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**ROUTINE ACTIVITY THEORY IN ANALYZING AND
PREDICTING ISIL's RESURGENCE**

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Abstract

After the Caliphate of ISIL was destroyed concerns arose on whether the group is still an evident threat. Using criminological thinking through Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory to discuss the potential for a resurgence of ISIL in Syria and Iraq. Routine activity theory's model includes three parts: a motivated offender, a suitable target and a lack of guardianship (control or supervision). For the purpose of this research, ISIL is the motivated offender, whose targets are

not controlled and the lack of guardianship are U.S. troops leaving who act as a deterrent. Information provided below will be grounded in this theory and will outline where attacks have taken place. Analysis of open-source data and the ACLED dataset concluded that announcement and implementations of U.S. troop withdrawal is correlated to an uptick in ISIL attacks.

Introduction

Determining if the resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) will emerge will be analyzed using criminological thinking. Specifically, Cohen and Felson's (1979) Routine activity theory (RAT). Routine activity theory encompasses three parts to why criminal activity occurs. There is a motivated offender, a suitable target, and a lack of guardianship (control or supervision) (Wikstrom, 2009). For this study, ISIL is the motivated offender, their targets are not unambiguous within Syria and Iraq and the lack of guardianship (control or supervision) is U.S. troops whose presence has ultimately acted as a deterrent in the prevention of the attacks. The purpose of grounding this study, in theory, is to review the possibility of a resurgence and offer recommendations on a preventative level rather than a reactive one. The following will be addressed the historical timeline of ISIL, the cohesive understanding of Routine Activity Theory and how other scholars have used this theory in reference to terrorism, data analysis of troop withdrawal and attacks in Iraq and Syria, policy recommendations, and limitations to this research.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant also referred to as IS, ISIS or Daesh is a terrorist organization that emerged in 2004. The group's founder is Abu Musab al Zarqawi (WC, 2020). Though the creation of the group was in 2004 they began to fade in 2007 with the rise of U.S. troops in Iraq, but then in 2011, the group began to remerge (WC, 2020). The group exploited the conflicts in Syria and tensions in Iraq. ISIL's mission is to solidify and expand its control of

territories that were once ruled by early Muslim caliphs and to govern the territory through the strict interpretation of Sharia law (DNI, 2020). Their secondary mission is to provoke an apocalyptic war against the West that they believe will fulfill Islamic Prophecy (Cafarella, 2019). The extremist armed group ISIL has committed widespread and systematic abuse in Syria, and Iraq. Although, ISIL has also claimed responsibility for attacks in other countries including, Afghanistan, Egypt, France, Indonesia, and the UK (HRW, 2020). ISIL claimed its caliphate in June of 2014 after it seized Mosul and by the end of that year the group was at their territorial peak (Chulov, 2019). The U.S. began ground operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria in December 2014. The U.S. led intervention threatened ISIS' religious legitimacy. The U.S. set out to destroy the physical caliphate which threatened ISIS' ability to remain and expand (Cafarella et al., 2019). By December 2017 ISIS had lost about 95 percent of its territory including its two biggest properties, Mosul, Iraq, and Raqqa in Syria (WC, 2020). It was in 2019 when ISIL was forced out of the last land space they claimed, in the Syrian desert the town of Baghuz (Chulov, 2019) After the caliphate of ISIL was destroyed concerns arose on whether this terrorist organization would be an ongoing threat. Since 2019, fighters have regrouped and continue to have financial means to carry out attacks due to generating money through smuggling and extortion (Falk, 2020). Evidence of attacks between 2018 and 2020 by lone wolves, small groups working in ISIL's name, and recent ISIL attacks raises the resurgence questions for U.S. policyholders.

The group's response to the loss of their caliphate is, It is God's Will. God is punishing or testing the caliphate by afflicting it with trials (Chulov, 2019). ISIL is telling their supporters to double down on their devotion because that is what God would want (Chulov, 2019). Although the caliphate has been destroyed, fears of a resurgence of the group have been discussed. The removal of U.S. troops means more potential on a theoretical perspective for an uptick in terrorist

activity. Former United States Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had warned members of an international coalition that the Islam State extremist group would return if nations did not continue to contribute to the fight (Schwartz, 2018). Mr. Tillerson also states in January of 2018 that U.S. troops will remain in Syria even after the fight against the Islamic State is over and will maintain a American military presence in Syria until the complete defeat of ISIS.

