NATO COHESION: THE THREAT POSED BY ISIL

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Strategic Studies

by

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
2019

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE *(DD-MM-YYYY)* 14-06-2019	2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis	3. DATES COVERED *(From - To)* AUG 2018 – JUN 2019
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE NATO Cohesion: The Threat Posed by ISIL		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S) Eirik Wabakken Hognestad, Norwegian Army		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301		8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

ISIL's declaration of an Islamic Caliphate in June 2014 sent shockwaves through the international environment. A following trans-national terror campaign under ISIL's black flag resulted in several countermeasures against the new geopolitical threat that have reduced the terror organization geographical control over its previous conquered terrain, and has forced ISIL to transition to an insurgency organization. The thesis addresses ISIL's transition to the insurgency, and examine how the terror organization's strategy and current state may pose a threat to NATO within the next five years. First, the paper explains fundamental theories of terrorism and ISIL's history, before analyzing ISIL's strategy and ISIL's capabilities to impose its strategy. Second, NATO's critical vulnerabilities are discussed through a Center of Gravity analysis. In the final phase, the thesis answers the research question by discussing if ISIL has the intention (strategy) and capability to exploit any of NATO's critical vulnerabilities.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

ISIL, ISIS, IS, Daesh, Terrorism, Terror, Counter Terrorism, CT, Iraq, Syria.

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT (U)	b. ABSTRACT (U)	c. THIS PAGE (U)	(U)	105	19b. PHONE NUMBER *(include area code)*

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39.18

ii

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

NATO COHESION: THE THREAT POSED BY ISIL, by Eirik Wabakken Hognestad, 105 pages.

ISIL's declaration of an Islamic Caliphate in June 2014 sent shockwaves through the international environment. A following trans-national terror campaign under ISIL's black flag resulted in several countermeasures against the new geopolitical threat that have reduced the terror organization geographical control over its previous conquered terrain, and has forced ISIL to transition to an insurgency organization. The thesis addresses ISIL's transition to the insurgency, and examine how the terror organization's strategy and current state may pose a threat to NATO within the next five years. First, the paper explains fundamental theories of terrorism and ISIL's history, before analyzing ISIL's strategy and ISIL's capabilities to impose its strategy. Second, NATO's critical vulnerabilities are discussed through a Center of Gravity analysis. In the final phase, the thesis answers the research question by discussing if ISIL has the intention (strategy) and capability to exploit any of NATO's critical vulnerabilities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ACRONYMS

AQ	Al Qaeda
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
COIN	Counter Insurgency
CT	Counter-Terrorism
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
IO	Information Operation
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and Levant
JTWJ	Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIS	Norwegian Intelligence Service
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
SCIRI	Iraqi Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq
VEO	Violent Extremists Organizations

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism can be described as a violent method to achieve political change or

political goals. David Rapoport explains the history of terrorism through four waves of

terrorism, where the latter and current wave is categorized as religious terrorism

(Rapoport 2012). The most prominent religion in today's religious terrorism is Islam, and

since 2014, the Islamic terror organization Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) has

made its presence known in the international arena through several spectacular attacks

against Western targets.

The West perceives religious terrorism as an inferno of violence and human

suffering, where the terrorists use barbaric methods to inflict pain, fear, and death to other

human beings who have a different religious or ideological preference. If we consider the

messages from Western tabloid media, this narrative may be valid, but the truth is likely

more nuanced. Consequently, one should seek to understand the reasons for ISIL's

actions.

To defeat terrorism, it is essential to understand terrorism as a phenomenon. It is

vital to understand why terrorism is used as a means to achieve the terrorists' strategic

end state. Further, we have to analyze to what extent terrorism may help terrorists achieve

their ideological or political strategic end. If we recognize that terrorism is a way to

achieve a political change, we also recognize that using violent means is a way of

reaching the strategic end state. Therefore, if we attempt to view the world from the

perspective of the terrorists, can we ask if violent actions are legitimate to achieve their

desired endstate? In other words – does the goal justify the medium? ISIL will argue that it does.

Only by following the terrorists' way of thinking are we able to prevent terrorism from occurring. To define terror organizations as merely fanatical religious or ideological fighters would be a dangerous undermining of the threat that terror organizations such as ISIL possess. ISIL declared the caliphate in 2014, and in the same year changed their strategic means to also include international terror operations, and thus the organization has posed a threat to international security in various ways (Fishman 2016, 235). Recent operations against ISIL in both Syria and Iraq have changed the terror organization's economic, military, and informational powers.

Parallel with the reduction of ISIL's so-called Caliphate over the last few years has been the establishment of a narrative that the war against ISIL is somewhat over, that the threat from this terror organization has crumbled along with the loss of its territorial defeat. This narrative was reinforced by President Trump on December 2018 when he announced victory over ISIL - at the same time as he stated that orders were issued for the withdrawal of US troops from Syria (Specia 2019). Even so, the US Intelligence Community claims that ISIL "will exploit any reduction in CT pressure to strengthen its clandestine presence and accelerate rebuilding key capabilities, such as media production and external operations" (DNI 2019, 11). In all strategies, defining a victory is linked to reaching the political end state in the National Security Strategy (NSS), and in that way, the US president's announcement may be correct. However, it is interesting to see deeper into the perception of the threat ISIL poses now that the terror organization has lost huge amounts of its power. It is one thing is to defeat ISIL militarily, another to overcome the

idea that made ISIL rise to power in the Middle East and as a security threat in the international arena.

The purpose of this thesis is thus to understand how ISIL's loss of power will change the terror organization's strategy, and to what extent ISIL's strategy and capabilities pose a threat towards NATO. Hence, this thesis seeks to analyze and predict how the dramatic changes within ISIL's power will affect its strategy towards NATO in the next five years. As a result, the thesis research question is, "Does ISIL pose a threat to NATO in the next five years?" Proceeding from this, the hypothesis of the thesis is that failure in Unity of Effort within NATO will result in Critical Vulnerabilities that ISIL still has intentions and capabilities to exploit directly or indirectly. Hence, ISIL will continue to pose a threat to NATO.

To answer the research question, it is necessary to break the question into secondary questions that can be analyzed based on evaluation criteria. This thesis has the following secondary questions:

1. What is ISIL's strategy? The analysis and understanding of ISIL's strategy will answer to what extent the terror organization intends to target NATO as an alliance, or individual member states, within the next five years.

2. To what extent has ISIL capabilities to achieve their strategic goals in the next five years? The analysis of ISIL's capabilities will provide an answer to whether or not the terror organization has the necessary ability to achieve its strategic and operational end states.

3. What are NATO's Critical Vulnerabilities? A Center of Gravity (COG) analysis will answer if NATO has vulnerabilities that possibly can be exploited directly or indirectly by ISIL the next five years.

<div align="center">Assumptions</div>

Three assumptions form the basis of this thesis. The assumptions about ISIL are derived from ISIL's status and historical development. The assumption referring to NATO is based on the status of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) and the geo-political situation in the world today considering the reemergence of deterring Russian aggression as a priority. Assumptions pertinent to this research about ISIL and NATO are:

1. ISIL is not defeated and has turned into an insurgency group in Iraq and Levant.

2. ISIL will seek to exploit geopolitical opportunities to achieve the desired end state.

3. Within the next five years, NATO will prioritize preparations for Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO), and reduce the use of combat power for counter insurgency (COIN) operations.

<div align="center">Definitions</div>

First, this paper uses the acronym ISIL when referring to the terrorist group. There are other acronyms used in different sources, and both the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS) and Da'esh could be used because these acronyms refer to the same organization (Steed 2016, 6). However, this thesis will follow the

NATO term and consistently use ISIL to designate the terror organization. ISIL stands for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Steed 2016, 6).

NATO defines <u>terrorism</u> as "The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious or ideological objective" (NATO 2015, 7). However, there is no universal definition of terrorism, but it is necessary for this thesis to have a definition that is broad enough to include the different aspects from which ISIL can best be described, including the doctrinal approach to use of violence as ISIL has shown.

As a consequence, this thesis uses *The revised academic consensus of terrorism* which states that:

> Terrorism refers on the one hand to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form of tactics of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties. (Schmid 2013, 86)

This definition includes the most central aspects of terror operations carried out by ISIL, where doctrinal violence is used towards civilian targets to impose fear and polarization to support ISIL's political ends.

When it comes to <u>Counter Terrorism</u>, the paper uses NATO's definition: "Offensive measures used to reduce the vulnerability of forces, individuals and property to terrorism, to include Counter-force activities and containment by military forces and civil agencies" (NATO 2015, 7).

Further, as a result of ISIL's historical ability to transform from an insurgency group to an ideological organization which controlled a vast amount of land and

resources, this thesis defines <u>terror organizations</u> as "a subnational political organization that uses terrorism" (Philips 2014, 237). This definition is broad enough to address the different aspects of ISIL's history and development.

A <u>Caliphate</u> is defined as "an Islamic state under the leadership of an Islamic steward with the title of caliph a person considered a religious successor to the Islamic prophet Muhammad and a leader of the entire ummah (community)" (Kadi and Shahin. 2013, 81–86).

National Powers (DIME)

<u>Diplomatic Instrument</u>: the way a nation interacts and engage with state or non-state actors, generally to secure some form of agreement that allows the conflicting parties to coexist peacefully (JCS 2018b, II-5).

<u>Information Instrument</u>: The infrastructure, capabilities, and processes by which a state or non-state creates, gathers, analyzes, disseminates, exploits and disrupts information (JCS 2018b, II-6).

<u>Military Instrument:</u> The way a state or a non-state actor entails applying force, threatening the application of force, or enabling other parties to apply force in furtherance of strategic ends in an attempt to impose its will on another (JCS 2018b, II-6).

<u>Economic Instrument</u>: The way a state or a non-state actor is furthering or constraining others' prosperity (JCS 2018b, II-7).

Strategy and Common Principles

Strategy is defined as a prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater and multinational objectives (JCS 2017a, GL-15).

Unified Action: The synchronization, coordination, and/or integration of the activities of governmental and nongovernmental entities with a military operation to achieve unity of effort (JCS 2016, 250).

Unity of Effort: Coordination and cooperation toward common objectives, even if the participants are not necessarily part of the same command or organization, which is the product of successful unified action (JCS 2016, 252).

Unity of Command: The operation of all forces under a single responsible commander who has the requisite authority to direct and employ those forces in pursuit of common purpose (JCS 2017a, A-2).

End state: (DOD) The set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives (JCS 2017a, GL-9).

Ends: The objectives and desired military end states (JCS 2017a, II-4).

Ways: The sequence of actions to achieve objectives and the military end state (JCS 2017a, II-4).

Means: The resources required to carry out the sequence of actions to achieve the objectives and military end state (JCS 2017a, II-4).

Risk: The chance of failure or unacceptable consequences in performing sequence of actions to achieve the desired objectives and military end state (JCS 2017a, II-4).

Operational Art: The cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means (JCS 2017a, II-3).

Lines of Effort (LOE): The linkage of multiple tasks and missions using the logic of purpose— cause and effect—to focus efforts toward establishing operational and strategic conditions (JCS 2017b, IV-29).

Center of Gravity (COG): a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act (JCS 2017b, IV-23).

Critical Capabilities (CC): the primary abilities essential to the accomplishment of the objective (JCS 2017b, IV-25).

Critical Requirements (CR): essential conditions, resources, and means the COG requires to perform the critical capability (JCS 2017b, IV-25).

Critical vulnerabilities (CV): those aspects or components of critical requirements that are deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack in a manner achieving decisive or significant results (JCS 2017b, IV-25).

Threat: is defined as any combination of actors, entities, or forces that have the capability and intent to harm NATO, NATO interests, or the homeland of the member states (HQDA 2018, 1-2).

Hazard: a condition with the potential to cause injury, illness, or death of personnel; damage to or loss of equipment or property; or mission degradation (JCS 2018a, GL-9).

Criticality: identifies key assets that are required to accomplish a mission and examines the costs of recovery and reconstitution, including time, expense, capability, and infrastructure support (HQDA 2012, 2-5).

Vulnerability: identifies physical characteristics or procedures that render critical assets, areas, infrastructures, or special events vulnerable to known or potential threats and hazards (HQDA 2012, 2-5).

Limitations and Delimitations

As the research question indicates, this thesis addresses the superior strategy and the strategic goals ISIL seeks to achieve. Thus, the thesis will not analyze the different strategies or capabilities from different geographical subgroups where their leaders have pledged allegiance to ISIL. Hence, the thesis concerns about ISIL's core areas, which are defined to be Iraq and Syria with nearby geography. At the same time, different members of NATO have different national interests in the counter-terrorism campaign against ISIL. The diversity of national interests is not addressed in this paper as the thesis will describe and analyze the counter-terrorism approach from NATO's strategic policy. Further, many geopolitical factors prevented Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) from creating a stable environment in Iraq and Syria. Although these factors are both interesting and relevant to understand, the thesis will not analyze these.

The thesis will look at threats from ISIL to NATO as an alliance, and thus will not analyze the possible threats to specific member states.

<u>Chapter Summary</u>

This chapter contains the background, purpose, and context of this thesis. The question the paper sets out to answer is relevant for NATO security in a time where the alliance's primary focus shifts to LSCO against a near-peer threat. Despite the shift of focus, NATO cannot take its eyes from the threat from terrorism. In the past, ISIL was severely degraded by COIN operations but recovered successfully and transitioned to a regional and global threat. It will be unwise to let that happen again. Therefore, this thesis seeks to answer to what extent ISIL poses a threat towards NATO in the next five years.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW – TERRORISM AS STRATEGY

Chapter Introduction

This thesis is a theory-based study designed to answer in which ways ISIL poses a threat to NATO in the next five years. To answer this question, this chapter will address existing theories which describe terrorism as a phenomenon. Hence, the literature review describes the problem this thesis is addressing from a qualitative view and is used to establish the evaluation criteria. Furthermore, this chapter will contain background from various sources to understand what ISIL threats represent to NATO. Lastly, this chapter addresses NATO's policy guidelines for counter-terrorism and an overview of theories regarding counter-terrorism. The different sections of this chapter are linked to the thesis' secondary questions and will provide the knowledge for analyzing the evaluation criteria in chapter four.

ISIL's Birth and Development

To set the conditions to understand the connection between theories related to terrorism and ISIL, this chapter addresses ISIL's development. According to Charles Lister (2015), ISIL's beginning may be linked back to 1999 when ISIL's founder, Abu Musad al Zarqawi, was released from prison in Jordan. Shortly after his release, Zarqawi went to Afghanistan, and with support from AQ, he established a training camp and a terror organization which now is known as Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad (JTWJ). JTWJ quickly became a crafty organization and ally of AQ. However, after 9/11 and the US entry into Afghanistan, JTWJ and Zarqawi were forced to escape and relocate in the

northern part of Iraq among the like-minded Ansar al-Islam. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, Zarqawi was still in the Kurdish mountainous region, but JTWJ's operational reach was more prominent than the Kurdish mountains. Within the same year, JTWJ carried out three significant terror operations; one targeted the Jordanian Embassy in Bagdad, another attacked the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Iraq, and the third struck the Shi'ite Iman Ali Mosque in Najaf. In total, the attacks resulted in 134 persons dead, including the US special envoy to Iraq and the religious leader for the Iraqi Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) (Lister 2015; Fishman 2016).

The significance of the attacks showed the scope and targets that Zarqawi considered as legitimate for his organization. Neither Westerners nor Muslims who did not support Zarqawi's interpretation of Islam should be spared. Through his actions Zarqawi showed his dual goals; undermine what he saw as an occupation force and stir a sectarian conflict between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims (Lister 2015, 8).

