

Whither ISIS? Insights from Insurgent Responses to Decline

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been pushed back over the past two years. It has lost, or soon will lose, major population centers, and its territorial control is shrinking. Yet it is not obvious how ISIS will respond to these setbacks. Many insurgent groups have faced similar challenges and either endured or rebounded. This article explores the trajectories of fifteen major insurgent organizations in South Asia following unambiguous military setbacks, examining what happens to groups after a significant loss of control or influence over territory or a broader loss of momentum and support. While ISIS is a distinctive organization, it blends characteristics of both separatist and revolutionary groups in ways that let us learn from the experiences of both types. By examining other cases of robust insurgents facing decline, this study provides insights into the possible future course of ISIS.

The findings from South Asia are fairly stark. Most of the groups survived well after they began their decline, even in the face of clear military setbacks and shrinking odds of victory. Of the groups that stopped fighting, only a small minority actually collapsed; the others agreed to long-term ceasefires and/or peace settlements. Of the groups that have kept fighting, some simply have endured without a significant rebound, while a small but striking number were able to make dramatic comebacks despite seeming to be on the verge of annihilation.

This evidence suggests that ISIS will likely survive even devastating territorial losses. It is even conceivable that the group will be able to bounce back, just as it

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did when known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) following the 2007 “surge” in Iraq.¹ Groups like ISIS that have built robust, institutionalized insurgencies are very difficult to destroy, especially when they are able to avoid comprehensive military encirclement and remain embedded in local communities. I use the South Asian cases to identify three potential trajectories of ISIS and the conditions likely to lead to each.

Insurgent Decline: A Missing Research Topic

There has been an explosion of recent research on insurgent and terrorist groups including studies of their internal operations,² patterns of violence,³ alignment choices,⁴ governance,⁵ and organization.⁶ There have also been a number of valuable studies of how long insurgent groups last,⁷ and how long civil wars endure.⁸

We do not, however, have substantial research on the question of how insurgents deal with decline specifically. There is little systematic comparative work on what groups’ life expectancy are after sliding down from their “high-water mark”⁹ and the strategies that powerful but declining groups use to adapt to shifting military conditions.¹⁰ These questions tend to be more fine-grained than most

How do insurgents deal with decline specifically?

cross-national comparisons of group survival and war duration, but are more aggregated than existing micro-level research on patterns of violence. This paper tackles these organization-level questions in order to provide broader insights into ISIS’s possible trajectories.

Studying ongoing cases is difficult—the future is obviously unknowable, while projections based on current events are often hazy or overly rooted in the present. Instead, I use evidence from other cases to offer comparative insights. South Asia is a useful setting for examining insurgent decline because it mixes different political contexts, armed group war aims (separatist vs. center-seeking), and levels of state power.

I compare groups that began as insurgents and were able to exercise substantial influence and, in a few cases, extensive bureaucratic governance over territory.¹¹ A few of these cases closely resemble ISIS in their ability to control territory and deny access to state forces along demarcated battlefronts. The rest were able to impose consistent costs on state forces in guerrilla warfare but without high levels of territorial control and conventional fighting power. Though not as tight a set of comparisons, they can still provide valuable insights into how effective and ambitious armed groups respond to substantial military setbacks.

I consciously selected powerful, armed groups in order to find the most usefully comparable cases to ISIS. I do not study movements with multiple factions about which we have little organization-level data on adaptation.¹² The comparison also excludes cases of successful insurgents who did *not* face a clear downward trajectory (such as the Communist Party of Nepal and the Mukti Bahini in East Pakistan).¹³

Is ISIS Unique?

A potential objection is that ISIS is a *sui generis* insurgent group that cannot be usefully compared to other insurgents. It is large, radical, media-savvy, and has a powerful, unique cross-border presence that sets it apart from other cases. Its ambitious war aims make it incomparable to separatist groups, while its transnational reach and ambition set it apart from other “center-seeking” groups aiming to take over a state rather than break from it.

