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Sep 25, 2017 by [Shaun Riordan](#)

What the West Lacks in the Fight Against ISIS (Part 2) ^[1]

***Note:** This blog is part two of a two-part series. Part one can be found [here](#). The entire piece was originally posted [here](#).*

The struggle against Islamic State in Iraq should be strategic and diplomatic in the true sense of the word: the creation and disruption of coalitions built on profound geopolitical analysis and accompanied by effective public diplomacy. It also offers digital diplomacy the opportunity to show that it amounts to more than Ambassadors blogging and First Secretaries tweeting. Islamic State in Iraq appears to be a coalition between (mainly foreign) Jihadists, Sunni tribesmen and ex-Baathist officers (two of the deputy commanders are ex-generals from Saddam's army).

This coalition is similar to that led by Al Qaeda in Iraq eight years ago. General Petraeus broke up that coalition by a combination of CIA officers driving around West Iraq with suitcases of dollars with promises that the Iraqi Government would respect the Sunni community. Petraeus was able to form the Anbar Awakes coalition from Al Qaeda's ex-allies to eradicate the groups's influence. Although the objective remains the same – break up the Islamic State led coalition to create a new coalition to fight against Islamic State – the details will need to differ. It is too dangerous to send CIA officers, or anyone else, driving around Western Iraq looking for Sunni tribal leaders to recruit. Islamic State is well aware of the dangers. Part of the reason for the online beheadings, analogous to Himmler's briefings for senior Nazi Party and army figure on the holocaust in Poznan in 1943, was to bind the allies into a circle of horror from which they cannot escape. Nor will promises of good behavior by the Iraqi government cut the mustard. The promises were unfulfilled last time, and would not be credible now.

The situation in Iraq offers digital diplomacy the opportunity to prove it has come of age. If direct contact with Sunni tribesman and ex-Baathists is too dangerous, they can be approached through social media and chatrooms. Once potential targets have been identified, they can be approached online before direct contact is made. Indirect relationships can be created by online platforms offering exchanges of views and ideas on the future of the Sunnis in Iraq. The objectives remain those of classical diplomacy: building networks to allow the creation and disruption of coalitions. Digital diplomacy offers new, and possibly more effective (certainly safer), tools for achieving them. But such tools will achieve nothing if the West does not have convincing assurances to offer Sunni tribes about their future.

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This may mean moving beyond the current Sykes-Picot inspired borders of the region. An offer to the Sunni tribes that convinces them to break with Islamic State could be to create a Sunni state out of the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria. The corollaries would be a Shia/Alawite state and a Kurdish state. This would offer the prospect of greater stability in the region, but would run up against the opposition of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Iran may be satisfied to

maintain the Shia Crescent from Tehran through to Hizaballah in South Lebanon and Saudi Arabia with the creation of a new Sunni state to balance against Iran. But what would Turkey get to compensate for the creation of a Kurdish state.

If one of the aims of tackling Islamic State is to undermine its attractiveness to Western European Muslims, then it is essential that Islamic State is defeated militarily by other Muslim forces, not the West. If these can include disaffected Sunni tribes who have broken with Islamic State, so much the better. As some commentators have pointed out, if Islamic State is defeated militarily, it could unleash scores of jihadist terrorists in Western Europe. But they will be less effective as the remnants of a humiliated Islamic State defeated by their co-religionists. It will not be like the returning Mujahdeen in the nineties, fresh from victory over the Soviet Union.

This points to the importance of the West (and Russia) not being seen to impose a solution. Any successful strategy must take account of, and engage with, the views of the people living in the region, as well as those who have been forced to flee. This offers another opportunity for digital diplomacy to show its true worth. In 1991 the Mont Fleur scenario exercise brought together 22 South Africans from across the political spectrum to think about what post-Apartheid South Africa would look like 10 years hence. The exercise helped develop a common language and common assumptions about the future that were able to influence the key political debates. Such an exercise could be of value in the Middle East, but the security and logistical challenges could be insurmountable. Digital scenario building platforms, however, could offer the opportunity of bringing together an even broader range of actors to debate the future of the region. The potential of digital tools, whether social media or more structured platforms or networking tools, to promote conversations in conflict zones has barely been explored yet, but could offer a significant way of engaging with Middle Eastern populations and giving them a voice in deciding their own future.

None of the above elements will work alone. The approach to the defeat of Islamic State must be holistic and strategic. This in turn will form part of broader strategies to combat Jihadism in Western Europe and manage mass migration to the EU. Military action will be necessary, including military (primarily air) support from the West and China. But it must form part of a broader diplomatic strategy with clear and agreed political objectives. These may need to be radical in terms of current borders. Mass Western military action, on a scale scarcely acceptable to Western publics and with civilian casualties abhorrent to Western sensibilities, might secure victory over Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. But only in a way that would unleash more Jihadists, with nothing to lose, onto European streets.

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