In 2004 Zarqawi and JTWJ swore allegiance with AQ and Osama Bin Laden and JTWJ transformed into Al Queada in Irag (AQI) (Sitter 2017, 231). However, the relationship between the AQ leadership and AQI was strained from the beginning. AQI showed brutality and a sectarian approach towards the Shiite Muslims that the central leadership of AQ believed would undermine their strategic goal (Friedland 2014). Despite the differences, AQI was seen as a useful tool for AQ's desired path towards an Islamic califate. AQI recruited Sunni Muslims who had lost power, resources, and honor after Saddam Hussein's fall from the Iraqi throne, and multiplied in numbers (Lister 2015).

According to Lister (2015), AQI included five of the most significant terrorist organizations in Iraq under the coalition known as Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM) by January 2006. The vision of MSM was to coordinate and synchronize jihad within Iraq, which gave AQI increased power. The resilience in the organizational structure of AQI was shown when Zarqawi and an AQI religious leader were killed in a US drone attack in June 2006. Five days after Zarqawi's death, a new leader was positioned, and within four months AQI transformed again and established the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), consisting of a complete shadow government. With this transformation, ISI had begun the break up with AQ. But by doing so, ISI had started an evolution where a former insurgency group transformed itself into a military-political actor over a geographical area (Lister 2015, 10-11).

ISI's birth was challenging. Local militias with support from US military capacities and COIN operations in Iraq inflicted heavy losses on ISI between 2007 – 2009. By the end of 2009, 34 of 42 senior leaders had been killed. This is an important point because even with significantly reduced capacities, ISI was not defeated. The terror organization had once again transformed, but this time reverted back to an insurgency group that used terror as a means (Lister 2015, 14-15). The link to ISIL's current situation seems obvious and will be addressed later in this paper.

The terror organization's rebirth started with the US egress from Iraq. The Iraqi security forces capabilities were reduced in line with ISI's gained confidence and recruitment. ISI shifted focus and established its headquarters in Mosul. Further, the organization invested heavily in informational power and propaganda, securing a narrative within the Sunni Muslim community that increased recruitment. New leadership

was established, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was positioned as Emir, leading increased attacks against Bagdad, Iraqi Security forces (ISF), and Shiite Muslims (Lister 2015).

In 2011, ISIL expanded its operations in Syria and quickly exploited the chaotic environment the country was experiencing due to the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the civilian war that swept the country. ISIL had for many years used Syria as a transit country to infiltrate foreign fighters to their ranks, but al-Baghdadi now established a military footprint in the country. However, Syria had its own jihadistic organizations; Jabhat al-Nusra, an AQ affiliated terror organization, being the biggest of them. As in so many other conflicts, the war in Syria was caused by the quest for power and resources, and al-Baghdadi viewed al-Nusra as a threat to his organization and ambitions. In 2012, al-Baghdadi tried to persuade al-Nusra to become a subordinate unit of ISI. The al-Nusra senior leadership quickly declined the offer, even though ISI was established in Syria, had no intention of leaving, and changed the name to Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). This resulted in two competing jihadist terror organizations in Syria, and ISIL had to fight a war on two separate fronts (Lister 2015).

AQ still considered both al-Nusra and ISIS as subordinates and sent an envoy to coordinate and synchronize both organizations in Syria. However, the chaos of internal fights between ISIS, al-Nusra and other smaller terror organizations had gone too far, and the mediation from AQ came too late. AQ had lost control over al-Baghdadi and ISIS, and ISIS broke from AQ in February 2014 (Lister 2015, 20).

After the declaration of an Islamic State and the proclamation of Mosul as the capital, ISIL's control over their geographical area started to decrease. ISIL's inroads in the geopolitical sphere and security situation in both the Middle East and internationally

had become too dangerous. This led to actions from different actors on the world stage. Iranian Shiite militias reinforcement of the Iraqi Security forces, Russia reinforced the Assad regime in Syria, Turkey prioritized border control towards the conflict area, and the USA and its European and regional allies intensified an air campaign towards ISIL. Accordingly, a US-led coalition started training Kurdish, Iraqi, and Syrian oppositional forces. The different strategic means had different effects on ISIL, and some of the impacts will be discussed later in this paper. However, another significant shift occurred in 2014. A sign of ISIL's expansion of their operational area first appeared in September the same year when the former ISIL spokesperson and leader of ISIL's external operations, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, called upon the Muslims of the world to carry out deadly attacks against the enemy of Islam – "If you cannot find an IED or a gun, then find a disbelieving American, Frenchman, or one of their allies [and] smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or hit him with a car […]" (Fishman 2016, 236). This signal was significant and showed that ISIL had other things in mind than just building an Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. The terror organization also had a strategic interest in international terrorism (Fishman 2016, 235). The next chapter addresses what ISIL wanted to achieve with this strategic approach, and sets out to describe the theory related to terrorism as a strategical means.

<div align="center">The Casual Explanation of Terrorism</div>

Marta Crenshaw claims that to understand why terrorism occurs, we have to separate the different factors that are causal explanations of terrorism. Crenshaw divides these factors into two main contributors: 1) foreseen end factors, and 2) provoking factors (Crenshaw 1981, 381). We can argue that some contributors to terrorism develop over

time, while other elements are a result of one or more specific individual events. Crenshaw explains that two conditions exist that, seen through the terrorists' eyes, legitimize terrorism as the only alternative for desirable political influence or change. The first condition is created when a group of people within a society or culture perceives discrimination and unfair treatment by either the ruling layers or the government of the society. The second condition exists because of the lack of political and social codetermination that causes a group within the society to be marginalized, thereby preventing the group from having societal influence (Crenshaw 1981, 383). In sum, these conditions legitimize or make terrorism morally acceptable as the only available means to reach the terrorists' desirable political change. Therefore, seen through the lenses of the terrorists', the goal sanctifies the medium (Crenshaw 1981, 387).

The Objectives of Terrorism

The objectives that different terror organizations desire to achieve vary, but there are some commonalities. Louise Richardson (2008) argues that the goals of the terror organizations may be categorized into three objectives: 1) revenge; 2) renown; and 3) reaction (Richardson 2008, 77). Richardson made an interesting claim that terrorists' objective is based upon a desire of redress from an individual or collective humiliation (Richardson 2008,102). Thus, she describes a connection between the human nature that is latent in us all, and how a collectivistic approach feeds individuals' hunger for revenge, renown (fame), and reactions to the actions carried out (Richardson 2008, 96).

Several scholars have supported the argument of reaction. According to both Crenshaw (1981) and Tom Parker (2015), the most prominent objective of a terror organization is to provoke an overreaction from a government. A terrorist's rationale is to

cause governmental actions that lead to the polarization of the society and thereby undermine the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the population or a part of the society. The terrorists' fight against the government is therefore legitimate, which will recruit more followers to the terrorists' cause (Parker 2015). Another commonality is that terrorism seeks to undermine and challenge a society's security system. By doing so, the terrorist seeks to undermine and demoralize a government's ability to establish and maintain security within the society and population, which may lead to another system controlled by the terrorists (Crenshaw 1981).

Nicolai Sitter (2017) sums up four historical objectives of terrorist organizations. These objectives have similarities with the theories mentioned above, but explicitly clarify the objective of polarization and mobilization of support:

Leverage – the objective is achieved through actions that lead to a reaction or response from the group who the terrorists' want to influence. The response leads to the effect that the terrorists' believe supports their goal.

Polarization – the intention is to increase the tension between different societies and to clarify the distinction between different groups, religions or ideologies.

Mobilization – the objective seeks to recruit new members to the terror organization and legitimize the cause both internally within the organization and among sympathizers regionally and globally.

Retribution – the intention is to restore honor and justice through penalty and revenge to a targeted group who the terrorists feel have done injustice to them or the society they belong to. Further, the retribution is also meant to deter the targeted group from future involvement (Sitter 2017).

Reconciling the theory with the history and development of ISIL, one can argue that ISIL represents something new and different from a "traditional" terror organization. The organization is described as something between a terror organization, an insurgency group, and a proto-state. An important question to raise therefore is if ISIL's strategic end state is something more, or something other than the scholars of terrorism claim. The next chapter addresses this question, where ISIL's strategy is analyzed.

<div align="center">Terrorism as a Way of Communication</div>

Schmid (2005) argues that propaganda and violence have commonalities. Whereas violence seeks to change behavior through force, propaganda seeks to change behavior through persuasion. Terrorist organizations use both means. Consequently, terrorism can be seen as a combination of both violence and propaganda (McAllister and Schmid 2013, 246). The violent actions conducted intend to communicate a message to one or more audiences, including political, religious or ideological opponents, the population as a whole, or sympathizers. However, the challenge with the use of violence as a means of communication is that the message is interpreted differently by different audiences (McAllister and Schmid 2013, 246). The message towards the different audiences differs, but to communicate different messages through the same actions is challenging. How the targeted audience receives the message is affected by several factors, such as the timings of the attack, the actual target, and the brutality in the attack (McAllister and Schmid 2013, 247).

One of the most prevailing effects of terror is fear. According to Alex Schmid (2005), terrorism connects with a "state of mind" which influences the targeted audience with an overwhelming fear that prevents human beings from doing an objective review of

risk. Schmid claims that terrorism exploits this irrational feeling deliberately by targeting seemingly random audiences without warning, resulting in that the audience experiences a fear that is not proportional to the actual threat. This may be a dangerous feeling, leading to irrational reactions from the targeted group. Hence, predicting an outcome from a terrorist attack is difficult, and the risk of undermining the terrorists' desired message is imminent. However, the most imminent danger of terrorism is not a physical threat, but the mental and psychological influence on politicians and decisionmakers (Schmid 2005, 143). Seeing that terrorism targets this influence specifically, the terrorist organization seeks to provoke a reaction from a government that supports the organization's tactical or strategic goals (Abrahms 2006, 46).

Abrahms (2008) argues that the strategical desired end states are categorized into two separate goals: 1) limited goals, such as a fight over a particular territory, and 2) maximalist goals, such as an ideological war (Abrahms 2008, 33). Furthermore, Abrahms argues that terrorists target to influence the perception of the action. Attacks on the civilian population are perceived as maximalist even if the terrorist organization has a limited goal. Targeting the civilian population, according to Abrahms, will be interpreted as a confirmation that the terrorists want to destroy society as a whole, which undermines the terrorist's desire for political change (Abrahms 2008, 56). Eventually, the biggest challenge the terrorists face when communicating a message through violence is that the targeted audience perceives violence as the message. Hence, the strategic message the terrorists want to communicate is drowning in the brutality of the action (Abrahms 2008, 56). Both Abrahms (2008) and Sitter (2017) therefore claimed that terrorism as a means is not suited for provoking political change, an argument history supports.

<u>Theoretical Framework for ISIL's Strategy</u>

The importance of strategy within jihadist terrorist organizations has been and still is, underestimated among Western players in the security domain. Underestimating the Jihadists' ability to think and act in strategic terms, ISIL is reduced to a weaker threat than it is (Fishman 2016). The theoretical framework for ISIL's strategy is described in this chapter.

<u>The Near and Far Enemy – Two Different Strategies for the Same Goal</u>

To understand the development of these two central jihadist strategies, one must return to 1979. When the Islamic revolution started in Iran, resulting in a Shia Muslim regime in the country, the Shiites got a state. This frightened the Sunni Muslims who longed for the same. Also, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan triggered revolutionary energy among many Muslims. Fishman claims that up to 20,000 foreign warriors fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. These warriors had gained military experience and expertise, and they felt self-confident after forcing the Soviet Union out of the mountains in 1989 (Fishman 2016).

Further, they had established a network of similar "brothers" from other countries and territories. Their common experiences as Muslims fighting against an occupation power resulted in the will required to establish a caliphate. However, many of the jihadists faced more imminent challenges, and the effort required gathering all Muslims under a universal caliphate came in second place (Fishman 2016, 12). Most of the foreign warriors came from nations ruled by governments with close ties to US and Western values, and the jihadists returned home with an intention and desire to control their local regimes. This strategy is known as "near enemy," where the close enemy of a purely

Islamic caliphate is the seated governing power in the Middle East (Fishman 2016, 12-13). Osama bin Laden eventually changed the meaning of the "near enemy" strategy, and it was at that time that the world became a more dangerous place. Bin Laden recognized the chosen strategy did not achieve the results AQ wanted and concluded that regimes supported by the United States and the West were too strong and therefore were too difficult to control. AQ, therefore, changed strategic direction to attack the United States and the West, a strategy known as "far enemy" (Fishman 2016, 12-13). The intention behind changing strategic direction was to force the United States to cease its support for local regimes in the Middle East, which would make the regimes more vulnerable to being overthrown by jihadists (Fishman 2016, 12).

As described in the former chapter about ISIL's history and development, ISIL revealed the will and ability to use both strategies. Thus, ISIL appears as a flexible and adaptable terrorist organization capable of changing strategic goals and instruments to achieve its policy goals.

<u>Seven Steps to Victory</u>

Fishman claims that ISIL is building its strategy on a seven-step plan, established by Sayf al-Adl, AQ's security chief before 9/11. Sayf al-Adl was closely associated with al-Zarqawi in 2005, many years before western eyes became interested in the threat posed by the relationship. Fishman described ISIL's strategic goals as a seven-step plan for complete victory. He claimed the strategic goal of ISIL was, and is, ideological, but the core of the strategic plan was a way to get to the ideological desired final state (Fishman 2016, 34-36). Predictably, the plan has been related to several events for ISIL's actions and the geopolitical relationships in time and space until 2017. The seven steps are:

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1. The Awakening internship (2000 - 2003). This step was designed to provoke a wide conflict between the West and the Jihadists. By attacking the United States in spectacular ways, AQ wanted to provoke Western military interactions in the Middle East, which would alert the entire world to AQ's goals, thereby increasing recruitment for the terrorist organization.

2. The Eye-Opening Stage (2003 - 2006). This phase began with the United States occupation of Baghdad in April 2003, and the strategic objective in this phase was to extend the conflict with the United States to illustrate that governments in the Middle East were in league with the United States. In this way, AQ wanted to undermine the governing power structures in the area where they would later establish their caliphate.

3. The Stage of Standing Upright (2007 - 2010). This phase intended to expand its networks from Iraq and to several countries in the Levant. The strategic masterpiece of using Syria as one of the jihadist revolt areas was unique, as the United States would never support the Assad government in Syria. By doing this, AQ broke away from its then "far enemy" strategy, but doing just that would increase the likelihood of overthrowing a near enemy. This would lead to two things; first, the jihadists would have a geographic area under their control, and secondly, it would show that all other governments in the Levant only managed to rule as a result of being puppets for the United States.

4. The Stage of Recuperation (2010 - 2013). This phase predicted that jihadists would oppose regimes in the Middle East as "step by step, the raisons d´etre of these regimes will cease to exist" (Fishman 2016, 35-36). The prediction

relates well to "the Arab Spring," but the reason for this may be based on other factors beyond the scope of this thesis. AQ assumed that the United States and the West would be tired of war and so weakened in the region that their involvement would gradually decline. The West's support for the regimes would, therefore, be reduced.

5. The Stage of Declaration of the Caliphate (2013 - 2016). AQ's strategic thinkers predict that this era will be characterized by "global weakness among the enemies of jihad, and declare an Islamic State - the Caliphate" (Fishman 2016, 36). The caliphate was declared in 2014, in line with the strategic plan's timeline, but the alliance it was supposed to support was now dissolved. AQ and ISIL had gone in different directions.

6. The Stage of Absolute Confrontation (2016 - 2018). This phase should begin immediately after the establishment of the caliphate and intends to divide the world into two conflicting groups. The groups are described as "the forces of faith and the forces of atheism" (Fishman 2016, 36). At that point, the era would be characterized by an "all-out confrontation" between the groups (Fishman 2016, 36).