There is no doubt that ISIS is distinctive, and there are no perfect comparisons for it. Yet there are three reasons that it can be valuably compared to other cases. First, political scientist Stathis Kalyvas has argued that ISIS actually resembles past revolutionary movements, particularly communist groups aiming for a total transformation of state, society, and economy across borders.¹⁴ Second, its recent operations in Iraq look far more like a separatist group than a center-seeking one—it has been defensively trying to hold onto territory in the face of expanding government offensives, while using terrorism and guerrilla warfare to keep state forces off-balance. Its activities in Iraq since losing momentum have closely resembled the ethno-separatist Tamil Tigers, for instance. Third, ISIS is far from unique in its ability to hold and govern large swathes of territory—whether the Communist Party of Burma, Mao’s “liberated zones,” or the Kurdish peshmerga, armed groups have often possessed territorial control and engaged in extensive governance.¹⁵

The ability of ISIS to strike at, and inspire attacks against, foreign targets is its most distinctive attribute, one that creates greater political constraints on U.S. and other states’ policies toward the group. I return to the political effects of this transnational reach when discussing ISIS’ possible trajectories, since they are certainly important. Yet, they are not such a central part of ISIS’ day-to-day governance, war-fighting operations, and future military-political trajectories to make the group incomparable to other powerful insurgents. Indeed, this transnational reach is contingent on ISIS’s ability to be a successful insurgency; if the group collapsed in the Middle East, its potency abroad would likely also diminish.

Table 1 outlines the fifteen cases and their trajectories. I begin my analysis at the point of a group’s territorial losses or other military setbacks. There are several cases where a single high-water mark is hard to determine (or code). For

Table I: Cases and Trajectories

Group	War Aims	Date of Revolt	High-Water Mark/s	Trajectory
Communist Party of Burma (CPB) [Burma]	Center	1947	Early 1970s	Hostilities; collapse in 1989
Hezb-e Islami (Gulbuddin) [Afghanistan]	Center	1975	Late 1980s/early 1990s	Hiatus until return in 2002; hostilities; incorporation in 2016
Hizbul Mujahideen [India]	Separatist	1990–1	1992–94	Hostilities through present (brief ceasefire 2000)
Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) [India]	Separatist	1988	1990	Hostilities; then collapse in 1994
Janatha Perumena Vimukthi (JVP) [Sri Lanka] ¹⁶	Center	1987	Early 1989	Hostilities; collapse in 1990
Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) [Burma]	Separatist	1961	Late 1970s	Hostilities until limited cooperation (ceasefire) in 1994; return to hostilities 2011–present
Karen National Union (KNU) [Burma]	Separatist	1947	Late 1940s	Hostilities until limited cooperation (ceasefire) in 2012
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) [Sri Lanka]	Separatist	1972	1991, 1995, 2005	Hostilities 1991–1994, 1995–2001, 2002–2006; limited cooperation (ceasefire) 1994–95 & 2002–06; collapse in 2009
Mizo National Front (MNF) [India]	Separatist	1966	1966	Mix of hostilities and limited cooperation (ceasefires/negotiations) until 1986 incorporation
Naga National Council (NNC) [India]	Separatist	1956	1956	Hostilities, then limited cooperation (ceasefire) 1964–72; hostilities, 1972–75; incorporation in 1975
National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak/Muivah (NSCN-IM) [India]	Separatist	1978–80	1992	Hostilities until limited cooperation (ceasefire) 1997–2015; incorporation deal signed 2015 but not yet implemented
Naxalites/CPI (Maoist) [India] ¹⁷	Center	1967	1970; 2010	Hostilities through present
Taliban [Afghanistan]	Center	1994	2001	Hostilities through present
Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) [Pakistan]	Center	2007 (factional predecessors from 2002)	2009	Hostilities through present
United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) [India]	Separatist	1989–1990	1991	Hostilities through present (brief ceasefire 2006)

instance, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) faced multiple major government offensives between 1991 and 2009, the Naxalite movement had peaks in 1970 and 2010, and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO/KIA) in northern Burma had a long period of influence rather than a single year that can be clearly identified as the high-water mark.

