespersons against ISIL/ISIS (whether anonymously or publicly) to deter other potential recruits. This is a key opportunity for counter-messaging the terrorist group’s image (see “2. Counter-messaging campaigns” below).

Fourth, rather than framing our counter-efforts as a “war,” which reinforces the apocalyptic ideology of ISIL/ISIS, we should consider using criminal justice models when dealing with those members who are not in positions of leadership. Language of a “war” may also overstate the threat, giving ISIL/ISIS social capital in the form of perceived power that it may actually lack. Certainly, terrorist sympathizers acting in our own nations, such as in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. or Australia, also complicate the model of a “war” and suggest that criminal justice models, including due process, may be much more apt at effectively targeting and counter-messaging ISIL/ISIS in ways that prevent the spread of the ideology.

2. Counter-messaging campaigns.
Analysts should determine who holds interpretive authority for ISIL/ISIS and take opportunities for vigorous but careful counter-messaging. For instance, it is important to learn which spurious hadith or misinterpretations of the Qur’an are being marshaled into supporting the terrorists’ actions and goals.
Counter-messaging campaigns should employ a diverse set of media, including the press, television, radio, and social media, including non-mainstream platforms such as Diaspora, Friendica, and Quitter, graphic novels, art, plays, and songs, to reframe and overturn the terrorist ideology and image. The British NGO that has used twitter at #Notinmyname to convey that the messages of ISIL/ISIS are unislamic is just one example of many. At both the state-sponsored and grassroots levels, counter-messages could stress the following facts: ISIL/ISIS murders (and apparently beheads) children, opposes many teachings from the Qur’an, lacks proper religious authority to institute a Caliphate, kills Muslims, misrepresents itself as a location of social and racial harmony, oppresses and rapes women, kills the innocent, and does not speak for Allah. However, continued positive images and references to Western support and celebration of the strength of the ummah outside the context of ISIL/ISIS will be more effective than violent or exclusionary imagery.

3. Grassroots efforts that foster peace and social resilience.
Since a great threat of ISIL/ISIS is that its ideology will grow and will gain further recruits, the ideology must be combated at the grassroots level. Efforts that focus on being “anti-ISIS” may serve to empower the group, however, unlike grassroots campaigns that promote inter-ethnic, inter-religious, and inter-sectarian peace and that foster social resilience (rather than unaddressed trauma) in post-conflict scenarios. Many NGOs, social groups, and efforts by the U.N. focus positively on peace and social resilience. Such projects should gain renewed state support.

In particular, CISTP maintains that projects aimed at promoting the welfare of children, especially in vulnerable zones, should take precedence. We would urge material, political, and social support for efforts such as education of children, especially in refugee camps, as well as efforts to provide for the basic material, psychological, and social needs of children. In addition, we support interreligious dialogues, food and cultural sharing initiatives between religious and sectarian groups, and ecologically based initiatives that bring communities together around shared commitment to the future. We would also bring analysts’ attention to social resilience studies and counseling practices in post-conflict areas in which children and others have experienced trauma, urging awareness of the deep need for the formation of healthy psychological memories and self-identity.

4. Long-term, multi-national commitments to economic and social development.
CISTP maintains that it is imperative that any airstrikes or ground troop action be followed with a long-term commitment to improving the lives of people in the societies that were vulnerable to the messages of ISIL/ISIS, as well as to their aggression. These long-term social commitments must include the equitable distribution of goods, the social empowerment of dispossessed peoples, interreligious dialogue, fostering of positive self-identity, especially of children, and the protection of ecological resources.

Long-term, material support and social programs should also be promoted in areas vulnerable to either ISIL/ISIS aggression or recruitment that are not directly in the Syria-
Iraq region. The new nation of Kosovo is a good case example. Kosovo has a Muslim population of 94% that represents a progressive, European, moderate form of Islam, but also has a post-conflict population, over one half of which became refugees in 1999. It also faces the second highest rate of unemployment in the world for those ages 17-30, with 27% of its population under age 14. Unsurprisingly, despite the efforts of “Interfaith Kosovo,” which promotes peaceful relations between faiths, Kosovo police recently arrested forty members/sympathizers of ISIL/ISIS. To stem extremism there and in similar post-conflict zones, it is imperative that the U.S., Canada, Europe and other allies invest in supporting the economic and material base of the nation as well as help efforts that promote a positive self-identity and social resilience for the children. An example of such a project is CISTP’s “Eco-Kosovo” project, which aims to aid the nation in becoming the regional leader in adaptive and sustainable development.

Multinational cooperation must infuse this material and social support, in recognition of the systemic effects of global terrorism. Efforts should be made to include countries from Asia, South America, and Africa in order to stem the long term spread of terrorist ideology.

III. Further CISTP Recommendations
In addition to the immediate implementation of the four-prong strategy above, CISTP also makes the following recommendations to the intelligence community:

• Recognize fully that long-term, multi-disciplinary, strategic models are necessary to prevent unintended consequences of actions.
• Utilize the interdisciplinary expertise of faculty at CISTP as well as at other institutions of higher learning.
• Clarify the elements in a society that are conducive to the spread of RADAP ideology and avoid policies that reinforce the ideology (we are being oppressed, violence is glorified, the world is involved in a war between good and evil).
• Clarify the criteria for a stable, resilient, long-functioning system. Identify the endgame for countermeasures against ISIL/ISIS, recognizing that maintaining current national boundaries may prove impossible or undesirable when political and ethnic boundaries conflict.
• Consider the second, third, fourth, and fifth order effects of policies.
• Foster post-conflict material support, counseling to promote social resilience, and peace education for children, paying particular attention to refugees/orphans.
• Anticipate actions of ISIL/ISIS, but also imagine the shape of future extremist groups and prepare possible strategies. Along the lines of models of healthcare planned by the CDC in the U.S., plan for preventative care with respect to the next major terrorist event (akin to the metaphor of a vaccine and a medicine on the shelf to be used as necessary). Avoid language that likens any terrorist group as a disease, but recognize that the spread of ideology functions as a contagion. At the root of diffusion remains the question, “What makes the ideology attractive in the first place”?