7. The Stage of Final Victory (2018 - 2020). The phase is not described in detail, but the intention is that all the world's Muslims are gathered under one flag and the caliphate's power structures are secured, Western influence is eliminated, and terrorism will scare the potential enemies of ISIL before challenging the ideology and power of the Caliphate (Fishman 2016, 34-36).

Counter-Terrorism Theory

As it is likely that the terrorist organization aims to change the state's behavior, it is natural to look at the state's reactions to acts and intended acts of terrorism. By adding theories of counter-terrorism (CT), it is possible to see which factors the state must take into account how they respond to terrorism. Theories about CT can be divided into three subgroups; 1) Preventive counter-terrorism; 2) Managerial responses to terrorist violence; and 3) Response-oriented measures (McAllister and Schmid 2013, 255). Of these, the Response-oriented measures are most relevant to look at the impact of terrorism, or in other words, how the state responds to terrorism. Brian Jenkins (2006) points out that it is how the state interprets the terror or insurgency problem that dictates how they react. He further emphasizes that if the state does not understand the terrorist's view of the conflict, they will be able to respond in a way that underpins the uprising (Jenkins 2006, McAllister and Schmid 2013, 259). Looking at this in the light of Abrahm's (2008) theory that was touched earlier in this chapter, which claims that the state usually interprets the terrorist organization to have maximalist goals if they target civilians, even when their stated objectives are not maximal, we see that brutality and choice of targets for a terrorist attack can dictate a state's response.

Furthermore, there are some limitations on how a state can respond to terrorism. Martha Crenshaw (2006) claims that responsible states have two main constraints when it comes to counter-terrorist operations. The first limitation lies in the state's population. While the terrorists only have a potential population to take into account, the state has a multitude of interests among the population that can be affected by different types of counter-terrorism strategies. The other is related to states' ability to use power, where

democratic states are limited to counter-terrorism activities that are socially accepted (Crenshaw 2006b, 254).

<div align="center">NATO Counter Terrorism Guidelines</div>

NATO identifies terrorism as a direct threat to the security of the citizens of NATO countries and international stability and prosperity (NATO 2012). Terrorists operate in different ways that inflict on the Alliance's strategic end states. First, terrorists have shown capabilities to cross international borders and execute attacks in several ways which have challenged the nations' internal security. Second, terrorists operate in areas of strategic importance to the Alliance, including Allies' territory. The threat is still taken seriously for several reasons, particularly due to the terrorists' desire to acquire chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) capabilities (NATO 2012).

The attacks of 11 September 2001 shaped NATO's response towards terrorism, and Operation Active Endeavour initiated various capability and institutional changes which have improved the Alliance's ability to counter the threat. NATO's strategic approach has enhanced synchronization and use of diplomatic and military power in both national and international efforts. For the military power, development of doctrine and operations, enhanced intelligence exchange and development of technology solutions have enriched the Alliance in many ways (NATO 2012).

Through the Alliance's policy guidelines on counter-terrorism, NATO seeks to provide "clear direction, enhanced coordination and greater consistency of efforts and activities [that] will enable NATO to use its resources more effectively" (NATO 2012) in three ways. First, the guidelines provide strategic and risk-informed direction to counter-

terrorism activities to the Alliance. Second, three identified principles to which the Alliance adheres is provided. The principles given are:

1. Compliance with International Law; which clarify that NATO will act "in accordance with international law, the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (NATO 2012). Further, future national and multinational efforts to combat terrorism will be within the framework of "International Conventions and Protocols against terrorism and relevant UN Resolutions […]" (NATO 2012).

2. NATO's support to Allies; which clarify that the primary responsibility for the internal security of population and territory belongs to the individual NATO members, but NATO can support efforts to prevent, mitigate, respond to, and recover from acts of terrorism upon request (NATO 2012).

3. Through Non-Duplication and Complementary efforts, NATO seeks to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts by member states or International Organizations (NATO 2012).

Third, identification of key areas in which the Alliance will undertake initiatives to prevent terrorism and enhance resilience to action from terrorists is provided through the guidelines:

1. Shared Awareness of possible threats and vulnerabilities from terrorism will be enabled through enhanced sharing of intelligence, strategic analysis and assessments, engagement and strategic communication among the member states.

2. NATO recognizes that adequate Capabilities are needed to prevent, protect

   against and respond to acts of terrorism. Hence, the second key area identified

   is comprehensive capabilities developments, innovative technologies,

   methods, lessons learned in operations, and interoperability among the

   member states to counter the threat (NATO 2012).

3. Through Engagement, NATO seeks to address the challenge of terrorism from

   a holistic approach which involves the international community. As a result,

   NATO will engage with partner nations and other international actors, in

   particular the UN, EU and OSCE, "to promote a common understanding of

   the terrorist threat and to leverage the full potential of each stake-holder

   engaged in the global counter-terrorism effort" (NATO 2012).

In sum, the aim of the policy guidelines is unity of effort, with a focus "on improved awareness of the threat, adequate capabilities to address it and engagement with partner countries and other international actors" (NATO 2012).

<center>Framework for Center of Gravity Analysis</center>

Joint Publication 5.0 defines a COG as "a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act" (JCS 2017b, IV-23). The COG is the moral or physical entities that "are the primary components of physical or moral strength, power and resistance" (Kem 2009, 25). According to JP 5.0, a military force, an alliance, political or military leaders, a set of critical capabilities or functions, or national will could be a COG at the strategic level (JCS 2017b, IV-23). Hence, both adversaries and own forces have COGs in an "adversarial context involving a clash of moral wills and/or physical strength" (JCS 2017b, IV-23).

As the COG is the source of power, an attack on the COG should collapse the will or capability to continue the conflict. However, a direct attack on the COG is not necessarily possible, nor the preferred solution in all situations because "consideration must be placed on whether the total collapse of the enemy or system is commensurate with the objectives and end state" (JCS 2017b, IV-25).

Within the framework of COG analysis, there are three factors that should be addressed; 1) Critical Capabilities – "the primary abilities essential to the accomplishment of the objective"; 2) Critical Requirements - "essential conditions, resources, and means the COG requires to perform the critical capability"; and 3) Critical Vulnerabilities – "those aspects or components of critical requirements that are deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack in a manner achieving decisive or significant results" (JCS 2010b7, IV-25).

The COG analysis is useful because it provides a framework to define the objectives that one should exploit to affect the adversary's source of power. In addition, a COG analysis defines one's own vulnerabilities that should be protected to retain its own source of power. Hence, a COG analysis provides a framework for analyzing sources of strength as well as vulnerabilities that could be exploited directly or indirectly (JCS 2017b, IV-23-24).
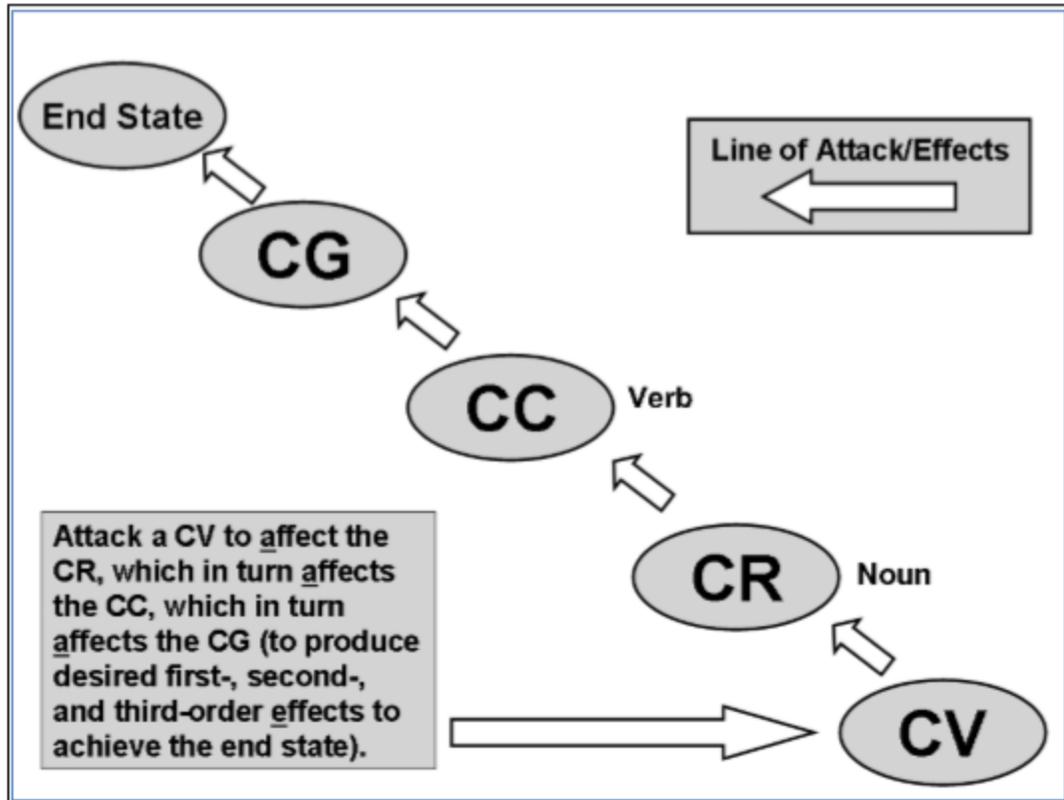
Figure 1.   The Exploitation of Critical Vulnerabilities to Affect the COG

Source: Dr. Jack. Kem, *Campaign Planning: Tools of the Trade,* 3rd ed. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, US Army Combined Arms Center, 2013), 199.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has addressed ISIL's development as a terror organization and examined existing theories which describe terrorism as a phenomenon to enable evaluation criteria and qualitative knowledge to analyze the primary research question.

There are two reasons why terrorism occurs; Foreseen end factors and Provoking factors. Hence, some contributors to terrorism develop over time, while other elements are a result of one or more specific individual events (Crenshaw 1981, 381). Further, the

conditions for terrorism is created when a group of people within a society or culture perceives discrimination and unfair treatment by either the ruling layers or the government of the society such as lack of political and social codetermination that prevent the group from having societal influence (Crenshaw 1981, 383). A feeling of discrimination, unfair treatment, and lack of political and social codetermination legitimize, or make terrorism morally acceptable as the only available means to reach the terrorists' desirable political change. Therefore, seen through the lenses of the terrorists', the goal sanctifies the medium (Crenshaw 1981, 387). The most prominent objective of a terror organization is to provoke an overreaction from a government that leads to polarization of the society and undermining of the government's legitimacy, which legitimizes the terrorist organization's objectives and mobilizes supporters. One of the most prevailing effects of terror is fear, and the message that the terrorists intend to send to a targeted population drowns in the violent form of communication. Hence, brutal actions also create resistance. To counter the threat from terrorism, NATO has issued guidelines to ensure Unity of Effort within the Alliance, and NATO members are contributing in various ways in Operation Inherent Resolve that affect ISIL in various ways. However, ISIL's strategical abilities should not be underestimated. The terror organization has shown adaptability to a shifting geopolitical environment in the past, using different strategical, operational and tactical ways and means in the effort to reach the desired ends.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter Introduction

This chapter serves as a gateway between the literature review chapter, which addressed central theories of terrorism, ISIL's strategy and NATO's policy guidelines on counter-terrorism, and chapter 4 which analyzes if ISIL may pose a threat to NATO within the next five years. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology used to answer the research question, build the evaluation criteria for the analysis in chapter four, and define any threat to the validity of the research.

The purpose of this thesis is to answer if ISIL's strategy poses a threat to NATO in the next five years. The introduction chapter addressed the motivation and background for the thesis, the importance of the research question, and how the secondary questions developed to support the primary question. Chapter 1 contained terms and themes used in the paper, explained the limitations and delimitations, and clarified the assumptions which the paper is based upon.

Due to the complex nature of terrorism, there are several theories that deal with the different aspects of terrorism; no single theory is superior (McAllister and Schmid 2013). The literature review is therefore categorized into four parts. The first section addresses ISIL's history and development. The second part explains theories and literature that may shed light upon strategy, terrorism as a strategical way, and ISIL's historical development and current state. Theories from scholars such as Chrenshaw, Parker, Sitter, Richardson, and Abrams are used to describe terrorism as a strategic instrument, and the different objectives terrorists seek to achieve. The third part deals

with ISIL's strategy and the main sources are Byman, Fishman, and Lister. The fourth part of chapter two describes central elements within Counter Terrorism theory, NATO policy guidelines on Counter-terrorism and provides a framework for analyzing Centers of Gravity (COG).

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology for this thesis to include defining the evaluation criteria and assessing the validity of the thesis. Moreover, chapter 3 serves as a transition from the literature review in chapter 2 to the analysis and data presentation in chapter 4. Chapter 5 concludes and answer the primary research question, and gives recommendations for further research.

Research Methodology

This chapter presents the outline of the research methodology used in this thesis. Creswell (2014) describes qualitative research as "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell 2014, 4). The methodology involves emerging open-ended questions and the collection of data from general themes to analyze and interpret the meaning of the data related to the research question (Creswell 2014, 4, 17). The thesis seeks to answer the research question: Does ISIL pose a threat to NATO in the next five years? The study is based on a qualitative and deductive approach and seeks to move from the general towards the concrete to see which elements within the theory answer or negate the research question. The theoretical interpretative methodology uses existing theories within the field of national security and terrorism studies to delineate, interpret and explain terrorism as a phenomenon. The theoretical framework provides the knowledgebase for the analysis, and evaluation criteria are used to confirm or deny the

correlation between the secondary questions and the relevant theories. The research consists of four parts:

What is ISIL's strategy? The qualitative analysis of ISIL's strategy answers to what extent the terror organization intends to target NATO as an alliance, or individual member states, within the next five years. In addition to the theories presented earlier in the thesis, the main sources in chapter four are various unclassified intelligence reports and national threat assessments. Further, among others, Hassan Hassan, the co-author of *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* and an active and well-sourced journalist, provides insight into the current state of ISIL.

To what extent has ISIL capabilities to achieve their strategic goals in the next five years? The analysis of ISIL's capabilities and capacities provides an answer to whether or not the terror organization has the necessary ability to achieve its strategic and operational end states. The thesis uses current threat assessments, unclassified intelligence reports, and well-known journalists as a baseline for the analysis of the question.

What are NATO's critical vulnerabilities in the next five years? The Center of Gravity (COG) analysis breaks the COG down to Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, and define NATO's Critical Vulnerabilities the next five years.

The analysis of the secondary questions provides knowledge to analyze and if ISIL poses a threat to NATO within the next five years. This knowledge will be used in the analysis of the thesis's primary question. The discussion will highlight NATO's critical vulnerabilities and use the conclusion from the secondary questions discuss if

ISIL has the intention and capability to target these, and thus pose a threat to NATO or not within the next five years.

