SECURITY COUNCIL RESEARCH REPORT— QUESTION OF HOW TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE OF ISIS (ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA)

I. Introduction of Topic:

The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) has attracted the world’s attention in the past few months for the imminent threat it poses to several nations’ security. ISIS, otherwise known as IS or ISIL, is fundamentally a Sunni Muslim group that wishes to establish an Islamic caliphate. A caliphate is defined as: “an Islamic state led by a supreme religious and political leader known as a caliph or successor to Muhammad”. They are currently focused on spreading their influence across Iraq and Syria. Thus, the most immediate threat ISIS poses is to both the Syrian and Iraqi states, making it a conflict that also raises questions of both nations existing sovereignty and autonomy. In addition, Syria is in the midst of a civil war, and Iraq is still repairing its fractured Sunni and Shiite Muslim populations in the aftermath of Saddam Hussain and the invasion. However, it has been made evident that the caliphate aims to reach farther beyond their regional sphere. ISIS follows an extreme edition of Sharia law, Islamic law derived from the Koran, which is not the current policy of the Iraqi government. In fact, Sharia law can have many different interpretations, although the different versions of it are often grouped under the same term. ISIS’s interpretation of the Koran espouses violence as a means to obtain its goal: a view not shared by most Middle Eastern governments. Part of ISIS’s long-term plan is to infiltrate Jordan and Lebanon after Iraq and Syria in order to “free Palestine”. In all of these areas, the caliphate is meant to be established and then rule over all populations.

The current “caliph-in-command” is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or as his supporters otherwise know him: Caliph Ibrahim. A biography written about him in 2013 claims that Captain Ibrahim is a descendant of the prophet Muhammed. This is the main reason why he was able to claim the title as the leader of ISIS.

The group has made demands to the president and his cabinet to implement more policies that are closer to their Sharia law. Earlier this year, the US asked the Iraqi government to make changes to mediate the situation by September 10th. However, by the deadline, barely anything was done. The problem still continues to grow.

ISIS sees that they are performing a Jihad, which is a religious war. Whatever they do is justified in their eyes because it is for their God and religion. This reasoning helps to explain why the terrorist group has used such inhumane tactics.

One of the main reasons Islamic State has become such an important force and focus as a terrorist organization is because of the imminent threat they pose. The tactics they have been using to spread their ideas and influence are unlike anything we’ve seen before. These include “beheadings, crucifixions and mass shootings” according to the BBC. Over the summer, the group attracted a lot of attention because of the murder of foreign journalists. Two American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff were victims of a media based initiative which consisted of them being executed in two separate videos published in August and September 2014. The two videos resulted in an international outcry and attracted the attention of the world. The United Nations has played a large role in

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discussing future action to be taken. Recently, the UK and the US, as well as France and a wider coalition decided that, if necessary, they will be willing to take military action.

Another key group in the conflict is Shia militants. Shia Muslims are another branch of Islam and took over the government after Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003. After the fall of the Hussein regime, there was a struggle for power in the country and eventually the Shias rose to power. This is partly the reason as to why this Sunni insurgent group has revolted against the government. They want the Sunni branch to be in power, to enforce strict Sharia law. ISIS has been using their Sunni influence as a powerful tool in recruiting people. The promise of Sunni authority has greatly inspired people to join the effort. Currently, many Sunnis do feel underrepresented in the government, and they are more than happy at the prospect of being once again “ruling” Iraq.

II. Background:

ISIS started out as a splinter of the Al Qaeda terrorist group and now has taken on a life of its own. The insurgent group AQI was led by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. AQI’s level of violence was too excessive for Al Qaeda. Thus, Al Qaeda separated from AQI and formed ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) in 2006. Baghdadi became its leader in 2010 and around the same time Al Qaeda started playing a role in Syria (the al-Nusra Front) against President Bashar al-Assad. In April 2013, Baghdadi announced that the two branches in Iraq and Syria had merged to create Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The conflict is mostly attributed to religious differences. Sunnis and Shias have a long history dating back to the foundations of Islam. Essentially, they hold different interpretations of the Koran and believe in different descendants of the prophet Muhammad. There are as well, within the Sunni and Shia branches, various understandings of Islam. In the Middle East there are several non-secular governments that are all Islamic with the exception of Israel. Although these governments follow
Sharia law and the policies of the two respective groups are different because of their diverging interpretations of the Koran.

ISIS is mandating that the current Shia Iraqi government converts to Sunni Islamism and imposes a much more stringent version of Sharia law.