Outcomes of Interest: State-Group “Armed Orders” and Group Strategies

First, I measure group trajectories after a high-water mark. On a yearly basis from the high-water mark until the end of the organization or until the present day, I identify three relationships between the group and the state—limited cooperation, military hostilities, and alliances—and, when relevant, the termination of these relationships, either by the group collapsing or being incorporated into mainstream politics through some kind of formal or informal deal that leads to demobilization.¹⁸ Some groups returned to a new high-water mark, while most were unable to return to the apex of their power. Hostilities involve continued fighting with the state; limited cooperation involves some form of ceasefire or spheres of influence order; and alliances involve close mutual policy coordination toward shared goals. Collapse is characterized by the inability of a group to continue operating militarily. Incorporation is the demobilization of a group through some kind of agreement with the state.

Second, I study the strategic and operational responses of these armed groups. I particularly examine patterns of force deployment, targeting, and rhetoric/discourse to see how the group’s overall profile shifted after its decline began. This is important because groups can persist for similar periods of time—but in very different ways.

Overall Initial Findings

A simple examination of the cases shows several broad patterns. After outlining these, I work through distinct armed group trajectories.

Insurgent Groups Tend to Endure

Rapid collapse after hitting a high-water mark was extremely rare. Only the Janatha Perumena Vimukthi (JVP) and Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) quickly collapsed after beginning to decline (Hezb-e Islami essentially went on hiatus for half a decade but survived as an organization). The Karen National Union (KNU) has been in the field since 1949; factions of the Naga movement since 1955; some variant of the Naxalite movement since 1967; the LTTE fought, with some breaks, from 1972 until its annihilation in 2009. Even groups that found

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themselves severely militarily constrained, like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and Hizbul Mujahideen, continue to be politically relevant.

Some groups did suffer from important dissent after the onset of decline. The JKLF and first-wave Naxalites experienced massive infighting that undermined their organizations (leading to the former's collapse). The Hezb-e-Islami, Hizbul Mujahideen, KNU, TTP, and ULFA all suffered substantial internal tensions that led to important splits and fissures at some point after the high-water mark. Almost half the groups (LTTE, MNF, NNC, NSCN-IM, KIO, Taliban, and JVP) did not suffer from massive splits, though all experienced internal tensions. The CPB fused the first and third categories—it held together for the most part from 1947 until 1989, when it collapsed in spiraling ethnic minority mutinies.

Militarized Retrenchment

The large majority of groups that did not rapidly collapse all initially engaged in militarized retrenchment rather than suing for peace or abandoning the fight. They sought to mobilize local communities and to exploit international and domestic sanctuaries as a way of stabilizing their downward trajectory.

Surviving groups took advantage of porous borders, diasporas, and/or international sanctuary to buffer military setbacks. For instance, China and Thailand helped the KNU, CPB, and KIO, and the Taliban benefited from the Pakistani military. The surviving Naxalites largely shifted into poorly-governed areas of central India,¹⁹ while the NNC, MNF, NSCN-IM, and ULFA all took advantage of the porous borders and mountainous or jungle terrain of India's Northeast. The Hizbul Mujahideen had access to Pakistani sanctuaries, where its leadership was based and where it had training camps. International politics allowed these groups to survive despite serious military setbacks.²⁰

Groups also generally limited their military activities, falling back on supportive social constituencies while trying to show their ability to still strike at the state. NSCN-IM and Hizbul Mujahideen attacks, for instance, focused on security forces after decline began, trying to avoid alienating civilian supporters. Yet, there are exceptions to this pattern—the JVP and TTP lashed out against civilian targets after their decline, escalating their targeting of noncombatants in a bid to impose costs on increasingly successful government forces. Neither group was able to turn this spiraling violence into strategic success. Their escalation may have been driven by their radical aspirations, but other, more successful revolutionary groups like the Naxalites and Afghan Taliban were willing to pull back and rebuild in the face of setbacks.

Rebranding for a Long Fight

Insurgent leaders appear to have been aware of the protracted nature of the struggle ahead and the long odds of victory. They were not delusional about the

changing balance of power. They sought to re-brand themselves both internally and externally, with an eye to maintaining bargaining power for negotiations or in hopes of holding out long enough for a shock to open new opportunities for re-escalating insurgency.