Chapter 5 will conclude and answer the primary research question, and further provide recommendations for further research within the topic addressed in this thesis and recommendations for NATO decisionmakers.
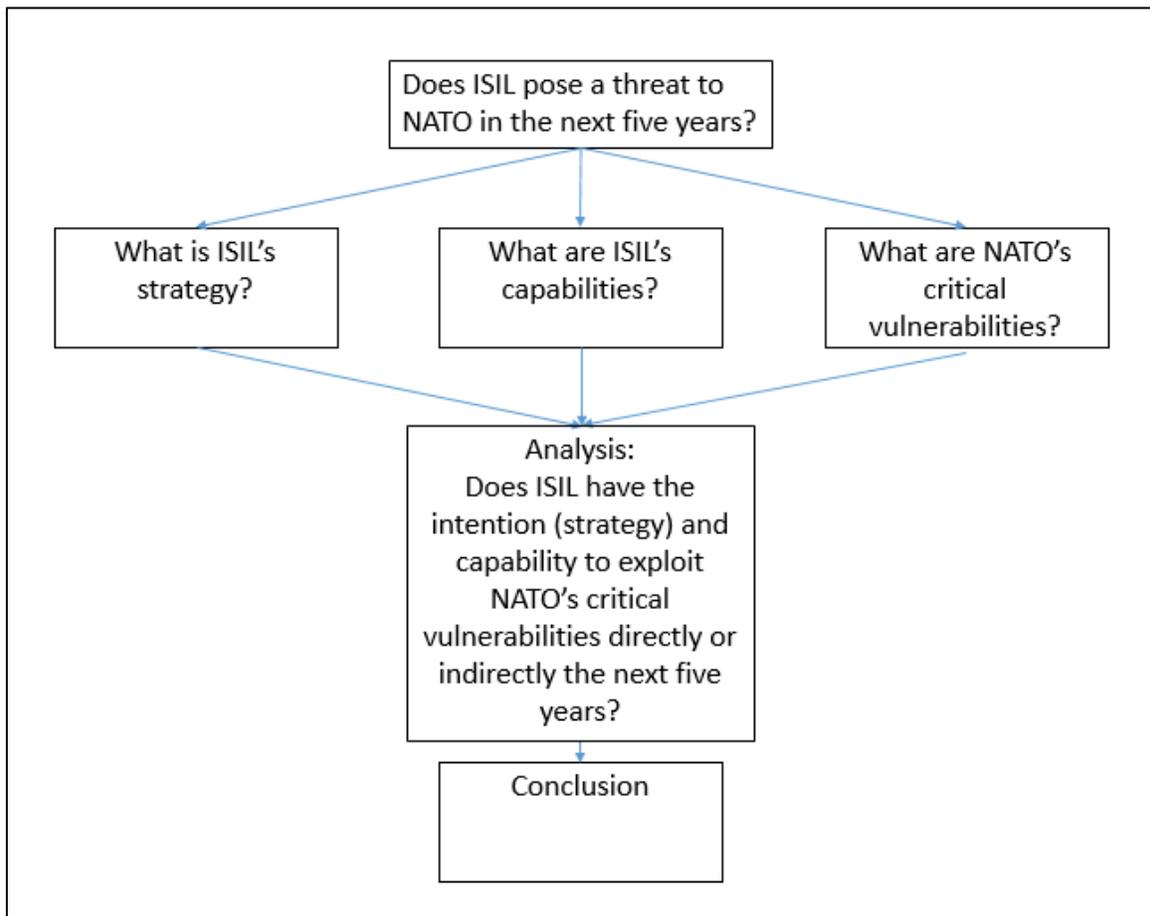
Figure 2.   Logical Flowchart of Thesis

Source: Developed by author.

Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation criteria for this thesis are bound to the secondary research questions presented in chapter 1. The criteria are pulled out of the theories presented in chapter 2 and serve the purpose as a framework for the analysis in chapter 4. Evaluation criterion 1 analyzes to what extent the theories of terrorism described in chapter 2 suits ISIL's strategy.

Table 1.   Evaluation Criterion: ISIL Strategy

Evaluation criterion: ISIL's Strategy			
Questions	Little Obligation	Moderately Obligated	Explicitly Obligated
Leverage The extent to which ISIL's actions lead to reactions and effects that support ISIL's strategic goals.			
Polarization The extent to which ISIL's ways and means increase the tension between different societies, groups, religions or ideologies.			
Mobilization The extent to which ISIL's ways and means recruit new members to the terror organization, and legitimize the cause both internally and among sympathizers regionally and globally.			
Retribution The extent to which ISIL's ways and means build the narrative of restored honor and justice in the terror organization.			
Geographical The extent to which ISIL's ways and means increase control of physical terrain			
Far Enemy Strategy The extent to which ISIL's ways and means include targeting of NATO Countries involved in Iraq and Syria			
Near Enemy Strategy The extent to which ISIL's ways and means include targeting the governments in Iraq and Syria			

Source: Developed by author.

Evaluation criterion 2 breaks down ISIL's different powers and thereby analyzes the

terrorist organization's capabilities to reach its political and ideological goals.

Table 2.   Evaluation Criterion: ISIL's Capabilities

Evaluation criterion: ISIL's Capabilities			
Questions	Little Obligation	Moderately Obligated	Explicitly Obligated
Diplomatic power (to which extent ISIL interacts and engage with state or non-state actors)			
Informational power (The infrastructure, capabilities, and processes by which ISIL creates, gathers, analyzes, disseminates, exploits and disrupt information)			
Military power (The way ISIL entail applying force, threatening the application of force, or enabling other parties to apply force in furtherance of strategic ends in an attempt to impose its will on another)			
Economic power (The way ISIL furthering or constraining others' prosperity)			

Source: Developed by author.

To answer what are NATO's critical vulnerabilities the next five years, a Center of Gravity (COG) analysis will break the COG down to Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, and thus define NATO's critical vulnerabilities the next five years.
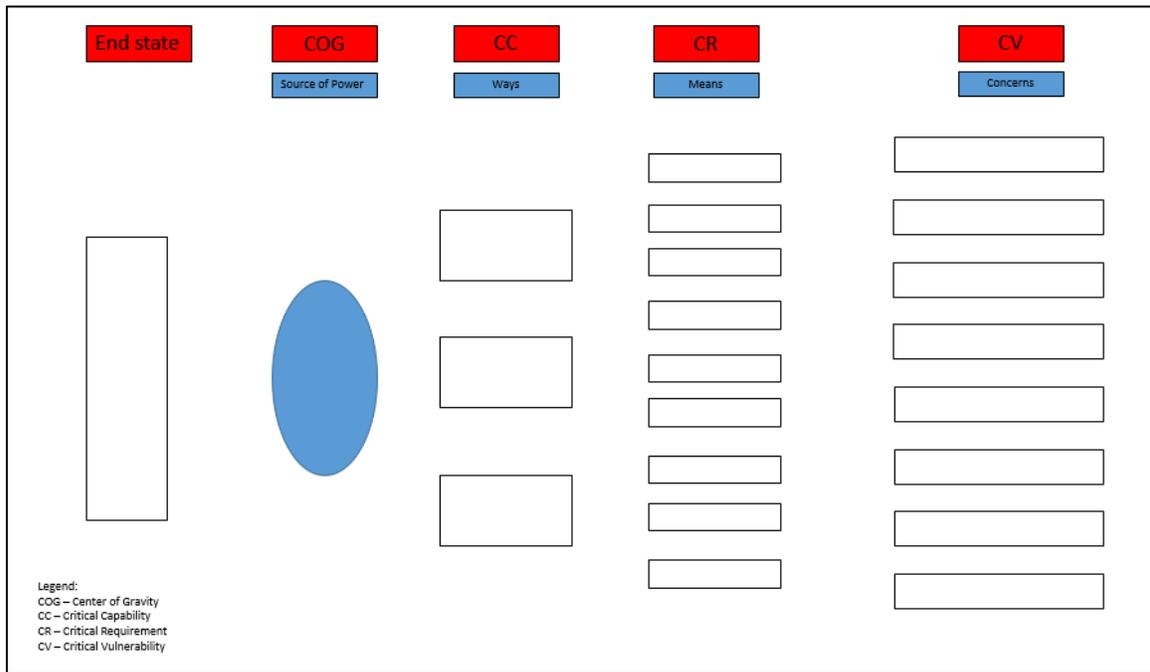
Figure 3.   COG Analysis Template

Source: Developed by author.

The thesis answers the primary research question by analyzing if NATO's critical vulnerabilities can be exploited either directly or indirectly by ISIL the next five years.

Table 3.   Threats from ISIL to NATO's Critical Vulnerabilities

NATO's critical vulnerabilities and ISIL's intention and capability to exploit			
	Little Obligation	Moderately Obligated	Explicitly Obligated
Critical Vulnerability 1			
Critical Vulnerability 2			
Critical Vulnerability 3			
Critical Vulnerability 4			
Critical Vulnerability 5			
Critical Vulnerability 6			

Source: Developed by author.

Threats to Validity

Due to the nature of ISIL as a present and active terror organization in the world

today, this thesis may have shortfalls regarding the research of the current status of ISIL.

Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) and the different factors that affect ISIL are constantly

analyzed by scholars, intelligence services, and media. However, the amount of open

source material regarding the current status of ISIL is limited due to the short period from

the beginning of ISIL's downfall until now. Moreover, getting information out of ISIL's

main area of operations is difficult for two reasons: the environment in which ISIL

operates is not suited for scholars and media due to risk, and ISIL protects and controls

the release of their strategy along with the ways and means to achieve its goals. For

example, it has often been reported that al-Baghdadi was killed, yet this is still not

confirmed. The research material in this thesis is therefore affected by selection bias due to limited access to sources.

Furthermore, the research and analysis of this thesis may be affected by the author's confirmation and selective biases. The author is from Norway, a NATO member, and is therefore generally cultural-bound to the values and worldview represented in the West. Moreover, the author wrote a thesis concerning ISIL's international terror campaign in 2017, and the interpretation of the literature review for this thesis is similar to the previous understanding. However, the current status of ISIL is different, which forces another view upon both the theory, what ISIL represents now versus at their peak, and how the recent factors in ISIL's life affect their powers and strategy, mitigate the author's bias to some extent.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the research methodology for this thesis. The description included the research questions, the evaluation criteria for the analysis, and threats to the validity of the research. The research methodology serves as a transition between the literature review provided in chapter 2 and the analysis in chapter 4 which discuss the secondary research questions and the associated evaluation criteria to answer the primary research question.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Do you think, O America, that defeat is the loss of a city or a land? Were we defeated when we lost cities in Iraq and were left in the desert without a city or a territory? Will we be defeated and you will be victorious if you took Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa or all the cities, and we returned where we were in the first stage? No, defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight.
– Abu Muhammad al-Adnan, Former spokesman of ISIL,
quoted in "ISIS – Out of the Desert"

Chapter Introduction

This chapter will analyze if ISIL poses a threat to NATO within the next five years. The analysis will start by addressing the thesis' secondary questions, and the following will thus discuss and conclude 1) What ISIL's strategy is, 2) ISIL's capabilities to achieve their strategic goals in the next five years, and 3) What are NATO's critical vulnerabilities. The secondary questions are built with the following logical structure; does ISIL's current strategy involve attacking NATO? This addresses the will of the terror organization. If ISIL has the will, the second question will answer if ISIL has the capabilities needed to impose its will and reach its end state. The third question defines NATO's critical vulnerabilities that may be exploited by ISIL directly or indirectly. The conclusions will be based on the evaluation criteria presented in chapter three. Second, the thesis will discuss and fuse the answers given by the secondary questions, and this analysis will answer the thesis primary research question.

Analysis of ISIL's Strategy

Geographical Expansion

The intention of this goal is latent in ISIL's strategic goals and involves the continuous expansion of ISIL's sphere of power. ISIL's strategy rests on consolidating territory for further expansion of the caliphate and has stated that "lasting and expanding" is the terrorist organization's motto (Byman 2015, 170). It is thus seen that ISIL's strategic thinking is based on the actual state building as a prerequisite for further expansion. They want to start from the areas they now control and cultivate state building based on their ideological preferences and expand with military means (Byman 2015, 171). The strategy of expansion makes the terrorist organization dependent on military superiority to be able to conquer new lands (Byman 2015, 171). Through the expansion of new lands, ISIL seeks to strengthen its access to resources, both human, economic, geographical and ideological. Further, controlling a geographical terrain is a prerequisite for have a physical Islamic caliphate, and thereby of tremendous symbolic importance, and helps in raising recruits and secure ISIL's logistics (al-Shishani, 2014). Expansion is, therefore, a prerequisite for further development and strengthened combat power, which creates the prerequisite for further expansion and increased strength. With this objective, ISIL, therefore, seeks to continually reinforce its organization and sphere of influence so that it can achieve its strategic goal.

Even though ISIL probably realizes that controlling new territory is not sustainable in the near term, the US Intelligence Community assess that ISIL will seek to regain territory in Iraq and Syria in the long term through the exploitation of sectarian grievances from Sunni Muslims, social instability and stretched security forces. (DNI

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2019, 11). This argument is supported by Hassan (2018), who claims that ISIL now has launched the *Sahraa*, one of the LOEs to retain the initiative and future combat power. The strategy calls for post-caliphate insurgency from rural areas after the collapse of ISIL's government and loss of terrain. *Sahraa* means desert, and the contiguous terrain that links Iraq and Syria provides value for ISIL as a safe haven and as a threat to both Syria and Iraq. From safe bases in the desert, Hassan (2017) argues that ISIL "aims to run a far-reaching and ceaseless insurgency in rural areas and urban centers to deter and stretch thin its opponents and to abrade any emerging governance and security structures in areas it previously controlled" (Hassan 2017, 6). The restrictive terrain that links Iraq and Syria together is not unlike the Afghan-Pakistani border that for many years has provided an environment and strategic sanctuaries for Taliban and al-Qaida factions (Hassan 2017, 6).

From the desert, ISIL may inflict damage in both remote areas and on the vital highways that link Syria and Jordan to Iraq (Hassan 2018, 1-2). Furthermore, the rural and desert-based insurgency draws parallels to 2008 when ISI was nearly wiped out by US COIN operations supported by the tribal Awakening Councils. In 2008, it became clear to al-Baghdadi and ISI central leadership that it was impossible to win a conventional fight at the time, and ISI thus switched to insurgency tactics from terrain where the organization could build combat power (Hassan 2018, 12-13). Again, according to Hassan (2018) the successful recovery from 2008 will most likely provide an insight into what ISIL will do next as the situation the organization finds itself in is simular. As a consequence, rural and desert-based insurgency represents an opportunity for ISIL to lay the groundwork for a future comeback. The remote areas in the desert

provide ISIL areas "in which it could regroup, coordinate sleeper cells, regain financial

autonomy through extortion, and plot attacks" (Hassan 2018, 13). Moreover, preventing

the security forces' control in these areas feeds ISIL ability to continue information

operations and propaganda, and thereby deplete the governments of both Iraq and Syria.

ISIL's other objectives, as described in this chapter, are all indirect means of achieving

the objective of expansion. In the end, the expansion strategy is ISIL's center of gravity

and also the most critical vulnerability. If they are unable to expand, ISIL deteriorates

from its present form.

<div align="center">The Far Enemy Strategy</div>

As described in chapter 2, this goal intends to reduce support the West provides to

the Middle East's seated regimes. This will mean that incumbent power structures in the

Middle East can be more easily controlled by ISIL as the "far enemy" strategy predicts.

The means for achieving the goal are international terrorism, polarizing

communication, and deterrence in the form of sectarian violence. The US Intelligence

Community assesses that ISIL very likely will continue to pursue external attacks from

Iraq and Syria against both regional and Western adversaries, including the United States

(DNI 2019, 11). We thus see that this objective is closely linked to the objective of

polarizing Western and Muslim societies. Furthermore, if we return to the event with

James Foley, based on Crenshaw and Parker's theories, we can claim that the action,

which communicated a message that promotes human emotions such as fear, disgust, and

anger, was intended to provoke a sectarian overreaction from the USA and the West. One

of the reasons why ISIL seeks to hit their Western enemies with terrorist operations can,

therefore, be found in the theory of using terror to provoke an over-reaction. Common to

both the goals of communication through violence and propaganda is that ISIL probably wants to communicate the force of action and legitimacy of its ideology to the group of sympathizing Muslims beyond the borders of its core areas.