II. Relevant International Agreements, Conventions, Organizations and Resolutions:

Resolution 2170: Passed in 2014, this resolution condemns the organization ISIS and all those who support it. It recognizes its actions as "gross, systematic and widespread abuse". The resolution was passed unanimously in the Security Council and it essentially: “called on Member States to take national measures to prevent fighters from traveling from their soil to join the groups, reiterating obligations under previous counter-terrorism resolutions to prevent the movement of terrorists, as well as their supply with arms or financial support. It expressed readiness to consider putting on the sanctions list those who facilitated the recruitment and travel of foreign fighters.”

Blacklisting: The UN Security Council blacklisted six senior ISIS leaders in August of 2014. The organization itself has been blacklisted for a while, but now it’s leaders are officially recognized by the UN as individual threats. These include the group’s spokesperson Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, and ISIS’ leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

US decision on military intervention: At first the US was hesitant to enter the conflict because it felt as though it were the only nation getting involved. However, since then, the US has committed themselves to partake in military initiative against ISIS. As President Obama recognized, “…this is going to be a long-term project”. Since the beginning of August, the US has had several air strikes on IS forces. By the end of September, they had conducted 240 strikes in Iraq and Syria.

UK’s decision on military intervention: British Prime Minister David Cameron backed a motion in the House of Commons that would allow military intervention on behalf of the UK against ISIS. The motion, which allows air strikes to be conducted, passed with overwhelming support of 524 votes to 43.

III. Timeline:

April 2013: ISIS as an organization is officially established and introduced with the bombing of Iraqi Kurds


June 2014:
- ISIS continues to spread and manages to capture Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul.
- US sends troops to help protect American embassy in Baghdad
- Iraq asks US to conduct air strikes
- ISIS proclaims that it is establishing a caliphate and names their caliph as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

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August 2014:
  - President Obama authorizes air strikes to protect US personnel
  - Video of the murder of American, James Foley is posted
  - Make advancements in Syria including capturing a government air base

September 2014:
  - Video of the murder of American, Steven Sotloff is posted
  - Arab League condemns behavior of ISIS and similar terrorist organizations
  - Video of the murder of British, David Haines is posted
  - US launches more airstrikes

October 2014:
  - Video of the murder of British, Alan Henning is posted

IV. Main Issues:

Funding: One of the principal reasons that ISIS is so powerful at the moment is because of the immense amount of resources that they possess. They reportedly have $2bn in assets at the moment and are steadily gaining more. The running of the organization has often been compared to a corporation. With money coming from so many different directions, the group effectively manages their assets and plans. Their main supporters are Saudi communities, as Saudi Arabia is in majority Sunni and so thus they support the increase in Sunni countries. Additionally, Iraq the location they are centered in has large supplies of oil and ISIS has taken advantage of this with millions coming in a month from oil and gas fields. They also partake in “taxation, tolls, smuggling, extortion and kidnapping”.

Recruitment: One of the primary reasons the international community is so worried by ISIS is because of the shocking support it has raised from other countries. People in Western nations have been taking part in the actions of the terrorist group and stopping their citizens from joining is one of the main focuses of governments at the moment. ISIS has tremendous manpower with an estimated 30,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq and around 12,000 of those being foreign nationals from at least 81 states.

Border States: Although ISIS is comprised of both Iraq and Syria, it is desperately trying to expand itself. In recent months, the city of Kobane came under particular stress, for it was surrounded by IS forces, making it extremely vulnerable. Kobane could not be allowed to fall because of its critical implications on the stretch of Turkish- Syrian border that it is currently barring. Domination of border-states, especially Turkey, could allow for trade expansion and religious dominance. However, although the Arab states openly fear the ideological expansion or hold that ISIS might have over their populations, they are not making any actions that remedy the situation to aid existing Kurdish forces. Despite their proximity, border-states are simply defending their territory, and doing nothing to remedy the actual conflict.

Fighting Tactics: A coalition between France, the United Kingdom, and the United State, has stated that they do not want troops on the ground, relying on air strikes. Border states, as stated above, have mainly refused to infiltrate ISIS borders. Another option may be to strangle ISIS economically,

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impounding their assets. However, it should be noted that ISIS holds claim to many oil and natural energy resources in the region.

V. Web Sites:
New York Times opinion article on ISIS

New Yorker opinion article on the world’s
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/08/return-war

BBC provides basic knowledge and background on the organization
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29052144

The Guardian hypothesizes on how ISIS came to be

Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium (TRAC) provides basic overview

United Nations Resolution 2170

It is advisable, before starting any research on specific issues on the agenda, to browse extensively the <WWW Virtual Library: International Affairs resources>, one of the best portal with scores of valuable links: http://www2.etown.edu/vl/ and of course the main UN portal: http://www.un.org/ as well as the invaluable UN cyber-school-bus website: http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/. The THIMUN website, http://www.thimun.org/ also has an extensive and efficient <Research> section worth browsing. For comprehensive academic documents on international crisis: http://www.crisisgroup.org/ has numerous reports in PDF format.