Routine Activity Theory & Terrorism

Routine activity theory, first formulated by Lawrence E. Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979) is one of the most widely cited and influential theories in the fields of criminology and crime science (Miro, 2014). While other crime theories focus on the psychological or biological factors of the offender or the criminal act, the focus of routine activity is the study of crime by an event, highlighting its relation to space and time (Miro, 2014). Cohen and Felson's (1979) theory includes an offender with the capacity to commit a crime, a suitable target or victim, and finally the absence of guardians. The idea of the absence of a capable guardian is someone who can intervene to stop or impede a crime (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Hence, the central argument is that individuals are more likely to be a victim of an attack if they encounter a motivated offender in a time/space where there are no guardians present. This theory has typically been used to explain the variation of victims, offenders, and the crime, i.e., moreover to a criminal justice perspective. The use of criminological theory to understand the process of why terrorism occurs and ways to prevent it is not typically done. Over the last few years, researchers have been applying environmental criminology theories to explain why this is happening. Cohen and Felson's (1979) theory refer to routine activities as a generalized pattern of social activities in society. The ideology is that the structure of routines in society cause changes that influence criminal activity to occur.

The following scholars have used Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory as an approach to understanding terrorist activities in certain regions. Camille Laurence Pauline Bigot (2017) used this theory along with working with Interpol, taking note of terror attacks and counter-terrorism operations to quantify the data and mathematically model routine activity theory to predict terror patterns. This paper will outline a similar thought pattern to Bigot's with limitations in place due to the inability to work with Interpol or any other federal enforcement. Bigot's (2017) conclusion is that routine activity theory is a valuable insight into terrorism as figures of the motivated offender, the capable guardian, and suitable target emerge.

Parkin and Freilich (2015) used routine activities theory and lifestyle theory to account for the variation between the victims of fatal ideologically motivated attacks, the victims of non-ideologically motivated homicide incidents committed by far-right extremists in the United States. Parkin and Freilich (2015) find concluded that Routine Activity Theory and Lifestyle theory can account for homicide victims committed by far-right extremists.

Researcher Clairissa Breen (2019) also explored the subcategory of routine activity theory, control, and learning theory to determine if criminological perspectives can deliver greater insight into alleviating terrorist activity. Utilizing routine activities theory and any other criminological theory can explain terrorism and terrorist activity. Terrorism is not completely different from crimes that influenced these theoretical frameworks to be studied. As Breen (2019) notes, criminologists have a long history of operationalizing and empirically testing theories to identify and explain criminal behavior. Therefore, as Breen (2019) states these same theories can offer great insight into terrorist behavior and terrorism in general. The following section will outline the announcement of troop withdrawals in Syria and Iraq and data that is correlated to any terrorist

attacks on individuals within these States. Keeping in mind that the motivated offender is ISIL, and the removal of troops is the supervision that acts as a deterrent against the crime.

Data findings & Methods

This study's unit of analysis is troop withdrawal and its linkage to attacks in Iraq and Syria. The population of the study includes injuries and casualties and ISIL claimed terrorist attacks between January 2018 and December 1st, 2020. The information discussed will be pulled from news articles referencing the timeline of troop withdrawal following ISIL-claimed attacks. Following that, there will be an analysis of ACLED datasets to confirm if beyond these news articles attacks have increased. For these to be deemed ISIL attacks reference to claim in the articles and filtering in the databases to determine this.

Open Source data in Iraq

Discussions on troop withdrawal from Iraq began in December 2019 but numbers were unclear on exactly how many troops would be withdrawn. The reasoning behind the troop withdrawal decision is to leave the battle against the Islamic State militant for local forces (Ryan, 2020). Although, the uptick in ISIL-claimed cases causes an argument for the United States intelligence community to review their strategic plan in lowering the number of troops in this state. ISIL as the motivated offender has proven a commitment that even with their caliphate destroyed, they have an intention to resurface and as noted prior announced to their followers that this is the time to emphasize their devotion to the cause.

May of 2020, in Baghdad, Iraq a man wearing an explosive vest emerged from a car and walked toward the gates of the intelligence building in Iraq, he ignored the guard's warnings and blew himself up wounding three security personnel (Abdul-Zahra et al., 2020). Three days after this attack a three-pronged coordinated attack killed ten Iraqi militia fighters in the northern

province, which has been the deadliest and most complex operation in months (Abdul-Zahara et al., 2020). As of June 2020, there were 5,200 troops in Iraq. On June 10th, 2020 an attack carried out by ISIS was confirmed during the growing pressure for the United States to reduce its military presence in Iraq. American and Iraqi negotiators began a round of strategic talks on Thursday on how to respond to ISIL's quiet resurgence (Rubin et al., 2020).