The LTTE focused on the threat of Sinhalese Buddhist hegemony, while the KIO and KNU pointed to the Burma Army seeking the subjugation of ethnic minorities.²¹ The Taliban exploited the American presence, a problematic Kabul government, and political rivalries and exclusion to craft a plausible political message. The Naxalites in India have offered visions of a decades-long revolutionary struggle. These narratives helped explain why fighting needed to continue despite daunting material and military disadvantages. There were also failures to adapt rhetorically. The CPB, for instance, was increasingly unable to craft a compelling party line over the course of the 1980s due to the growing implausibility of Marxism and the reduction of Chinese support.

Divergent Trajectories After Initial Retrenchment

Despite these broad similarities in immediate reactions to decline, we then see trajectories diverging. Two-thirds of the groups (TTP, ULFA, LTTE, Naxalites, JKLF, JVP, CPB, Hizbul Mujahideen, and Taliban) kept fighting, sometimes with occasional ceasefire talks or negotiations, either through to the present or until their collapse. Of those nine groups, four (LTTE, CPB, JKLF, and JVP) collapsed at some point; the rest of these groups remain fighting to the present. The KNU, KIO, NSCN-IM, NNC, MNF, and Hezb-e-Islami eventually cut some kind of deal with the central government, often with a very long lag (in the KNU case, six decades) between the high-water mark and agreement. These deals have in turn varied in their nature and extent, ranging from limited cooperation ceasefire deals to formal peace settlements.²² The sections below explore this variation.

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When and How Did Groups Collapse?

Some groups collapsed without a peace deal or other form of intentional demobilization. The groups that met this fate were the CPB (1989), LTTE (2009), JVP (1990),²³ and JKLF (1994–95). The first wave of Naxalites almost collapsed in 1971–72 West Bengal, but enough cadres survived and shifted to other areas of operation that it cannot be considered a case of collapse. There are no common threads across these four cases beyond the fact of

substantial, sustained government repression (which is also true of groups that didn't collapse). The JVP and JKLF do resemble one another—they were torn apart by counterinsurgency operations; both were harmed by a lack or withdrawal of international support,²⁴ and had been surprised by their own successes, expanding faster and farther than was wise.

The LTTE and CPB were more formidable military forces. The LTTE was eventually wiped out in conventional battles, after having survived intense fighting that blended conventional and guerrilla conflict in the 1990s and early 2000s. Sri Lankan forces sealed off the LTTE from escape, while its international isolation left the Tigers alone to face the state. The demographic and resource limitations that the LTTE had previously evaded eventually undermined it.²⁵ The Sri Lankan government has since garrisoned Tamil areas to prevent LTTE resurgence.

While the Burma Army consistently pushed the CPB back from its high-water mark starting in the early 1970s, the CPB remained a large and formidable military force that controlled huge areas along the China–Burma border until it collapsed in 1989. Its problem was the rise of internal dissent as victory became more elusive. The CPB had increasingly relied on ethnic minorities from border zones to fill its ranks, but the leadership remained ethnically Burman, aging, and contained Marxist-Leninist ideologues. Mid-level ethnic minority commanders launched a series of mutinies against this leadership. The CPB dissolved into a set of successor organizations that defined their politics in ethnic terms and quickly cut ceasefire deals with Burmese Military Intelligence.²⁶ These groups continue to exist, some now fighting the state and others remaining in tenuous ceasefires with it, but the CPB as a coherent organization with center-seeking, revolutionary war aims simply disappeared.²⁷

Which Groups (Eventually) Cut Deals?

Deal-making seems to be the least likely outcome for a group like ISIS, but given its importance in the sample under study, it is worth discussing. A number of groups had limited ceasefires or negotiation talks—even the TTP, JVP, LTTE, CPB, and second-wave Naxalites, all ideologically radical maximalists, were willing to talk with counterinsurgents.²⁸ It is not impossible that ISIS leadership could open lines of communication with enemy forces, even if only to try to buy breathing space.

