

# The Islamic State Surprise: The Intelligence Perspective

Ephraim Kam

In most respects, the prominence of the Islamic State (still often referred to as ISIS, in reference to its original name as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in the Middle East theater was a strategic surprise. The group's rapid command of center stage, especially in Syria and Iraq, occurred primarily in mid-2014. Less than a year before, no government or intelligence community in the nations most affected by ISIS predicted the force, scope, or speed of its emergence. Some in the United States and perhaps in the Middle East considered certain aspects related to its evolution, but not even one actor seems to have envisaged that by the middle of 2014, the organization would control one third of Syria and one quarter of Iraq, infiltrate into other countries, and threaten the future of states, the stability and survivability of regimes, and the way of life of large population groups.

This essay examines the reasons for the strategic surprise surrounding the emergence of ISIS, in light of the assessments and attitudes of the US administration and intelligence community. This examination is primarily based on the threat assessments published in 2013-2015 by the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the State Department's intelligence body, and the Director of National Intelligence. It also relies on public statements – some anonymous – by administration and intelligence officials. While perhaps a somewhat altered picture would emerge from the US intelligence community's classified assessments and messages to the administration, there would likely be no radical differences. In addition, we do not have enough information about the assessments of other intelligence communities involved, yet presumably most if not all

Dr. Ephraim Kam is a senior research fellow at INSS.

of these communities were likewise surprised by ISIS's sudden rise in the Middle East.

### **The Emergence of the Islamic State: The Essence of the Surprise**

The strategic surprise of the emergence of ISIS on the Middle East stage consists of several layers. First, ISIS emerged as an organization that early on threatened its close and distant environments more than any group before it. Therefore, it was impossible to learn from historic precedents how to relate to the doctrine, methods of operation, and trends of an organization such as ISIS in order to try to stop it at an early stage.

Second, the organization's capabilities were a surprise, as these too were unprecedented. ISIS is more than a terrorist organization, as it combines a terrorist organization's capabilities with the military capabilities of a small army. It has acquired advanced weapon systems, including tanks and artillery, captured from the Iraqi and Syrian armies. Its command level includes Sunni officers from Saddam Hussein's army who have demonstrated the ability to train and deploy forces the size of companies. The organization seized control of unprecedented financial resources – the outcome of the occupation of oil assets and banks, as well as extortion money. The manpower reserves at its disposal kept growing, as tens of thousands of volunteers streamed to Syria and Iraq from Europe, the Middle East, and Muslim nations. This phenomenon – the arrival of so many volunteers to fight on behalf of a relatively new organization – was unknown in the past.

Third, the organization's intentions were surprising. Intelligence and administration sources did not sufficiently recognize the possibility that ISIS intended to seize rapid control of large areas, stay in them, and expand their conquests – including to large cities such as Mosul – while linking Syria to Iraq and erasing the border between them. From ISIS's perspective, joining Syria and Iraq was not merely an operational necessity; it was part and parcel of its leader's vision to restore the Islamic caliphate, a vision directly threatening the future of local regimes and representing the magnet attracting the thousands of young people streaming to Syria and Iraq to enlist. The significance of the caliphate vision was understood only at a later stage, after ISIS had already burst onto the scene in Syria and Iraq.

Finally, along with underestimating ISIS's capabilities, the administration and intelligence community had an inflated view of the Iraqi army's capabilities. The Iraqi security forces were built, trained, and armed by the US military after the 2003 conquest of Iraq. By 2014, the ranks of the

Iraqi security forces had swelled to 650,000 personnel, 280,000 of whom were in the army and the rest in various branches of the police. But when ISIS made its first significant move in Iraq in tandem with its June 2014 seizure of Mosul, the second largest city in the country, some five divisions of the Iraqi army collapsed within 48 hours and stopped functioning as military units.

Thus the combination of erroneous assessments of ISIS's intentions and capabilities, its rapid progress, and the insufficient awareness of the Iraqi army's weaknesses led to a failure of the early warnings that ISIS might become only an advanced version of al-Qaeda and that its limitations might enable attempts to stop it at an earlier stage. In practice, the organization seized control of vast tracts of land in Syria and Iraq, most of which it still retains – despite the efforts of its enemies and the international coalition established to contain and destroy it.