As a consequence, potential supporters are mobilized, an argument the US Intelligence Community supports: "Prominent jihadist ideologues and media platforms continue to call for and justify efforts to attack the US homeland" (DNI 2019, 10). And this is probably the core of what ISIL seeks to achieve with this long-term goal; reducing the West's influence in ISIL's core areas to steer the current power structures, then take over state governance. By doing so, ISIL will have more favorable conditions for further strength building and expansion of the caliphate. Deterrence of Western intervention in ISIL's core areas and desire for punishment/revenge is probably subordinate to the desire for polarization and mobilize supporters.

The end state of the goal has been reached when Western governments refrain from involvement in the Middle East, both directly in the form of military operations and indirectly in the form of support for the Middle East governments.

The Near Enemy Strategy

The intention of the Near Enemy strategy is to eliminate current power structures and pave the way for ISIL ideology, governance, and government in the Middle East. Hence, it is seen that this is a more direct path to power where ISIL attacks the state's leadership, and thus seeks rapid control of the population by leading the state apparatus. The goal is based on the "near enemy" strategy developed by AQ. The means to achieve this is to create inner turmoil in society (including sectarian struggle and polarization), attacks on security forces, and directly and indirectly to undermine the ability of

governments to secure and create security for the population. Through attacks on the ability of governments to create and maintain security in society, ISIL disrupts and undermines the political power system. At the same time, through the brutality of the actions, one can suggest that the message ISIL communicates is likely to provoke an over-reaction from Sunni opponents, Shiites and the regime's security forces, to reinforce polarization and mobilize more support in the Sunni population. As discussed earlier, the sectarian struggle ISIL seeks is closely linked to the "near enemy" strategy.

Byman (2015) argues that the "near enemy" strategy is crucial for ISIL since control of their self-appointed state is a prerequisite for the expansion of the caliphate (Byman 2015, 170). In ISIL's eyes, the final state of this goal has been achieved when the societies within ISIL's core areas cannot maintain current power structures, and ISIL can take over the leadership of society. This will allow ISIL to increase its access to human, financial, geographic, and material resources, which will increase ISIL's fighting power, thereby supporting their strategic goals.

As pointed out earlier, ISIL has been severely weakened in Iraq and Syria since the organization was at its strongest in 2015. Since then, the organization has lost most of its land areas, and has weakened its attractiveness for recruitment of both global supporters and foreign fighters. Generally, human beings, including jihadists, favor being on the winning team. However, ISIL expected to lose control of the "caliphate" and began preparing early for the territorial loss by establishing hidden structures before OIR and counter-terrorism measures were in full effect (Hassan 2018, 2).

NIS (2019) claims that ISIL now is returning to its former mode of operation as an underground movement and launching a strategy to continue destabilizing Iraq and

Syria, an indication that the near enemy strategy is a priority for the group. This argument is undermined through ISIL leader Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi's speech in August 2018, where he highlighted the fight against regimes in the region and urged cohesion (NIS 2019, 62). The speech gave indicators that the group will utilize known networks and methods from ISIL's past as AQI, and the ISI described earlier in this chapter, and at the same time assessed that the group now has greater capacity than its predecessors had. NIS assesses the near-term strategy of ISIL to exploit the unstable political situation to increase sectarian conflicts and undermine national and local authorities in Iraq and Syria to ensure continued operational room for maneuver and opportunities for future growth. Indeed, many of the social, economic, and political factors that enabled ISIL's growth in 2013–2014 are still present (NIS 2019, 62).

In the article "*Sunni Jihad Is Going Local*" Hassan (2019) claims that Sunni Jihadist are moving away from the global agenda towards a hyperlocal one, leaving the "far enemy" strategy at the current moment as an "unacceptable distraction" (Hassan 2019). If this prediction turns out to be correct, future Sunni Jihadists such as ISIL will focus on building influence in their near areas, thus the West should see less violence exported globally. Within a five-year planning cycle, this could be interpreted as a good sign. On the other hand, the change of strategy follows new challenges. Through infiltration of local communities and building influence with moderate models, we see a shift to a more moderate approach towards the population. The Sunni Jihadists move away from the "jihad of the elite" that represented a hierarchic and authoritarian based approach towards the population, towards a "jihad of the people" approach which respects local communities and priorities (Hassan 2019). If we combine this approach,

which is likely to be received more positively within both Sunni and Shiite communities, and the Sunni jihadists determination to fight a long war, the "near enemy" strategy challenges both the NATO and the different member states' Middle East Strategies in years to come.

<div style="text-align:center">Polarization</div>

The Sectarian Struggle

Through polarization, ISIL intends to establish a clear distinction between what is "right-believing" and "believing" Muslims to provoke a sectarian struggle between the groups. ISIL itself calls this goal "*eliminating the gray zone*" (Dabiq 2015). The US Intelligence Community claims this goal to be present and assess that ISIL "is perpetrating attacks in Iraq and Syria to undermine stabilization efforts and retaliate against its enemies, exploiting sectarian tensions in both countries" (DNI 2019, 11).

The method of achieving the goal is a sectarian struggle against religious groupings and societies that do not embrace ISIL's religious ideology and actions. The divide entails classification of "us" against "them." Internal cohesion becomes stronger when a group of people has a common outer enemy. ISIL's fight against Shiites and moderate Sunni Muslims is, in the eyes of ISIL, a prerequisite for ensuring Sunni survival and influence. Byman (2015) argues that the sectarian struggle ISIL intends Muslims to mobilize and recruit supporters to increase its fighting power that ISIL needs for expansion of the caliphate (Byman 2015, 171). In his time as head of the AQI, Al-Zarqawi developed a strategy in which he purposefully sought to provoke a civil war between Shia and Sunni Muslims to drive the United States out of the region (Parker 2006, 5). The intention is documented in a letter from al-Zarqawi to AQ's leadership: "If

we succeeded in the arena of sectarian, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis if they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of [the Shiites]"(Parker 2006, 5-6).

Even though the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites has been one of the root causes of ISIL's legitimacy within the Sunni communities, Hassan (2018) argues that one of ISIL's main concerns now is fighting Sunni opponents. The reason for this can be found in the "Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Standing of the Islamic State of Iraq," a document written in 2009 by ISI that analyses the factors that led to the near defeat of the group, and also how the terror organization defines its changes to recovery (Hassan 2018, 5).

Looking back at ISIL's history, we know that the group managed their recovery successfully and were able to transit into a lethal organization threatening stability in both the Middle East and globally through trans-national terror operations. In an article published in Al-Naba, ISIL's weekly newspaper, in October 2017 the Islamic State suggested that it had "again been forced to switch to insurgency tactics like in the spring of 2008" (Hassan 2017, 4). With regards to its successful recovery in the past, it is highly likely that ISIL will copy the same strategy when dealing with the current challenging situation under the premise that what worked before will work again (Hassan 2018, 5). For this reason, Hassan claims that an examination of the document provides insights into how ISIL now will play out its strategy. To overcome their challenges, Hassan (2018) argues that ISIL's current Lines of Efforts (LOEs) can be summed up as Hit-and-Run Operations (*Sawlat*) against Sunni Opponents (*Sahwat*) from rural desert areas (*Sahraa*)

(Hassan 2018, 2). Hence, ISIL is now conducting insurgency tactics in areas liberated from ISIL's earlier control.

The document studies the role of the Sunni Awakening Councils, a central part of US COIN operations, where Sunni tribes in the western part of Iraq that backed the US-led operations made it too difficult for ISI to consolidate and retain combat power. Hence, targeting opponents and collaborators coming from Sunni communities is one of the LOEs in ISIL's current strategy. ISIL calls this objective *Sahwat* and focuses on setting the stage for what comes after the withdrawal of US and international troops. For this reason, ISIL now seeks to prevent the emergence of local power structures that can fill the vacuum after the withdrawal. The premise is found in ISIL's own words written in their Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Standing of the Islamic State of Iraq; "the real victor of this battle will be the one who knows how to plan and prepare for the post-withdrawal period" (Hassan 2018, 6).

To achieve their objective with regards to *Sahwat*, ISIL carries out three LOEs. The first is targeting Iraqis, in particular, Sunnis, who seek to join the police and military forces. Through propaganda such as "nine bullets for the apostates and one bullet for the crusaders," ISIL portrays state agencies as sinful and socially shameful, and thus seek to prevent enrollment into opponent force structures that will present a challenge for ISIL in the future (Hassan 2018, 5-7). Consequently, as the group withdraws from its earlier strongholds, ISIL's propaganda "focuses on targeting Sunni collaborators to prevent the establishment of alternative local structures that appeal to local communities in predominantly tribal and rural areas" (Hassan 2017, 5).

Through physical targeting of police and army units, ISIL seeks to maximize the costs of enrollment (Hassan 2018, 5-7). Looking at some of the main theories presented in chapter 2, these actions are also meant to deplete the government forces and increase attention for the terrorist organization's cause. The 9:1 ratio analogy is an example of ISIL's pragmatic strategy. It is pointless to focus the combat power on an international force that already has chosen to leave. Instead, ISIL will prevent the construction of functional government institutions and drain the security forces' ability to enable security for the population. This is LOE two, where ISIL will attack the security forces' bases and gatherings to prevent the construction of police and army institutions, and keep them worried about rebuilding bases and facilities (Hassan 2018, 7). In this way, ISIL fixes the security forces to prevent the legitimate institution ability to have full control of populated areas. Further, constant engagement of police and army units will drain the security forces, which will enable more freedom of movement for ISIL.

The third LOE is assassination of leaders within the security forces to prevent the forces ability to expand their objectives. Operationally effective officers, engineers, and trainers will be a top priority to target along with elite forces capable of operating independently because these figures are difficult to replace (Hassan 2018, 7, 15). In sum, all three LOEs aim to create power vacuums, sow confusion among other potential leader structures, and erode the trust of the government's ability to create a secure environment for the population. By doing so, ISIL seeks to undermine and demoralize the governments' ability to establish and maintain security within the society and population, which may lead to another system controlled by ISIL to emerge. Thus, this objective is in

line with Crenshaw's (1981) theory of the objectives of terrorism described in chapter

two, and also to the "Near Enemy Strategy" which will be described later in this chapter.

Even though the sectarian struggle is mainly fought in ISIL's immediate areas,

ISIL seeks to use the struggle to send a clear message to the world's Muslims that the

gray zone is not a place to be. By fighting a struggle on inner Islamic lines, ISIL seeks to

recruit, force, influence, scare and ultimately gather the world's Muslims to establish the

limits of the Caliphate with a loyal and cohesive population. This will create the

prerequisite for the strength to reverse the fight against other religious communities and

the expansion of the caliphate in the future. As a consequence, even though the sectarian

struggle is mainly fought in ISIL's core areas, it helps to polarize the world's Muslim

community, which mobilizes both supporters and opponents. The message, therefore,

affects ISIL's strategy in the form of Muslim mobilization in Western societies and the

proliferation of ISIL's ideology. As a result, the sectarian struggle ISIL seek to fight, is

also a part of the terror organizations mobilization strategies, which will be addressed

later in this chapter.

ISIL and the Jihadist Hierarchy

In its goal of a clear jihadist hierarchy, ISIL seeks a sectarian struggle against

other jihadist groups that do not submit to ISIL's leadership. This goal emerged in al-

Baghdadi declaring himself a caliph of all Muslims in the world in 2014. As ISIL's

development tells us, ISIL is a source of AQ. However, the two terrorist organizations are

now bitter enemies fighting for justice, hierarchy and power. But despite major

disagreements, both ISIL and AQ share several key attitudes, and their ideological vision

of the establishment of an Islamic caliphate is shared. One of the differences lies in the

time aspect when the various organizations believe the establishment of the caliphate should take place. While ISIL has already shown a willingness to conquer both land and population and proclaimed the establishment of the Caliphate, AQ operates in a more long-term domain as they believe it will enable better prerequisites for a Caliphate to be established (Friedland 2014; Fishman 2016, 60).

Even though the struggle of Jihadist hierarchy is present, there are some indicators that Sunni Jihadists, in general, have become more liberal towards other terror organizations "and have begun to speak in favor of cross-ideological coalitions in countries such as Syria and Libya, and to describe them as "corrective" or "reformist" models" (Hassan 2019). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, there are also reports that claims a shift in attitude towards local power structures, claiming that Sunni Jihadists are moving "away from a "jihad of the elite" that looks down on the masses, and toward a "jihad of the people" that respects local communities and reflects their priorities" (Hassan 2019). This might be a sign of shifting attitude towards more moderate Jihadist movements and thereby challenging the "grey zone" which ISIL has proclaimed as a dangerous place to be. On the other hand, the possible shift in attitude may be a way for Sunni Jihadist to gather around goals that they share instead of focusing on differences. Even so, in an Islamic Caliphate, there has to be a Caliph, and ISIL will hardly give up the self-proclaimed title to others. Hence, the possible moderate shift is likely to be a preliminary method to gain increased combat power.

Therefore, the objective negatively affects ISIL's strategic goals as ISIL must fight a war on several fronts, but at the same time, these potential supporters show that ISIL's polarizing message is followed up with action and that the gray zone is to be

eliminated, which can have a recruiting effect on jihadists. If ISIL wins in its fight against other jihadist groups in the future, ISIL can increase its combat power, which will affect ISIL's strategic long-term goals. ISIL reaches the end state of this objective when Muslim threats are eliminated and Muslims are gathered under ISIL's black flag and Caliph Ibrahim's leadership.

ISIL and the West

ISIL seeks to polarize Western and Muslim Communities. The intention of this goal is related to ISIL's goal of mobilizing potential supporters both in their core areas and globally. By taking "leadership" against Western or external involvement, ISIL is probably seeking to stand out as an attractive, dynamic, and strong organization for rebel movements and terrorist organizations globally. Hence, ISIL seeks to use this objective for recruiting new members and thereby new combat forces. The instruments for achieving the goal are international terrorism, polarizing communication, and delinquency in the form of sectarian violence. By using violent means such as brutal executions that are broadcasted, ISIL sends a message that their actions could potentially hit anyone. ISIL seeks to create fear in the people of Europe and the West for the purpose of indirectly influencing European and Western governments. To achieve this, any mobilized supporter who supports ISIL's ideology can use a weapon he or she has at hand to attack random or selected targets in Europe. The fact that ISIL deliberately uses extreme violence made the world look when the American journalist James Foley was brutally beheaded, and the video was posted on youtube in 2014 entitled "*A Message to America*." The title itself indicates that the message is directed to the entire United States, not just to the governments but to society as a whole. After the decapitation of Foley,

ISIL has repeatedly directed bestial and barbaric executions and published these through various media with the same kind of message. The actions in the videos evoke conflicting and different feelings in people. The sense of fear for the barbaric is undeniably awakened intentionally, but feelings such as disgust, empathy for the victims and aggression against ISIL as predators are also prominent. Based on Abrahm's (2006) theory that terrorism's actions are unable to communicate a strategic message, one can suggest that if the message ISIL wants to communicate is rooted in the far enemy strategy, the strategic message will drown in the effects of the violence.

But at the same time, ISIL succeeds in provoking a polarizing message through this type of communication, which intends to mobilize supporters (Byman 2015, 178). There are several factors that point out that this is exactly what ISIL wants to achieve. The actions are perceived by the West as bestial, medieval, and represent a view of value and humanity that violates all legal, cultural and ethical perception and legitimacy seen in Western eyes. Thus, ISIL becomes an outgroup from the western in-group, and the polarization of "us" and "they" is a fact. We, therefore, see that ISIL not only wants to provoke polarizing conflict lines and a sectarian struggle in the Muslim population but also between itself and the Western world. The purpose is so much like the polarization of Muslim societies; eliminate the gray zone and mobilize supporters to increase their combat power.

The final state of this strategic sub-goal is achieved when ISIL has polarized the world map into two groups; "The forces of faith and the forces of atheism," which gives a clear enemy image and sets the framework for a sectarian struggle between the groups.