The key question is which groups cut more enduring deals. The NNC, NSCN-IM, KNU, KIO, MNF, and most recently Hezb-e Islami all signed ceasefires and/or incorporation agreements. The MNF and NNC were fully incorporated (though the NNC split as a result, leading to the rise of the NSCN), and the NSCN-IM recently signed an incorporation deal that is not yet consummated. The KNU entered limited cooperation with a ceasefire in 2012, and the KIO was under

ceasefire from 1994–2011, though it has since gone back to war with the Myanmar military.

Notably, all but one of these groups have been separatists (the Hezb being the exception) willing to live with a tenuous but real autonomy on the periphery.²⁹ Limited cooperation hinges on the state tolerating these groups' continuing existence. This may be because of international pressure to avoid costly warfare, or a calculation that the military costs of total warfare are not worth the effort compared to managing violence, as long as the groups remain within politically and ideologically acceptable boundaries of behavior.³⁰

Full peace deals are rare in this sample, with the NNC and MNF being the exemplar cases. In both contexts, over a decade of ceasefires and negotiations, broken by periods of hostilities as well, preceded the final demobilization deal. Even in these best-case scenarios, the path to demobilization was very long: the MNF started its war in 1966 and cut a deal in 1986, while the NNC revolt started in 1955 and ended in 1975.

Making a Comeback: The Taliban and Naxalites

The big achievement for most of the groups under study here has been survival, and perhaps a deal that reduces military pressure or provides limited (but welcome) policy concessions. In two cases, however, we see groups making major military and political returns from low points. The first is the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the second is the CPI-Maoist/Naxalites in central India.

The Taliban took advantage of international sanctuary, surviving leaders and cadres who escaped from its 2001–02 rout, and a new central Afghan government that was simultaneously seen as absent and predatory (and as an American puppet). The group returned first to influence and operations, and then to substantial territorial control after 2002. Within this structural context, the group was able to re-mobilize past social networks while starting to expand into new social and geographical terrain. They now operate across broad swathes of the country and are putting serious pressure on central government forces. This has been a remarkable comeback from the nadir of 2002.

The Naxalites have a vastly more complicated history.³¹ After the breaking of the 1967–1972 initial rebellion in West Bengal, there were nevertheless surviving cadres in West Bengal and sympathizers in substantial areas of India. The relatively loose organization of the Naxalite movement built in substantial factionalization already, and the geographic spread of the movement across India furthered these

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tendencies.³² However, survivors endured from both the CPI-ML and groups like the Dakshin Desh. From the 1970s onward, other small factions emerged, inspired by the Naxalite ideology. This movement remained highly fragmented and factionalized, but survived in areas of simultaneous state weakness, predatory control by local strongmen and landed elites, and extensive tribal populations. It then re-coalesced in the early 2000s, merging distinct factions into the present-day CPI-Maoist.

The return of both the Naxalites and Taliban bears some resemblance to the survival and return of AQI after the surge in Iraq.³³ Dropping back to core areas of support on geographical and political peripheries allowed them to endure, and then put these groups in position to exploit ongoing state weakness and political exclusion. This is a transition ISIS has managed before, making it eminently possible that it can find a way to survive even devastating battlefield setbacks.

ISIS Scenarios

This empirical record suggests that ISIS will be very difficult to decisively destroy. The groups I examine in South Asia continue to fight, went down fighting, or cut some kind of deal only after sustained blends of combat and negotiation. Based on this evidence, I identify and discuss three possible outcomes for ISIS.

1. Fighting to the Death

One possible scenario is that ISIS is annihilated through brute-force conventional warfare that uses contained, sealed battle lines to prevent breakouts or escape by ISIS forces. The model here is the destruction of the LTTE in the 2006–2009 “Eelam War IV” that destroyed the group. What are preconditions for this outcome? Above all, ISIS forces need to be surrounded and attrited along a continuous front with few or no avenues for escape or breakouts.