### Intelligence Warnings

The debate over who was responsible for failing to issue adequate warnings about ISIS began in the United States in mid-2014. On September 18, 2014, Gen. James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, claimed that his personnel had in fact reported on ISIS's growing strength and its capabilities and daring. They had also warned of the weaknesses of the Iraqi army, but did not properly foresee its lack of resolve to fight. "What we didn't do was predict the [Islamic State's] will to fight...In this case, we underestimated ISIL and overestimated the fighting capability of the Iraqi army...I didn't see the collapse of the Iraqi security force in the north coming. I didn't see that. It boils down to predicting the will to fight, which is an imponderable."<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama used Clapper's statement to ascribe most of the blame for the failure to the intelligence community. As early as August 2014, Obama asserted that intelligence assessments had not anticipated ISIS's advance in Iraq and Syria accurately. At the end of September, Obama admitted that the United States had not properly understood developments in Syria that turned that country into a destination for jihadists from all over the world. The President specifically used Clapper's explanation: that the intelligence had underestimated ISIS and overestimated the capabilities of the Iraqi army.<sup>2</sup>

Obama's finger-pointing aroused a wave of protest among intelligence and political figures who claimed he was avoiding taking personal responsibility for his own mistakes and instead scapegoating the intelligence community.

The CIA rejected the accusation of an intelligence failure in Iraq, claiming that anyone who had read all of the agency's assessments on ISIS could not have been surprised. An intelligence official stated that ISIS had been under surveillance for years, and that the intelligence agencies had provided warnings about its growing strength and the increasing threat it represented; the decision makers had also been warned of the emerging problems with the Iraqi military, so that there was no reason to be surprised when it collapsed.<sup>3</sup> Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Michigan), chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, declared: "This was not an intelligence failure. This was a policy failure."<sup>4</sup> The White House was forced to respond by saying it had not accused the intelligence community of failure, but was only trying to explain how hard it was to anticipate a foreign force's will to fight.

In the midst of the public debate in the United States about the ISIS surprise, the fog surrounding the intelligence community's warnings of the ISIS threat was partially lifted. As early as July 2013, DIA Deputy Director David R. Shedd claimed that al-Qaeda affiliated groups were gaining strength in Syria. "It is very clear over the last two years they have grown in size, grown in capability, and ruthlessly grown in effectiveness... They will not go home when it is over. They will fight for that space. They are there for the long haul."<sup>5</sup> The 2013 State Department strategic assessment issued in April 2014 presented a similar picture of a growing ISIS, which was then al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq – until it broke off from the organization in January 2014. According to this assessment, in 2013 ISIS increased the lethality, complexity, and frequency of its attacks in Iraq and demonstrated improved capabilities in planning, coordinating, and conducting widespread effective attacks.<sup>6</sup> In late 2013, the intelligence community grew increasingly concerned by the deteriorated security situation in Iraq, in part in light of the transfer of ISIS forces from Syria to western Iraq since the spring of 2013. Sources in the intelligence community warned that ISIS was becoming a force to be reckoned with in northern and western Iraq and was starting to attack cities and kill members of the Iraqi government and army.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in early 2014, after ISIS conquered Fallujah and part of Ramadi, some 70 miles from Baghdad, the number of warnings increased. Administration officials assumed it would be possible to stop ISIS and eventually drive it back, but sources in the intelligence community warned that this assumption was flawed.<sup>8</sup> In the annual intelligence assessment presented to the Senate in February 2014, DIA Director Gen. Michael T.

Flynn stated that ISIS would apparently try to seize areas in Iraq and Syria in order to show its strength, just as it had done in Fallujah and Ramadi, and to show it could maintain strongholds in Syria. However, its ability to maintain control of the area would depend on the organization's resources, support from the local population, and the responses of the Iraqi security forces and various Syrian opposition groups.<sup>9</sup> In practice, ISIS's moves went much beyond this cautious assessment. Its major breakout in Iraq occurred in June 2014, when thousands of Sunni jihadists crossed the border from Syria into western and northern Iraq, conquered Mosul, and seized control of large areas of both Syria and Iraq.