In September of 2020, President Trump announced the cutting of troop amounts in Iraq in half to roughly 3,000 (Schmitt, 2020). Since this announcement, attacks by ISIL have increased in Iraq. ISIS killed eight people in an attack in northern Iraq on November 21st, 2020 by using a car bomb (Jawad, 2020). It has been assessed that in recent months ISIS militants have stepped up attacks in the north and eastern provinces of Iraq also referred to as the *Triangle of Death* (Jawad, 2020). In November 2020 Iraqi foreign minister, Fuad Hussein warned of the increasing risks of ISIS in the country and articulated that their activities have escalated in the last few months (Hawar News, 2020). ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack on November 29, 2020, on the Siniya oil refinery in northern Iraq using two rockets.

Mr. Hussein's message follows Mr. Tillerson's analysis that the U.S. should not withdraw troops rashly until there is complete reassurance that the group has been defeated.

Iraqi military officials state that ISIS is shifting from local intimidation to more complex attacks as operations previously focused on the assassination of local officials. Now the group is carrying out more bomb attacks, shooting, and ambushing of the police and military (Abdul-Zahara et al., 2020). Although, there are other factors to consider in the uptick of attacks such as the number of Iraqi military personnel on duty due to COVID-19 prevention methods, the territorial disputes between Baghdad and authorities from the North Kurdish zone has left parts without law

enforcement. But Abdul-Zahara et al. (2020) highlight that the uptick also coincides with a pullout of the U.S.-led coalition forces from bases in western Iraq.

Syria

The United States had 2,000 ground troops in northern and eastern Syria (Landler et al., 2018). On December 19, 2018, President Trump announces his intent to withdraw 2,000 U.S forces from Syria. Trump's decision quoting the House Democratic Leader, Nancy Pelosi, "The president acted out of personal or political objectives rather than national security interests." General Joseph Votel the outgoing commander of U.S. Central Command warns Congress that ISIL is lying in wait for a resurgence, they are hiding in camps for internally displaced peoples and going in remote areas waiting for the right time to resurge he said in his testimony to the House Armed Services Committee (WC, 2020). Further, the purpose of staying in Syria according to Brett McGurk is to ensure stability can be maintained in this area even if it seems the physical space has been defeated. Military commanders feared in 2018 that a hasty withdrawal would jeopardize the territorial gains against the Islamic State by the U.S. and its coalition partners (Landler et al., 2018). Votel's concerns were verified as four Americans among 19 people in Syria were killed on January 16, 2019, a few weeks after President Trump announced the withdrawal of troops from Syria (Schmitt et al., 2019). February 22, 2019, the U.S announces that 400 troops will remain in Syria to prevent the resurgences of ISIS (WC, 2020). As of December 2020, there are roughly 500 troops in northeast Syria assisting local Syrian Kurdish allies in combatting the remaining ISIL fighters (Schmitt, 2020).

ISIL is regaining strength in Iraq and Syria by conducting guerilla attacks across Iraq and Syria, retooling its financial networks, and targeting recruits (Schmitt et al., 2019). Data presented in 2019 indicates there are roughly 18,000 remaining ISIL fighters in Iraq and Syria who are split

into sleep cells and strike teams. These individuals have carried out sniper attacks, ambushes, kidnappings, and assassinations against security forces and community leaders (Schmitt et al., 2020). As of September 2020, General McKenzie and other American Officials state the U.S. can afford to withdraw troops for Iraq and Syria because local forces are more able to counter ISIL on their own with some American technical, intelligence, and logistical help (Schmitt, 2020). Although the uptick in attacks and concerns from Mr. Hussein's projections in Iraq should raise concerns for Syrian officials as well.

Datasets via ACLED

Data analyzed from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is collected by a range of researchers who use the information primarily from secondary sources and code it according to ACLED's codebook. The data is collected each week after individual researchers have scrutinized information from available reports which are then aggregated and revised by the first coding reviewer. This is then investigated, and cross-checked by the second reviewer and the event notes and details are inspected by the third and final reviewer.