Leverage

Extracted from the analysis above, and the literature review defining ISIL's strategic ability, one can argue that leverage is inherent in ISIL's ends, ways and means. At the leadership level, the terror organization has shown the capacity to use their organizational powers, to include Military and Information Power to reach their objectives, and Economic Power to sustain and support their strategy. On the strategic level, the terror organization has shown how Military Power enabled the proclamation of the Caliphate, and how Informational Power had success in recruitment of foreign jihadists from all over the world. It can be argued that the leverage sought by the terror organization is apocalyptic. ISIL will not be satisfied with political influence in a coalition with other religious or political opponents. ISIL wants to rule, and the leverage the terror organization wants is to change both international recognized borders and governments for the benefit of an Islamic Caliphate and Caliph Ibrahim as the ruler.

Mobilization

ISIL's actions intend to mobilize supporters and followers. As mentioned, the sectarian struggle is a way to stir up a clear distinction between the followers of Caliph Ibrahim's leadership and those who follow other paths. Mobilization is important for ISIL for two reasons; to build combat power and to divide the world into "the forces of faith vs. the forces of atheism." Both reasons feed ISIL's strategy.

There are indicators that ISIL shifts focus of the targets of the mobilization from foreign jihadists to Sunni Muslims within ISIL's core areas. There has been a decrease in both numbers of attacks outside the borders of Iraq and Syria, and also the media coverage of the terror organizations. Hence, one could argue that ISIL's propaganda,

which intends to mobilize supporters and boost morale within the organization itself, has lost some of its power since 2014-16. However, despite the reduction of territorial control, reduced external operations, and loss of combat power, the US intelligence Community claims that "*ISIS's past actions and propaganda probably will inspire future Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVE) attacks especially if ISIS can retain its prominence among global jihadist movements and continue to promote its violent message via social and mainstream media*" (DNI 2019, 12). Also, as long as terrorists serve pictures, threats, drama and human-interest stories, the news of the world will continue to report, and in many cases over report, even small acts of terror (Nacos 2016). Hence, ISIL is still able to mobilize supporters both within its core areas and across the globalized world.

Retribution

The intent of retribution seen from the terrorist's view is to restore honor and justice through penalty and revenge to a targeted group whom the terrorists feel have done them, or the society they belong to, injustice (Sitter 2017). Retribution for the loss of power among Sunnis after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime is likely more important for individuals than as a strategy in itself. This argument is based on how ISIL builds its strategy where there are no coincidences. As earlier mentioned, ISIL's own booklet "*A Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq*" written in 2010 when ISIL suffered heavily due to the US Surge and the Sunni Awakening Council's opposition intended to "improve the position of Islamic state; [to make it] more powerful politically and militarily… so the Islamic [State] project will be ready to take over all Iraq after the enemy troops withdraw" (al-Shishani 2014). As argued earlier, the booklet shows the terror organization's capability to define ends and

direct its combat power, ways, and means. The means shown after the loss of territorial control show calculated ways to regain combat power, and thus do not fall into revenge as the prime motivator. However, information operations that feed the individual's need for retribution may be carried out in information channels such as al-Naba, ISIL's weekly newspaper, to spark feelings in the Sunni population. Hence, retribution may be a motivational factor for the individual combatant or supporter of ISIL. However, at the strategic level, the retribution in itself is most likely achieved when lost power and influence is retained by Sunni Muslims accordingly to ISIL's strategic end.

Table 4.   ISIL Strategy

Evaluation criterion: ISIL's Strategy			
Questions	Little Obligation	Moderately Obligated	Explicitly Obligated
Leverage The extent to which ISIL's actions lead to reactions and effects that support ISILs strategic goals.		X	
Polarization The extent to which ISIL's ways and means increase the tension between different societies, groups, religions or ideologies.			X
Mobilization The extent to which ISIL's ways and means recruit new members to the terror organization, and legitimize the cause both internally and among sympathizers regionally and globally.			X
Retribution The extent to which ISIL's ways and means build the narrative of restored honor and justice in the terror organization.	X		
Geographical The extent to which ISIL's ways and means increase control of physical terrain	X		
Far Enemy Strategy The extent to which ISIL's ways and means include targeting of NATO Countries involved in Iraq and Syria	X		
Near Enemy Strategy The extent to which ISIL's ways and means include targeting the governments in Iraq and Syria			X

Source: Developed by author.

Conclusion

The various objectives support ISIL's strategic goals in various ways, and all objectives have the potential to influence ISIL's future fighting power in a positive direction, thereby supporting ISIL's strategy. We also see that the various strategic objectives influence each other and that they can flow into each other. The common denominator of the goals, and thus a central element of the research question, is that the polarizing message and ISIL's desire to provoke a sectarian struggle between itself and everyone who does not support their ideology is prominent. In ISIL's strategy, there are no gray zones, and it can be suggested that the terrorist organization is willing to go against an apocalyptic sectarian struggle to achieve its strategic goal. Their strategic objectives, therefore, aim to mobilize as much combat power as possible so that they can regain their geographical control of their so-called Caliphate.

We see that international terrorism plays a role in ISIL's strategy for several reasons. By provoking polarization on inner Muslim lines, and against Western societies, ISIL mobilizes supporters who can increase ISIL's fighting power. But the polarization also mobilizes opposition among Muslim societies and NATO members which, after 2014, intensified their military interventions against ISIL's core areas in Iraq and Syria. As a result, ISIL's territorial control has been significantly reduced, and their so-called caliphate vanished, at least geographically. As of now, ISIL as a conqueror is essentially gone. In this way, one can argue that ISIL has failed with its strategy when using the "far enemy" strategy. But in the end, ISIL probably does not want a passive and defensive approach where the Western or Muslim community is discouraged from involvement in their core areas. ISIL wants the opposite. A sectarian struggle against those societies that

do not submit to their ideology. The desire for influence and leverage is therefore existential. ISIL, with its polarizing actions and communication, seeks to provoke an offensive sectarian struggle, and their goals support this approach. Based on the objective of reducing the Western influence in ISIL's core areas, we can extract elements that indicate that deterrence is desirable, but this is probably only to set optimal frameworks for ISIL's mobilization of supporters and strength building. Although the goal is based on the "far enemy" strategy, this is probably only a sub-goal of the strategic goal, and not the intention itself. As of now, ISIL's strategy seems mainly to be based on the "near enemy" strategy to consolidate, regroup and build up combat power while targeting governmental structures and players using insurgent tactics to shape the environment for a future recurrence. The desire for revenge and punishment is probably present in ISIL's goals but related to international terrorism, this desire is probably stronger at the individual level than at the collective level.

Analysis of ISIL's Capabilities

This chapter addresses ISIL's different powers as an insurgency movement and thereby analyzes the terrorist organization's capabilities to reach their political and ideological goals.

Diplomatic and Military Power

Analysis of ISIL's Capabilities Outside Iraq and the Levant

Even though the military operation against ISIL has led to significant territorial and leadership losses, the US intelligence Community argues that "ISIL still commands thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria, and it maintains eight branches, more than a

dozen networks, and thousands of dispersed supporters around the world" (DNI 2019, 11). This might be a serious threat to the region. Furthermore, the same report claims that the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have "generated a large pool of battle-hardened fighters with the skills to conduct attacks and bolster terrorist groups' capabilities"(DNI 2019, 10-11) which may be a threat both regionally and globally. Comparing this claim and Iraq's current situation, where the underlying factors that enabled ISIL's mobilization and rise persist, ISIL has suitable conditions to again pose a more serious threat to the region than they now do. Analyzing the Iraqi operational environment, the US Intelligence Community assesses that the government in Iraq "will confront a high level of societal discontent, institutional weakness, and deep-seated divisions, as well as protests over a lack of services, high unemployment, and political corruption" (DNI 2019, 31).

Further, the more long term analysis claims that political discontent, lack of resources and institutional capacity fails to address longstanding economic development and basic services challenges (DNI 2019, 31). Hence, ISIL remains both a terrorist and insurgent threat which will exploit the societal instability to build up their powers and regain territory, utilizing opportunities against Iraqi security forces that are stretched thin (DNI 2019, 31). It is also likely that ISIL faces some of the same favorable conditions in Syria. The Assad regime will unlikely clear out ISIL from remote areas that do not threaten the regime's military, economic, and transportation infrastructure (DNI 2019, 32).

According to the Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS), there are few indications that ISIL will be able to resume a comprehensive campaign with centralized attacks against Europe within 2019. In 2018, nine completed and ten averted terrorist attacks

have been recorded in the West. All of the attacks were attacks inspired by jihadism. In 2017, the figures were 25 and 28, which shows a significant decrease (NIS 2019, 61). However, in the longer term, the organization has favorable conditions for strengthening the capacity to carry out external operations, because the facilitation networks outside Syria and Iraq are less affected by OIR. Hence, it is likely that parts of ISIL's infrastructure for terrorist attacks in Europe will be located outside the core area and NIS assess that these branches can carry out centralized attacks against Western interests in their respective areas of operation (NIS 2019, 61).

Many foreign jihadists who fought within ISIL, and were radicalized, are returning to their home countries. Those nations are concerned about the impact of these returning jihadists within their societies. Even though security measures have made it difficult for foreign warriors to return to Europe, this concern should be taken seriously. NIS claims that returning foreign jihadists will present a threat towards society by providing guidelines and encouragement for attacks through associations with established communities in their home country (NIS 2019, 61). NIS is more concerned about jihadists who have already returned and assess it difficult for jihadists operating in Iraq and Syria to get out of the conflict area undiscovered due to imposed anti-terrorist measures and ISIL's loss of border areas against Turkey. The loss has made it difficult to travel to and from the group's core areas (NIS 2019, 61).

Returned foreign jihadists should be taken into consideration when assessing the future threat. NIS (2019) warns that the foreign war networks from Syria and Iraq will form the basis for new terrorist groups with a transnational agenda in the near future. The networks will bring the different jihadist organizations in Europe closer together, which

will create a breeding ground for radicalization and organization (NIS 2019, 65). Also, many returned foreign fighters have been sent to prison upon return to their respective home countries, witch has increased radicalization and recruitment in European prisons. This represents a complex threat for security forces in Europe, especially since a large number of extremists will be released from European prisons in the near future (NIS 2019, 61). Given these points, NIS assess that the dynamics of European jihadist networks may mean more to the threat to Europe than the development of terrorist organizations in the Middle East (NIS 2019, 65).

Possible access to chemical and biological weapons by terrorists is a serious concern for NATO members. ISIL has used chemical weapons on battlefields during the past two years, and the US Intelligence Community assess threat from biological weapons "has […] become more diverse as [biological weapons] agents can be employed in a variety of ways and their development is made easier by dual-use technologies" (DNI 2019, 8). We know that chemical weapons have been used by terrorists in Syria and Iraq, but this type of attacks have not yet been implemented in the West (NIS 2019, 65). Even though it is highly likely that terrorist networks have a desire to carry out chemical and biological attacks in Europe, the production of these weapons is likely too challenging, time-consuming and risky (NIS 2019, 65). A possible threat is the use of UAV systems which have been frequently used by ISIL as a collection and weapon platform in Syria and Iraq. Commercially available UAVs are easily accessible and can be modified relatively easily to deliver explosives. Hence, the use of UAV in a terrorist attack in the West in the coming year is considered possible (NIS 2019, 65).

Even though OIR and counter-terrorism measures have reduced ISIL's presence in the Middle East, NIS assess the capacity of ISIL's branches outside of Syria and Iraq is only slightly impaired. However, the branches are concerned with local and regional conflict dynamics, and their operational priorities will be linked to these lines of conflicts (NIS 2019, 62). Furthermore, it is more likely that ISIL will prioritize local conditions in the group's strategy, and "other lines of conflict than "Islam against the West" may seem to mobilize" (NIS 2019, 64). Thus, when it comes to global presence, ISIL's international branches will mainly be important to ISIL strategy for maintaining the status of the transnational organization with territorial ambitions (NIS 2019, 62).

Even though ISIL has reduced capabilities to carry out complex operations in Europe, NIS warns that the terror organization still has intention and some capacity to attack Europe, as "ISIL [still] has the ability to inspire, guide and contribute with operational support to European-based cells and sympathizers" (NIS 2019, 61).

Moreover, EUROPOL is concerned with the development of ISIL's digital combat army, also known as "The Islamic State Hacking Division" or "United Cyber Caliphate." The group has historically been responsible for several defacements of websites, and there are indicators that the group is "focused on gathering intelligence related to the energy industry and power grids, purportedly in preparation of an attack" EUROPOL 2018, 15). The concern is reinforced with the possibility of ISIL developing capabilities to conduct cyber-attacks, either with an internally built capability or by buying access to the capabilities that the group is lacking from criminal organizations (EUROPOL 2018, 15). This will enable ISIL to conduct hybrid attacks, which could severely disrupt emergency or other essential public services (EUROPOL 2018, 15).

Another concern that Western Intelligence Services has is the exploitation of the power vacuum following in the footsteps of ISIL's reduction in combat power. ISIL's weakness allows other Violent Extremists Organizations (VEO) to take over the hegemony of global jihadism (NIS 2019, 64). The group that has the best conditions to get in the same position is al-Qaeda (AQ), and it is highly likely that AQ will seek to exploit ISIL's fall to strengthen its position and attract more sympathizers through increased propaganda production (NIS 2019, 64). NIS (2019) argues that AQ has strengthened its ability to produce propaganda over the past two years and that the organization communicates a message that targets other VEOs to acknowledge their affiliation to AQ. However, it is unlikely that AQ (or any other VEO) will be able to consolidate the jihadist environment to the same extent as ISIL did (NIS 2019, 64). Further, AQ IO to other VEOs communicates cohesion and patience which likely are indicators that AQ does not see the present time as favorable to establish a caliphate. Going back to the separation of AQ and ISI, we see that AQ still working in a long term strategy and likely assess their combat power as too weak to reach their end state as of now.

Although AQ is likely to be motivated by ISIL's decline in Syria and Iraq, NIS (2019) argues that AQ will prioritize building alliances and attacks in geographical areas where they have branches rather than attacks in the West the following year (NIS 2019, 64). Even though this thesis is not about AQ, this point is important since the dynamics between AQ and ISIL necessarily will challenge ISIL. To maintain its legitimacy and recruitment, ISIL will also have to fight a fight on inner jihadist lines to survive.

Analysis of ISIL's Capabilities within Iraq and the Levant

In December 2017, Iraq's Prime Minister Haid-er al-Abadi declared victory over ISIL. However, the threat from ISIL is still present. According to Michael Knights (2018), ISIL carried out a total of 1271 attacks between January and October 2018. Of these, 762 were explosive events to include different Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), Vehicle Born IEDs (VBIED), suicide bombings, indirect fire, Rocket Propelled Grenade attacks, guided missile attacks, recoilless rifle, and improvised rockets. Of these, 135 of the explosive events were attempted mass-casualty attacks. Also, ISIL carried out 270 effective roadside bombings, 120 attacks on Iraqi Security checkpoints and outposts, and 148 assassinations of specifically targeted individuals such as security force leaders, tribal heads, and district council members (Knights 2018, 1).

Further, the rate of the attacks tells the story of an insurgency movement that remains highly active. In the first ten months of 2018, ISIL generated 13.5 attempted mass-casualty attacks, 27 successful IEDs, 14.8 targeted assassination attempts, and 12 attacks on Iraqi Security Forces check positions per month. Further, to set a geographical frame to it, the attacks have been carried out in at least 27 areas within Iraq (Knights 2018, 2).