### **Where Did They Go Wrong?**

The United States was familiar with the Islamic State for years. ISIS was the incarnation of the al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, a declared and defiant enemy of US forces stationed in Iraq until late 2011. There is no doubt that the intelligence community knew that starting in 2013, the threat presented by ISIS in both Syria and Iraq to critical US interests and various states in the Middle East was growing. As early as 2013, intelligence agencies issued warnings that the Syrian crisis had strengthened the organization and encouraged it to expand its operations toward Syria at the same time that it was dramatically stepping up its terrorist attacks against government and military targets in Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, as of 2013, the intelligence community was in fact identifying important components in the strength and conduct of ISIS. Nonetheless, this is insufficient to negate the general sense – even within the community itself – that both the decision makers and the intelligence community were taken by surprise and failed to properly assess the consequences of ISIS's moves. While the intelligence community did indeed warn of the possibility that ISIS would try to seize and retain control of territories, the Director of National Intelligence expressed reservations about this actually occurring, pointing out that most jihadists would be unable to seize and maintain widespread areas as long as there was local, regional, and international support for repelling them, and that the growth in the jihadists' numbers would apparently be offset by their lack of cohesion and an authoritative leadership.<sup>11</sup> Admiral Michael Rogers, Director of the National Security Agency (NSA), claimed that the intelligence community did not accurately assess the rate at which ISIS transitioned from a terrorist organization to a group focused on seizing territory; he

said that the intelligence community spoke of the possibility but with insufficient emphasis.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, several pieces of evidence indicate that even after ISIS forces streamed into Iraq from Syria and conquered Fallujah and Ramadi in early 2014, decision makers considered this a problem that could be handled and failed to pay enough attention to the warnings issued by the intelligence community. In a television interview in January 2014, a few days after ISIS seized control of Fallujah, President Obama dismissed ISIS as being “the JV team.”<sup>13</sup> Administration officials admitted that they did not focus sufficiently on ISIS’s territorial ambitions, instead viewing its activities as a response to the Iraqi government’s hostile policy toward Sunnis. Some were concerned primarily by the possibility that jihadists making their way back to Europe would then form terrorist cells on the continent, but were not worried about their efforts to control territories seized in Syria and Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

In hindsight, it is clear that both the intelligence community and the decision makers did not fully understand the implications of the crisis in Syria and Iraq for ISIS’s growth and methods of operation. They failed to realize that the vast vacuum created in both countries could not stay empty for long and that the central governments’ inability to govern large tracts of land was an open invitation to an organization such as ISIS to fill the vacuum, construct its force, and grow in strength, in order to seize control of the lawless regions. In addition, the Obama administration’s longstanding focus on toppling Assad may well have encouraged a perception of the various jihadist organizations as an important tool to help bring down the regime, thereby contributing, at least initially, to clouding the danger and threat they presented.<sup>15</sup>

The situation in Iraq also played a role in the threat miscalculation. Because ISIS was an al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq, it was at first viewed as the parent organization’s heir and expected to focus on showcase attacks rather than on seizure of territory. Furthermore, in the last few years that the US troops were in Iraq, the al-Qaeda proxy there was significantly weakened thanks to a series of blows dealt it by the United States. Therefore, the ISIS threat was seen as limited, even as it was intensifying.

All of this was compounded by the fact that US intelligence capabilities in Iraq were compromised. In their years of activity in Iraq, US troops had constructed a large intelligence network that drew a good picture of the various militias and organizations active in the country. According to one report, the CIA station in Baghdad was, at that time, the biggest CIA station

in the world, with hundreds of operators and researchers. Following the departure from Iraq in late 2011, intelligence coverage shrank as the need was reduced and the CIA presence was scaled back. Consequently, the CIA lost many of its contacts with tribal leaders – including Kurdish leaders who had information about ISIS activity and movements – and with it much of its ability to issue warnings about projected ISIS activity. In addition, the more that the United States was perceived in Iraq as weak, especially after withdrawing its troops from the country, the less willing Iraqi sources were to cooperate and provide intelligence.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, once it withdrew its troops, the United States stopped its aerial sorties over Iraq. They were renewed in 2013, but only sporadically due to Iraqi sensibilities. The attempt to establish a joint intelligence center with the Iraqis yielded only modest results.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the problem of intelligence coverage did not extend to Iraq alone. In 2014, administration officials claimed that intelligence gathering in the countries where ISIS was active was limited.<sup>18</sup>