This seems already to be an unlikely trajectory, as ISIS guerrilla and terrorist operations have continued in Anbar province and Baghdad, rather than its cadres being sealed off behind a continuous battlefront. ISIS’ battle lines are not surrounded on all sides by a tightly coherent military force that is able to prevent escapes or continued guerrilla operations. The gaps and disagreements among Syrian Kurdish, Iraqi Kurdish, Syrian government, Syrian rebel, Iraqi government, and American combat forces suggest that there will be, and already are, extensive opportunities for ISIS to avoid the encirclement-and-annihilation fate of the LTTE.

2. Containment and Possible Collapse

A less dramatic outcome is that ISIS retains control of substantial territory, but is put under sustained pressure along fluid conventional lines that blend into guerrilla and terrorist operations. Taking advantage of the fractured array of armed

actors around it and creatively using withdrawals and strategic diversions, the group could survive with some degree of territorial control. ISIS would use guerrilla and terror attacks in areas it has lost, as well as against Shia and Kurdish civilian populations, even as recurrent anti-ISIS offensives determine where it can hold territory.

In this scenario, ISIS would operate like the LTTE during Eelam Wars II and III of the 1990s–early 2000s, able to hold onto some territory even in the face of regular counterinsurgent offensives by strategically retreating, counterattacking, and hitting behind enemy lines with a variety of tactics. The 1960s–70s CPB in Burma is another useful analogy: the group ideologically radicalized under the influence of the Cultural Revolution and launched a no-holds-barred bid for capturing the state. Like ISIS, it also attempted to manipulate and eventually absorb or purge other armed groups. While it was pushed back, it continued to be a potent force for another fifteen years, and eventually collapsed because of internal tensions rather than military defeat. In both cases, fighters and leaders continued to battle despite very long odds and a shifting conventional balance.

It is possible such containment could trigger internal splits and disarray as it became clear that ISIS's political project was doomed to failure, as occurred with the CPB's decline and collapse. Internal tensions and contradictions between leadership cadres and the local populations they rule and extract from are where such splits are most likely. However, the KNU, LTTE, and KIO cases show that armed groups can conventionally hold territory and maintain basic organizational integrity long after their decline begins.

What are the preconditions for containment? The most important is that anti-ISIS forces are insufficiently capable, resolved, or coordinated to roll the organization back decisively, but can keep it bottled up without major breakouts or counter-offensives. ISIS's role as an inspiration and launching base for attacks elsewhere in the world makes it very different than the groups under study here. Nevertheless, this containment result is an imaginable outcome in the near to medium term, with persistent but not decisive conventional offensives that leave ISIS in control of substantial, if shrinking, territory. Its transnational reach would need to be defended against, while hoping that the group is slowly worn down or will collapse in internal fragmentation.

What are the preconditions for containment?

3. Return to Guerrilla Conflict and Possible Comeback

The final scenario involves the elimination of ISIS conventional forces and a robust, sustained seizure of major population centers that forestalls continuing territorial control or a blend of conventional and guerrilla warfare. However, there is

not a thorough destruction of ISIS fighting cadres or tight control of remaining civilian populations. Limited state presence and the presence of ethno-sectarian armed groups in the shattered zones along the Euphrates River Valley provide opportunities for ongoing guerrilla warfare, in addition to porous borders and supportive local communities.

What are the preconditions for this outcome? Fighting cadres and leaders need to survive conventional collapse and find sanctuary either across borders or in sympathetic local communities where they can regroup. From this point, ISIS could slip into increasing marginalization, able to maintain a low level of attacks but not major influence. Like ULFA in Assam, ISIS could retain political and military relevance for a long time, but not pose a serious threat, possibly eventually fading away.³⁴

Yet, it could instead take the path of the Taliban and Naxalites—and, crucially, its own 2009–2012 history—by taking advantage of absent, incompetent, and/or predatory state presence to slowly rebuild. Avoiding this outcome requires imposing coherent counterinsurgent or state authority across major population centers supported by at least some form of political order and governance that can prevent a resurgence. As difficult as pushing back ISIS will be, overcoming the extraordinary political-military fragmentation in ISIS' areas of operation is a far more daunting policy challenge.

It Ain't Over ...