Even though the numbers discussed above show signs of ISIL's ability to prevent the normalization of the security situation in Iraq, the attacks carried out each month in 2018 is less than a third compared to 2017 (Knights 2018, 2). Thus it shows a significant reduction of ISIL's operational tempo. However, reduction in attacks does not necessarily correlate with a reduction in capacity. It could also mean that ISIL is more selective and prioritizes a "quality over quantity approach to operations" (Knights 2018, 2). The

question is therefore if the reduction of attacks is a result of ISIL's lack of capability or a decision to rationalize their combat power. Going back to the 1271 attacks carried out in the first ten months of 2018, 54 % of them were successful. Even though this means that 46% of the attacks are less lethal or more harassment attacks, Knights (2018) argues that there are indicators supporting that ISIL was "deliberately focusing its efforts on a smaller set of geographies" (Knights 2018, 8).

The future threats of ISIL within its core areas depend on the ability to build and regain their combat power. In the past, mobilization and recruitment of foreign fighters have been a source of manpower and needed knowledge for ISIL. It is estimated that as many as 27,000 foreigners traveled to Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2016 to join the ranks of ISIL (Kirk 2016). When it comes to future mobilizing and recruitment of foreign jihadists, NIS argues that few new Western jihadists will travel to Syria and Iraq the next year, and that it is unlikely that extensive travel from the West to other areas where ISIL is present will occur (NIS 2019, 61). Furthermore, a consequence of the transformation to an underground network is challenging ISIL in its use of non-Arab warriors, as it is difficult for them to hide in the population. Hence, non-Arab jihadists will be less useful in an underground organization (NIS 2019, 61). As a consequence, it is unlikely that ISIL will increase its combat manpower with foreign fighters.

Information Power

When it comes to ISIL's information power, the branches outside ISIL's core areas have received more attention than before, while publicity of the group's propaganda in Iraq and Syria has been reduced (NIS 2019, 62). However, there are indicators suggesting recovery of the ISIL centralized media network despite severe damage of its

media infrastructure parallel with the loss of territorial control (EUROPOL 2018, 30). ISIL still issues a weekly newspaper named al-Naba as an information channel to internal and external audiences (EUROPOL 2018, 30). However, comparing the contents of al-Naba to other historical propaganda magazines from ISIL such as Dabiq and Rumiyah, we see a shift in focus – "Idyllic depictions of governance and civilian life in the caliphate has been replaced by a defensive and defiant discourse and a stronger focus on victimhood and resilience" (EUROPOL 2018, 32). The content of al-Naba focuses on practical guidance on how to carry out terrorist attacks and military advances. Furthermore, ISIL publishes al-Naba only in Arabic and thus ISIL's ability to reach out to external audiences outside and inside Iraq and Syria is significantly decreased (EUROPOL 2018, 30). Hence, ISIL is likely to put more emphasis on internal forces to stir motivation and consolidate morale, than to target an external audience for recruitment and polarization.

In contrast, as mentioned earlier, Nacos (2016) argues that as long as terrorists serve pictures, threats, drama, and human-interest stories, the news of the world will continue to report, and in many cases over report, even small acts of terror (Nacos 2016). Hence, even with a reduced intention and capability to carry out international operations, the terror organization still has the ability to exploit informational power. This argument is reinforced with the fact that ISIL "continues to spread its message to wide audiences by increasingly redistributing older material by new means" (EUROPOL 2018, 6). ISIL former operations and use of technology allow an "extensive archive of material across a variety of online platforms" to be exploited by sympathizers who focus on archiving historical content as the quantity of new material is reduced by both infrastructure and

operatives (EUROPOL 2018, 30-32). It is also vital to understand that the Informational

Power of ISIL not only depend on its media and publication infrastructure but more on

the effect the information operations and propaganda have on the audience to witch it is

addressed. Given Abrams argument that the message the terrorists intends to send drowns

in the violent actions, one can argue that the reduction in publicity of brutal actions in the

western media serves its purpose. Moreover, there are signs of a shift in the propaganda

focus towards "community projects, religious preaching or even poetry recitals [to

mobilize] more followers and appealing to those who would otherwise shy away from

these groups' brutality, but who are nevertheless moved by the idea of a global Muslim

community (umma) and caliphate" (EUROPOL 2018, 32)

Economic Power

At the height of its power, ISIL drew economic resources from 1) Black Market

Oil Trade; 2) taxation/extortion of the population within the territory they controlled; 3)

kidnapping for ransom; 4) Donations from wealthy donors; 5) Sales of antiquities; 6)

Looting Iraqi Banks; 7) Sales of other looted property; 8) Real estate and rentals of

confiscated property; 9) Currency provided from foreign fighters joining ISIL; 10)

Agriculture trade; and 11) Human Trafficking (Swanson 2015). Of these resources, trade

of oil on the black market and taxation has been the major drivers for ISIL's economy

(Swanson 2015), and thus the economic power has been reduced parallel with the

reduction of the loss of territory. Even though this has led to decreased economic power

for the group, NIS (2019) argues that ISIL is still able to draw on existing financial and

material resources to meet the needs of an insurgent organization (NIS 2019, 62).

Moreover, EUROPOL claims that ISIL raises funds from sympathizers through

cryptocurrency donation campaigns in ISIL-affiliated websites (EUROPOL 2018, 31).

Thus, fundraising is still a credible way of income for ISIL that support the

organization's insurgency and actions.

Table 5.   ISIL's Capabilities

Evaluation criterion: ISIL's Capabilities			
Questions	Little Obligation	Moderately Obligated	Explicitly Obligated
Diplomatic power (to which extent ISIL interacts and engage with state or non-state actors)	X		
Informational power (The infrastructure, capabilities, and processes by which ISIL creates, gathers, analyzes, disseminates, exploits and disrupt information)		X	
Military power (The way ISIL entail applying force, threatening the application of force, or enabling other parties to apply force in furtherance of strategic ends in an attempt to impose its will on another)			X
Economic power (The way ISIL furthering or constraining others' prosperity)		X	

Source: Developed by author

Conclusion

Even though there are indicators of decreased operational tempo, ISIL has shown

the ability to prevent the normalization of the security situation in its core areas.

Furthermore, political discontent, lack of resources and institutional capacity fails to

address longstanding economic development and basic services challenges, ISIL has

suitable conditions to again pose a more serious threat to its core areas than they now do.

In contrast, there are few indications that ISIL will be able to resume a comprehensive

campaign with centralized attacks outside its core areas within the next year. However, in

the longer term, the organization has favorable conditions for strengthening the capacity

to carry out external operations, because the facilitation networks outside Syria and Iraq

are less affected by OIR. Hence, ISIL's infrastructure for terrorist attacks in Europe will

be located outside the core area, and these branches can carry out centralized attacks

against Western interests in their respective areas of operation. The foreign war networks

from Syria and Iraq will form the basis for new terrorist groups inspired by ISIL with a

transnational agenda in the near future. The networks will bring the different jihadist

organizations in Europe closer together, which will create a breeding ground for

radicalization and organization. Consequently, the dynamics of European jihadist

networks with experience and inspiration from ISIL may mean more to the threat to

Europe than the development of terrorist organizations in the Middle East.

Analysis of NATO's Critical Vulnerabilities

The following COG analysis will define NATO's critical vulnerabilities and thus shed

light upon which weaknesses ISIL could possibly exploit either directly or indirectly.

NATO is arguably the most powerful military alliance in the world and has been a success since it was established in 1949. The COG of NATO is Cohesion, and it rests upon the mantra that an attack on one member is an attack on every member.

With Cohesion as the COG, political will has to be based upon shared common goals in the threat perception related to the different member states national strategic ends. However, defining political will and its implications are difficult for two reasons: 1) it involves intangible phenomena such as motivation and intent; and 2) political will is exhibited by both individuals and collectives, and more collective will leads to more complexity (Morris 2018, 2). Thus, NATO's political and military power is "the extent of support among key decision makers for a particular solution to a particular problem – necessary to overcome costs and risks – and commitment to sustain over time" (Morris 2018, 3). We therefore see that cohesion within the political will is vital for the alliance because if cohesion in the alliance falls, the alliance falls. Hence, Cohesion is the COG of NATO. It is the hub where NATO draws its moral strength and power that feeds into the physical capabilities of NATO.

The alliance consists of 29 member states that share a common bond of trust, perseverance, and legitimacy which in the end sums up in a relationship where an attack on one member state, is an attack on the whole alliance. As mentioned, the alliance has been an actor on the geopolitical map of the world since 1949 and is considered to be the strongest alliance in history. It possesses an amount of combat power that no other alliances can match. However, the greatest danger to the alliance comes from within; "Questionable allied political will threatens the survival of NATO as a credible political and defense organization" (Morris 2018, 1).

There are three components of NATO's political will: 1) sufficient key decision makers supporting the use of NATO's military or political power to a particular problem or a threat; 2) a common understanding of the threat or the problem, and; 3) a potentially-effective solution supported by the decision makers as the general policy to reach the desired ends (Morris 2018, 3-5).

The first factor addresses if all member states agree to use military force on a problem. Since action by NATO is based on consensus, the absence of a veto is a prerequisite. All member states can choose to support or block the use of force to a particular problem, and thus all member states can be influenced by the other member states and domestic political influences and priorities based on national interests. Hence, veto players represent a potentially dangerous obstacle to the cohesion of the alliance.

The second factor deals with threat priorities and threat perception from the different member states. This is vital because "without this, consensus on action by alliance leaders remains unlikely because different perspectives and priorities suggest fundamentally different solutions" (Morris 2018, 4). The third factor of the political will depends on the consensus of the means and ends in the general policy to address a threat, and that the different member states develop capabilities that support long-term solutions for the operational environment (Morris 2018, 5). Seeing that US and Turkey have two completely different preferences and narratives of People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian-Kurdish militia that dominates the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), is one example of how different national preferred ends, ways and means can clash within the NATO alliance. YPG is the Syrian wing of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which Turkey view as a terrorist organization that has "been waging an insurgency against

Turkey for more than 30 years" (Tahiroglu and Gabel 2019). The US views the organization as one of the ways to reach the desired ends in OIR.

So what are the prerequisites of cohesion for NATO? This thesis argues that Trust, Perseverance, and Legitimacy are the critical capabilities that NATO COG rests upon. Trust is crucial because political and military will may be expressed through language, but can only be manifested through action (Brinkerhoff 2010). Perseverance ensures the commitment necessary to attain the strategic end state for the alliance, and legitimacy provides the development and maintaining the will required to accomplish the strategic end state for the alliance. Hence, trust, perseverance, and legitimacy are the ways that enable cohesion for NATO. It is the moral operational framework of the alliance in which all member states must maneuver within to ensure that the strength of the alliance is maintained. Further, it is also the framework of which the different member states need to balance their own national or bilateral strategies to keep the alliance intact. All it takes is one member state believing its national strategies are better off with a veto of a decision or not committing to a decision for the framework to fall.
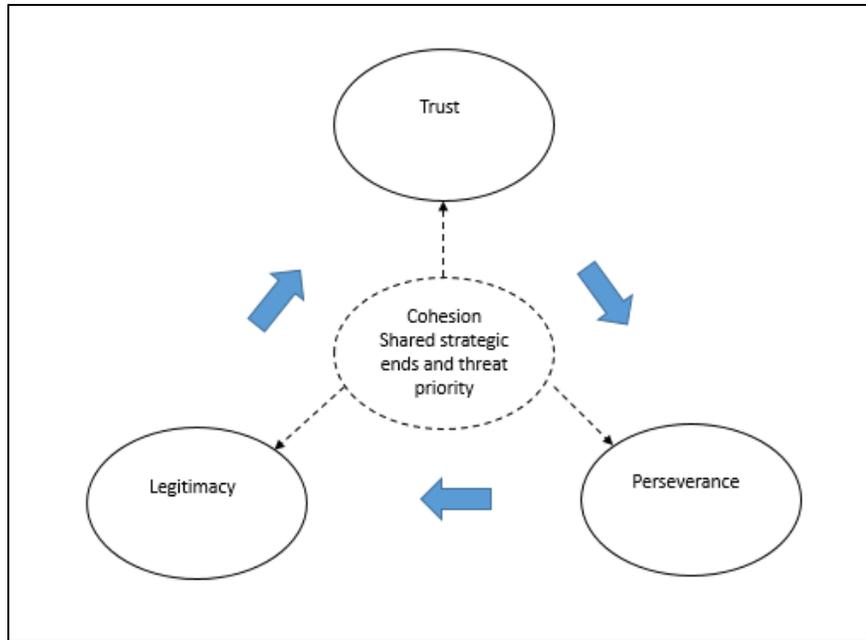
Figure 4.   NATO COG and Critical Capabilities

Source: Developed by author.

To allow NATO's critical capabilities to prevail, NATO needs the means that enable perseverance, legitimacy, and trust which allows NATO to preserve its power.

Through perseverance, NATO ensures the commitment necessary to attain the strategic end state. As a military alliance, NATO depends on Diplomatic and Military Power that are capable of forcing NATO's will upon an enemy or an adversary. As discussed earlier when defining political will, diplomatic power may also be needed to enable cohesion internally in the alliance both to ensure commitment and necessary funding. Hence, the CR of Perseverance is defined to be Military Power, Diplomatic Power, and Funding.

Through Legitimacy, NATO develops and maintains the will necessary to attain the strategic end state. Because legitimacy addresses the will of the different member

states, the CC rests on Diplomatic Power to preserve cohesion internally, Information Power to ensure populace support within the member states, and International Law as a framework for NATO to maneuver within.

Trust is the third CC, and since trust is a mental state, it addresses how the different member states believe in the reliability, commitment and strength of the alliance. Trust has to be developed based on a set of shared values, an authentic relationship fostered by genuine communication, and a shared common goal that the security of one member state is based on the protection of all.
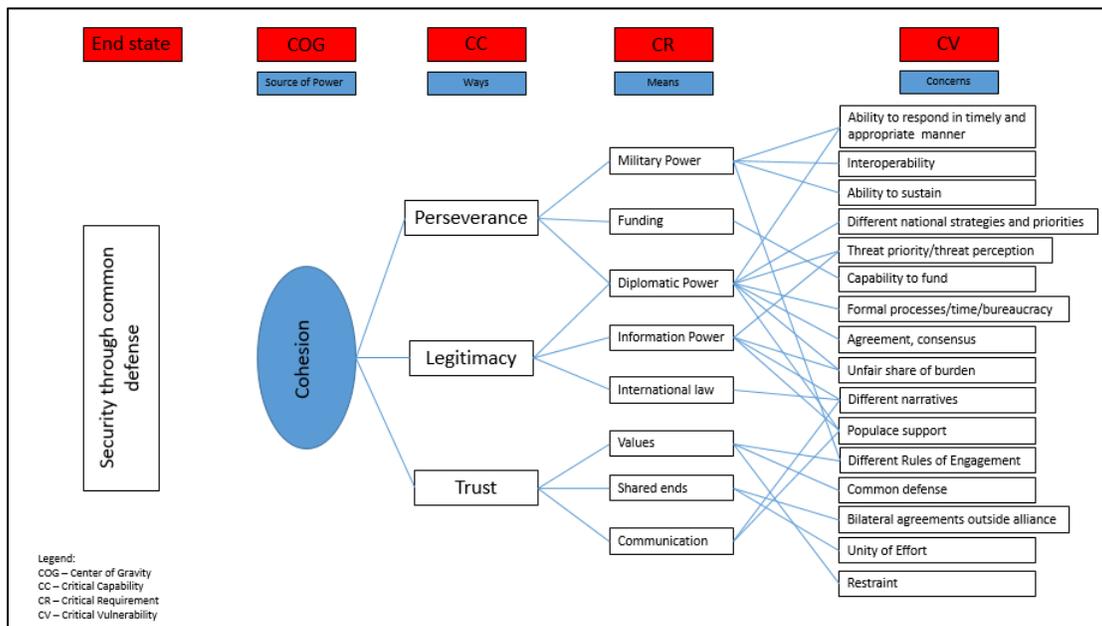

Figure 5.   NATO COG Analysis

Source: Developed by author.