However, beyond the difficulties in understanding the implications of the situation in Syria and Iraq, there is no doubt that one of the severe surprises stemmed from the overestimation of the Iraqi security forces. The US intelligence community and defense establishment were aware of the flaws in the Iraqi army's performance. According to the DIA assessment of early 2014, the Iraqi security services were incapable of stopping the rising tide of violence in the country, in part because they lacked intelligence, logistical equipment, and other high quality capabilities. The forces lacked cohesion and suffered from manpower shortages and bad morale, and their level of training, equipment, and supply was low. The security forces showed the ability to secure certain sites, operate checkpoints, and exhibit a presence on the street, but this was not enough to suppress ISIS and other internal threats. Furthermore, they were hard pressed to operate in areas with a Sunni majority or mixed populations and were vulnerable to terrorist attacks.<sup>19</sup> For its part, the State Department's assessment of the Iraqi security capabilities was somewhat more positive, believing they had made some strides in fighting ISIS. But even in its opinion the deterioration in Syria was making it increasingly difficult for Iraqi forces to defend the Iraqi-Syrian border or prevent the increasing amount of arms smuggling between the two countries.<sup>20</sup>

Yet despite its awareness of these significant weaknesses, the administration, security establishment, and intelligence community were all surprised by the rapid collapse of the Iraqi army. The army alone, not

counting the police, was ten times the size of ISIS, and was constructed and trained by the United States over several years. Because most of its troops were Shiite, the expectation was that they would demonstrate both the will to fight and a reasonable level of resolve in battling a Sunni organization. This did not happen, and it was not understood that the ethnic division in the Iraqi government, establishment, and security forces would impinge on the resolve of the army to defend the country. Its collapse within 48 hours and its inability to defend a large central city like Mosul were not foreseen, which raised questions about the possibility of ever reconstructing this force. Two other factors perhaps made it difficult to assess the Iraqi army's capabilities correctly. One was the fact that the responsibility for force construction lay with the US Central Command rather than with intelligence, so that the intelligence community lacked the tools to properly assess the Iraqi army's will to fight. The other was that the Obama administration did not pay sufficient attention to the warnings about the weaknesses of the Iraqi security forces because it had already withdrawn its troops from the country and had no desire to get bogged down again in the Iraqi quagmire.<sup>21</sup>

Yet another component in the ISIS surprise was the speed with which the organization acted. Even though the intelligence, security, and political echelons had by the spring of 2014 realized that ISIS presented a growing threat, they failed to grasp the speed with which the organization was able to move troops back and forth between Syria and Iraq as needed. It took the United States time to understand the meaning of the obliteration of the Syrian-Iraqi border and the fact that ISIS had turned northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq into one territory in which it operated at will with a significant ability to surprise its enemies. Thus, in September 2014, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said that "everybody was surprised to see the rapid advance that ISIL was able to make from Syria across the Iraqi border and to be able to take over such large swaths of territory in Iraq did come as a surprise."<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Assessing the stability and survivability of regimes and examining the ramifications of regional unrest stemming from regime destabilization are difficult tasks for the intelligence community. The problem is compounded when these upheavals take place in several countries simultaneously, where

what happens in one affects another and generates unprecedented side effects, such as the emergence of ISIS.

Part of the assessment and forecasting difficulty is that no source, no matter how good, can report what will happen. Any strategic surprise connected to the outbreak of war or a strategic terrorist attack such as 9/11 is one that is very hard to predict, and there are many consequent intelligence failures. But there are people – at least on the side of the enemy – who, by virtue of their roles in or near the circle of decision makers, do know what is about to happen: if, when, where, and how a war will start or a terrorist attack will be carried out. In such cases, the problem for the intelligence community lies in reaching those individuals and extracting the relevant information from them in time. This is a very complex task and those charged with it often fail, but in theory – and sometimes in practice – it is doable.

By contrast, phenomena such as regional upheavals, regime destabilization, or the emergence of ISIS are not merely the results of some leader or group of leaders making a decision. They are the consequence of deeply rooted and at times intangible processes that are years in the making, on which leaders may try to build and steer developments in what they think are favorable directions. This means that a forecast of their development or an assessment of their significance does not rely on solid information but rather on indicators – an understanding of the forces involved, including their intentions, capabilities, and history; intelligence about the mood on the other side; and at times, gut feelings and intuition. This is a problematic foundation, increasing the risk that assessments of such issues could be wrong.