These are obviously only suggestive scenarios based on imperfect comparisons. Nevertheless, scenarios two (containment and possible collapse) and three (return to guerilla conflict and possible comeback) seem far more plausible than a rapid collapse.³⁵ This poses a serious challenge for U.S. policymakers because of ISIS's transnational capabilities, which make its survival and especially enduring territorial presence deeply dangerous. This threat is likely to endure into the foreseeable future. Policymakers and the public should prepare for a long, grinding conflict, despite ISIS's fall from its high-water mark.

The likelihood of an enduring ISIS presence therefore calls for a clear-eyed view of the future of U.S. security policy in the Middle East, one that will require either ongoing but limited "containment"³⁶ efforts or a dramatic retrenchment from the region.³⁷ If history is a reliable guide, ISIS is unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

Notes

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9. Thanks to James Dobbin for this phrase.
10. On terrorist groups, see Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
11. This excludes important groups that do not fall into these criterion, such as the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) in Karachi, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi in Pakistan, the caste armies of Bihar, the CPM and Trinamool in West Bengal, and the splinter successors of the Communist Party of Burma like the MNDAA and UWSA.
12. I thus do not include the conflicts in Manipur and the Indian Punjab.
13. Richard Sisson and Leo E Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Michael Hutt, *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

14. Stathis Kalyvas, "Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and If Yes, What Are the Implications?" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 (2015), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/442>.
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16. The JVP also launched a revolt in 1971 that posed a less severe challenge than the 1987-1990 revolt.
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21. Boudreau, Vincent. *Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Yoshihiro Nakanishi, *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution: The State and Military in Burma, 1962-1988* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).
22. Implementation is still pending in the case of the NSCN-IM.
23. The JVP returned to electoral politics in the 1990s, but without a military wing.
24. Manoj Joshi, *The Lost Rebellion: Kashmir in the Nineties* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999); and Sumantra Bose, *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) note that Pakistan intentionally reduced its support for the JKLF. The JVP had no external support.
25. Gordon Weiss, *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers* (London: Bodley Head, 2011).
26. Martin J. Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 2nd edition (London: Zed Books, 1999); Mary P. Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation and Coexistence* (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).
27. See Tom Kramer, *The United Wa State Party: Narco-Army or Ethnic Nationalist Party?* (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007); Renaud Egreteau, "Burma's Militias: Between Insurgency and Maintaining Order," in *Armed Militias of South Asia: Fundamentalists, Maoists and Separatists*, edited by Laurent Gayer and Christopher Jaffrelot, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): 113–34; John Buchanan, *Militias in Myanmar* (Asia Foundation, 2016) on the modern configurations of power along border areas.
28. Factions that later became the TTP had multiple rounds of talks and often signed ceasefire deals, and in 2013 Nawaz Sharif attempted direct negotiations. The Andhra Pradesh state government opened lines of talks with the Naxalites in 2004-5, the CPB briefly came to the table in the early 1960s and early 1980s, the JVP had a number of contacts with elite politicians in 1987-1988, and the LTTE was on ceasefire with Colombo during 1994-5 and 2002-6.
29. A key exception to this pattern in the broader South Asian environment is the Communist Party of Nepal.

30. Paul Staniland, "Militias, Ideology, and the State," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 770-793, offers a framework for understanding how governments assess the politics of armed groups.
31. Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalites and Their Ideology*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
32. Chakrabarty, *Communism in India*.
33. Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).
34. ULFA launches occasional attacks on security forces, tries to build alliances with other insurgent groups in the Northeast, and maintains a hard-line political stance. It is militarily a shadow of its 1990 self, but still matters in Assam.
35. Similar conclusions can be found in Fishman, *The Master Plan*; Clarke, Colin P., Kimberly Jackson, Patrick B. Johnston, Eric Robinson and Howard Shatz, *Financial Futures of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Findings from a RAND Corporation Workshop* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017); William McCants and Craig Whiteside, "The Islamic State's Coming Rural Revival," *Brookings Institution*, October 25, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/10/25/the-islamic-states-coming-rural-revival/>.
36. Stephen Biddle and Jacob Shapiro, "America Can't Do Much About ISIS," *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/isis-containment-civil-war/478725/>
37. Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).