The COG analysis reveals the critical role of the political power plays in both enabling the combat power of the COG, as well as the importance of protecting the COG.

Several critical vulnerabilities are linked to diplomatic power as a vital requirement. Further, numerous links are drawn between the diplomatic, military and informational power which highlight the complexity of cohesion among 29 different member states with different national strategies, different threat perceptions, different geographical concerns and different priorities. However, it also shows the strength of the alliance. 29 member states who, despite all the differences, form an alliance that ensures the security and stability of the member states and enable their national strategies to prevail.

The critical vulnerabilities may to some extent be mitigated through NATO's guidelines for countering terrorism. These are built on NATO's strategic approach and provides a clear direction, enhances coordination and enable unity of effort. Further, we also see that the war against terrorism has, from NATO's viewpoint, enhanced synchronization and use of diplomatic and military power in both national and international efforts. Further, for military power, development of doctrine and operations, enhanced intelligence exchange and development of technology solutions have enriched the Alliance in many ways (NATO 2012). Hence, one could argue that the war on terrorism and OIR has made NATO stronger.

<div align="center">

ISIL's Strategy, ISIL's Capabilities and NATO's
Counter Measures – an Analysis

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This chapter fuses the answers provided in the previous analysis of the secondary questions. Thus, ISIL's strategy and ISIL's capabilities will be discussed against NATO's critical vulnerabilities, which will be the baseline for the analysis to answer the primary research question.

ISIL does not have the military power to pose a military threat to NATO. However, as earlier discussed and reflected in the COG analysis, NATO's weakness is within the organization itself. The question is therefore if ISIL has the capability and intention to exploit the internal critical vulnerabilities directly or indirectly.

Different narratives of the threat from ISIL and threat priorities feed into the different member states national strategies, and therefore the political will to commit military and diplomatic power to fight ISIL. Therefore, if ISIL should exploit one of NATO's critical vulnerabilities, the most dangerous Course of Action (COA) is to use ways and means that will drive a wedge between the different national strategies among the member states. One way of doing this will be to target the narrative of the threat perception of the terror organization.

An approach leaning against the "near enemy" strategy may thus be a wise strategy from ISIL's view because the further away the threat is, the less dangerous it is felt. Thus, it affects the dynamic relationship between the government, the military forces and the population of the different member states. As a result, political will may thus be affected in three ways: 1) the perseverance to continue to send troops and military hardware to ISIL's core areas when ISIL is not a threat towards the member states, 2) legitimacy to priority funding for a threat that is felt less dangerous than others, and 3) legitimacy of the risk involved in taking casualties.

Even though one may argue that reduced political will to fight ISIL is not a threat towards NATO itself, failed concurrence of threat priority is because it affects the cohesion that the alliance is built upon as a source of power. Hence, if one or more member states fails to recognize the threat towards other member states, and thus refuse

to commit to the common defense, the alliance may start to disintegrate. Therefore, if ISIL targets one particular member state and focuses all its power against it, the narrative of ISIL as a threat may differ. It may lead to a decline in the mental interoperability that NATO's cohesion depends on because other member states are more concerned by near-peer threats such as Russia, China or Iran. This leads to different priorities for use of NATO's power among the member states and thereby creates internal friction in the alliance. To illustrate; the Eurobarometer survey of 2018 showed a decrease in support for combating terrorism from 41% in April 2018 to 30% five months later, which is a significant reduction from the previous surveys where terrorism issues were at the top of Europeans' concerns (European Parliament 2018, 68). Only the United Kingdom believed that the fight against terrorism should be one of Parliament's #1 priority (38%). Among the other member states, "results show a general and significant decline of the number of respondents asking for this policy to be a top priority, led by Italy -19 (29%), Portugal -18 (28%) and Spain -18 (25%)" (European Parliament 2018, 68). As the example shows, NATO members differ widely in the perception of the priority to combat terrorism.

Further, the feeling of an unequal share of the burden through participation and funding/investment creates tension within the alliance that may be exploited. The feeling of threat relates to the passion in the population and thus political will to prioritize resources to reduce the threat, to include both human resources (troops), military capabilities, and economical funding. These national resources need to be prioritized against other national strategies on the political agenda. Therefore, a feeling of inequality and unfair share of burden within NATO creates friction and discontent because all

member states need to balance their resources to reach their strategical ends to develop their nations according to their political programs and policies. The core of the NATO alliance is common defense, and thus if the feeling of "common" is not met, the passion to support the NATO alliance in the population is reduced which affects political will.

By targeting the feeling of inequality of the Alliance, ISIL may disturb the internal cohesion of NATO. Means such as Information Operations directed at specific member states to affect the narrative of the threat from ISIL may lead to different threat perspectives within the Alliance. Further, selectively targeting certain military capabilities and soldiers to increase casualties for a specific member state may affect the population's support and political will to maintain the use of resources for CT purposes.

With the strategic shift to operate within the framework of the "Near Enemy" strategy, and by increasing IO campaigns to include poetry, community projects and religious preaching in contrast to the brutal propaganda acts the world witnessed between 2014-16, ISIL may change the narrative of the group with regards to both the global Muslim community and NATO members. The reduction of violent and bloody propaganda may be appealing to Muslims that, until now, have shied away from ISIL's brutality, and it may affect the different member states' perception of the group as a threat. Hence, exploitation of NATO's critical vulnerabilities related to threat perception may result in different national narratives and priorities of political will and support of the populace. As a result, NATO's attitude related to perseverance and legitimacy may differ within the different member states, leading to different national strategies prevailing above NATO's political will. This may lead to a break of the trust upon which

the alliance rests, and ultimately the cohesion among the member states. Hence, the COG of NATO may be affected by ISIL.

Table 6.   Threats from ISIL to NATO's Critical Vulnerabilities

NATO's critical vulnerabilities and ISIL's intention and capability to exploit			
	Little Obligation	Moderately Obligated	Explicitly Obligated
Ability to respond in a timely/appropriate manner	X		
Interoperability	X		
Ability to sustain	X		
Different national strategies/priorities		X	
Threat priority/ threat perception			X
Capability to fund	X		
Formal processes/time/ bureaucracy	X		
Agreement/ Consensus		X	
Unfair share of the burden		X	
Different narratives			X
Populace support			X
Different Rules of Engagement	X		
Common defense	X		
Bilateral agreements outside the alliance	X		
Unity of Effort		X	

Restraint		X	

Source: Developed by author.

<u>Responses to the Primary Question and Aggregated Findings</u>

The primary question of this thesis is "Does ISIL pose a threat to NATO in the next five years?" The answer to this question is yes. ISIL has both the intent and capability to harm NATO. By using strategical and operational ways and means to establish different narratives of the threat from ISIL, the terror organization may drive a wedge between the cohesion among the member states of NATO. Hence, by exploiting NATO's critical vulnerabilities, ISIL may pose a threat to NATO within the next five years. The conclusion rests upon the premises found in the analysis of the secondary questions.

The first secondary question is "What is ISIL's strategy?" The analysis and understanding of ISIL's strategy answers to what extent the terror organization intends to target NATO as an alliance, or individual member states, within the next five years. The findings from the analysis conclude that the terror organization has shown adaptability to a shifting geopolitical environment in the past, using different strategic, operational and tactical ways and means in the effort to reach the desired ends. Hence, to underestimate the terror organization's ability to conduct operational art and thereby tie ends, ways and means together would be a mistake.

As of now, ISIL's strategy seems mainly to be based on the "near enemy" strategy to consolidate, regroup and build up combat power while targeting governmental structures and players using insurgent tactics to shape the environment for a future

recurrence. The various objectives within ISIL's current strategy support ISIL's strategic goals in various ways. Further, all objectives have the potential to influence ISIL's future fighting power in a positive direction, thereby supporting ISIL's strategy in the long run. For this reason, polarizing and mobilizing ways and means are still an important part of ISIL's current strategy. Along with the shift to regional focus, there are also signs of a shift of the propaganda communicated by the group. A more moderate IO campaign focused on religious ideology and poetry is most likely a means to attract moderate Muslims who until now have condemned the group's violent and brutal messages. There are also indicators found in the analysis that ISIL has become more moderate towards other jihadist terror organizations. However, this paper argues that in ISIL's strategy, there are no grey zones, and it can be suggested that the terrorist organization is willing to go against an apocalyptic sectarian struggle to achieve its strategic goal. Hence, the shift of focus towards "near enemy", moderation in IO and towards other regional jihadist organizations are likely LOEs to build combat power, and not a strategic shift in itself. Their strategic long term ends and objectives aim to mobilize as much combat power as possible so that they can regain the geographic control of their so-called Caliphate. Hence, on a longer term, ISIL probably does not want a passive and defensive approach where the Western or Muslim community is discouraged from involvement in their core areas, but rather a sectarian struggle against those societies that do not submit to their ideology. The desire for influence and leverage is existential. ISIL, with its polarizing actions and communication, seeks to provoke an offensive sectarian struggle to set optimal frameworks for mobilization of supporters and building strength. In this way,

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ISIL's focus on the "near enemy" strategy is not a lasting strategy, but a strategy that suits the current powers and capabilities of ISIL.

The second primary question this thesis analyzes is "To what extent has ISIL capabilities to achieve their strategic goals in the next five years?" The analysis of ISIL's capabilities provides an answer to whether or not the terror organization has the necessary ability to achieve its strategic and operational end states. The analysis concludes that even though there are indicators of decreased operational tempo, ISIL has shown the ability to prevent the normalization of the security situation in its core areas. Political discontent, lack of resources and institutional capacity in ISIL's core areas fails to address longstanding economic development and basic services challenges. Hence, ISIL has suitable conditions to again pose a more severe threat to its core areas than they now do on the regional stage in the Middle East. Therefore, in the longer term, the organization has favorable conditions for strengthening the capacity to carry out external operations. Additionally, the facilitation networks outside Syria and Iraq are less affected by OIR and ISIL's infrastructure for terrorist attacks in Europe are located outside the core area. Also, the foreign war networks from Syria and Iraq will form the basis for new terrorist groups inspired by ISIL with a transnational agenda in the future. The networks will bring the different jihadist organizations in Europe closer together, which will create a breeding ground for radicalization and organization resulting in a more serious threat for the societies within the NATO.

The third secondary question of this thesis is "What are NATO's Critical Vulnerabilities?" A Center of Gravity (COG) analysis answers if NATO has vulnerabilities that possibly can be exploited directly or indirectly by ISIL the next five

years. The thesis concludes that NATO's critical vulnerabilities lie within the Alliance and the different national strategic ends of the member states. Different threat perceptions and narratives lead to dissent of priorities reflected in national strategies. Populace support and political will to prioritize COIN operations after 17 years in the Middle East can easily be perceived as less important than near peer threats such as Russian aggression among some member states, while others feel more threatened by ISIL. In addition to a common understanding of the threat or the problem, the collective will of NATO rests upon support for a potentially-effective solution among the decision makers as the general policy to reach the desired ends. The fundamental opposite narratives of the Kurdish YPG forces between Turkey and the US is one example of how different national security strategies can potentially burst the cohesion among different member states. Hence, the collective will of NATO is complicated and different member states favor different solutions for different problems. It takes only one member state to break the cohesion of NATO. Hence, by using ways and means to create different narratives of what the threat from ISIL represents, the terror organization can exploit NATO's critical vulnerabilities both directly and indirectly and thereby effect the COG of NATO.

<u>Chapter Summary</u>

This chapter analyzes the thesis's primary questions and concludes that different perspectives of the threat from ISIL may lead to different priorities from the member states and thus affect the cohesion which the Alliance rests upon. By using strategical and operational ways and means to establish different narratives of the threat from ISIL, the terror organization may drive a wedge between the cohesion among the member states. In this way, ISIL may exploit NATO's critical vulnerabilities and thus pose a threat to

NATO within the next five years. The conclusion rests upon the analysis and findings of the secondary question presented in the chapter.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter concludes the thesis and answers the primary research question. Further, the chapter provides recommendations for NATO's decision makers and policy makers of the different member states of the alliance. Recommendations for further research on the topic in the thesis is also presented. Finally, the chapter presents some final thoughts on prerequisites for NATO to remain a credible security alliance for the member states in the future.

Conclusion

The primary question of this thesis is "Does ISIL pose a threat to NATO in the next five years?" The answer to this question is yes. ISIL has both the intent and capability to harm NATO. By using strategical and operational ways and means to establish different narratives of the threat from ISIL, the terror organization may drive a wedge between the cohesion among the member states of NATO. Hence, by exploiting NATO's critical vulnerabilities ISIL may pose a threat to NATO within the next five years.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Decision Makers

This paper argues three recommendations for the decision makers of both NATO and the different member states. First, NATO is too important for the security of its members to let internal differences and perspectives cause the alliance to fade away.

Allied will equals political will from the different member states. Different national strategies, conflicting interests and domestic concerns, varying threat perception and different bilateral agreements outside the alliance causes friction internally in NATO. Hence, NATO and its member states should address the ongoing and future issues related to the Alliance's political will. Second, glancing back at the root causes of the establishment of the Alliance, NATO was established to secure the member states against a near-peer threat. As the geopolitical environment develops, NATO needs adoptability to remain an Alliance that secures the member states from different threats. Hence, NATO needs to be flexible. If NATO only maintains its role as a protector for stability and security for the member states in a bipolar or multipolar world, it does not offer the solution for dealing with other future threats. Third, despite the shift of focus from COIN to LSCO, NATO cannot take its eyes from the threat from terrorism. In the past, ISIL was severely degraded by COIN operations but recovered successfully and transitioned to a regional and global threat. It will be unwise to let that happen again.

<center>Recommendations for Further Research</center>

There are two main recommendations for further research that this thesis highlight. First, since NATO's decision making process rests upon political will from the different member states, it would be valuable to look into what means and mechanisms that could enable better prerequisites for resilience and perseverance amongst the member states. Second, looking back at the theory of terrorism, the violent actions from ISIL were intended to create fear in a targeted audience. Fear is not necessarily a rational feeling and can lead to irrational decisions and passions affecting the political will. The publicity which the terrorists seek is provided through the media platforms in western

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societies. Also, seeing that the objective of a terror organization is to provoke an overreaction from a government that leads to polarization of the society and cultures, it will be valuable to look into how the media should prevent unnecessary fear and irrational behavior within the societies.

Final Thoughts

Different perspectives of the threat from ISIL may lead to different priorities from the member states and thus affect the cohesion which the Alliance rests upon. The answer to this thesis is therefore relevant for NATO security in a time where the alliance's primary focus shifts to LSCO against a near-peer threat. In addition, the analysis provided in this thesis is also relevant for NATO in other challenges than counter-terrorism and the war against ISIL. The cohesion that NATO rests upon will have to be balanced against the different member's national strategies and narratives of threats. In this way, the will of NATO relays on the political will of the different member states. Hence, all member states have a responsibility to maintain the strength of the alliance in both resources and trustworthy communication as we move into the challenges of the future.[1]

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[1] This thesis is based on suggested research from a previous thesis that the author wrote. Hence, the literature review and theoretical framework described in chapter 2, and parts of the analysis of ISIL's strategy are similar to one of the author's earlier thesis. These parts are translated from Norwegian and to some extent rewritten, but the context and structure in chapter two are similar to the authors former MA thesis in Security Studies at BI/Norwegian Business School in Norway. The text only refers to original scholars and theorists, not to the author's former thesis.

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