The surprising emergence of ISIS on the Middle East stage was the result of two factors: the growing strength of jihadist terrorist organizations of a new type, along the lines of al-Qaeda and the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001 (which also involved an intelligence assessment failure), and the vast ungovernable swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria that allowed radical Islamist organizations, first and foremost ISIS, to grow and flourish. Each of these factors is in itself difficult to decipher from an intelligence perspective – let alone when they converge and compound one another. ISIS's significant capabilities were to a large extent affected by the collapse of the Iraqi and Syrian regimes and armies, and the intentions of the new and innovative organization – fashioned on

the basis of considerations, motivations, and objectives it determined for itself – were not sufficiently understood, at least not initially.

Nonetheless, the assessments of the US intelligence community about ISIS were not entirely wrong. In 2013, the intelligence community began to issue warnings on the growing threat and even pointed out – albeit cautiously and with reservations – the possibility that the organization would try to seize control of territories in Syria and Iraq. The US defense establishment was aware of the Iraqi army’s functional difficulties. It may be – as some political and intelligence figures have claimed – that the decision makers did not pay enough attention to the intelligence community’s warnings about ISIS. But certainly in the end, at the strategic level, the outcome was not anticipated: the tens of thousands of volunteers streaming to ISIS, the speed with which the organization operated, the collapse of the Iraqi army, the success by ISIS in seizing vast tracts in Syria and Iraq and acquiring substantial financial and military means, and the emergence of organizations linked to ISIS in other countries such as Egypt and Libya.

At any time would it have been possible to prevent the strategic surprise linked to ISIS’s bursting forth on the scene? The unique aspect of the organization and its connection to the surprising upheavals in the region did not leave the US intelligence community much opportunity for a correct assessment of all the developments related to ISIS. But at least one aspect of the affair needs to be reexamined. Assessing the Iraqi security forces’ will to fight was not within the purview of the intelligence community. The problem is familiar from other aspects of intelligence assessments. Intelligence analysts are asked to assess the enemy’s military capabilities but to a large extent those also depend on one’s own capabilities; however, assessing one’s own capabilities is not part of the mandate of the intelligence community, which is often insufficiently familiar with them. This difficulty may be mitigated by breaking the walls between the intelligence community and the operational community and expanding cooperation and information exchange. This would bring vital information outside the scope of responsibility of each sector to the attention of both elements.

## Notes

- 1 David Ignatius, “James Clapper: ‘We Underestimated the Islamic State’s Will to Fight,’” *Washington Post*, September 18, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-we-underestimated-the->

- islamic-state-james-clapper-says/2014/09/18/f0f17072-3f6f-11e4-9587-5dafd96295f0\_story.html.
- 2 Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat," *New York Times*, September 29, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/30/world/middleeast/obama-fault-is-shared-in-misjudging-of-isis-threat.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/30/world/middleeast/obama-fault-is-shared-in-misjudging-of-isis-threat.html?_r=0); Kevin Liptak, "How Could Obama Have 'Underestimated' ISIS?" *CNNPolitics.com*, September 30, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/29/politics/obama-underestimates-isis/>.
  - 3 Bill Gertz, "CIA Blew it in Iraq, Blamed for Failing to Warn about Rise of Islamic State," *Washington Times*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jul/1/cia-blamed-iraq-intel-failure-isis-rise/?page=all>.
  - 4 Baker and Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat."
  - 5 Liptak, "How Could Obama Have 'Underestimated' ISIS?"
  - 6 U.S. Department of State, *Country Report on Terrorism 2013*, Chapter 1, "Strategic Assessment," <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224819.htm>.
  - 7 Baker and Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat."
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Annual Threat Assessment*, February 11, 2014.
  - 10 Department of State, *Country Report on Terrorism 2013*; James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, March 12, 2013.
  - 11 James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, February 26, 2015.
  - 12 Baker and Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat."
  - 13 Steve Contorno, "What Obama Said about Islamic State as a 'JV' Team," *Politifact*, September 7, 2014, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2014/sep/07/barack-obama/what-obama-said-about-islamic-state-jv-team/>.
  - 14 Baker and Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat."
  - 15 Ibid.
  - 16 Gertz, "CIA Blew it in Iraq, Blamed for Failing to Warn about Rise of Islamic State."
  - 17 Baker and Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat."
  - 18 Liptak, "How Could Obama Have 'Underestimated' ISIS?"
  - 19 DIA, *Annual Threat Assessment*, February 11, 2014.
  - 20 Department of State, *Country Report on Terrorism 2013*.
  - 21 Baker and Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat."
  - 22 Liptak, "How Could Obama Have 'Underestimated' ISIS?"