This database presumes that although their caliphate has been destroyed it has not lost its influence of potential for global disruption (Pavlik, 2019). The presumptions for this paper have been that ISIS will resurface in Syria and Iraq and the findings of attacks that were presented arguments in favor of this assumption. But the other side of the argument is that IS activity has globally expanded to include a presence across dozens of countries worldwide (Pavlik, 2019). The following chart by Melissa Pavlik argues in favor of the original argument of this paper, which is that the resurgence of ISIL is more likely to occur due to lack of troop withdrawal.

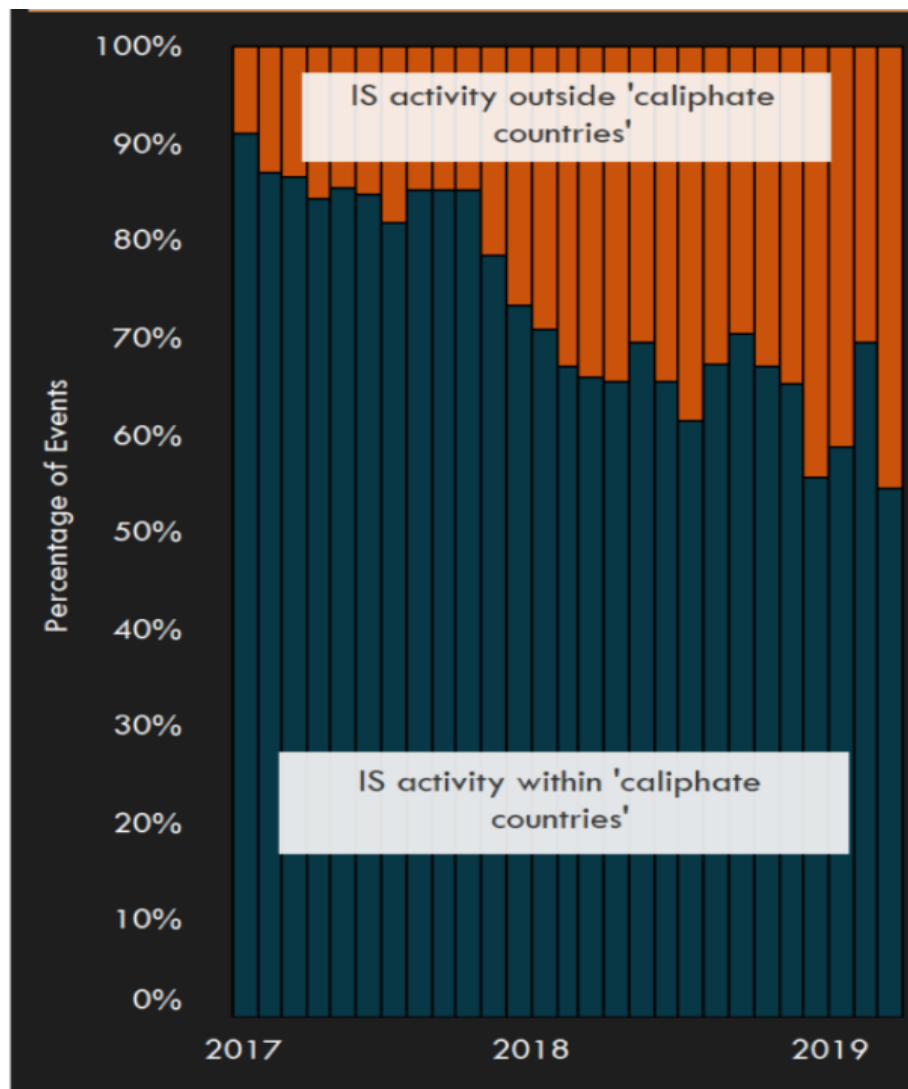


Figure 1 IS activity with Syria and Iraq 'caliphate countries' vs. IS activity globally

Looking at the percentage of events within the caliphate countries even after IS' caliphate was destroyed their activity began to subside minimally and in 2019 activity spiked again which is right after the U.S. announced troop withdrawal in Syria and Iraq. Following this graph and data referenced before using open sources, the ACLED dataset confirmed in May 2020, a continued rise of ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria. In Syria, ISIS attacks increased in April, the attacks were more than double the number of attacks reported in March. During the first week in May, five ISIS-claimed attacks were reported and ACLED states these attacks are more likely to continue in

the coming weeks. Also, confirmation for the ACLED database shows that IS’ current presence is now primarily concentrated in northeast Iraq. As for Syria, IS attacks were concentrated in central Syria between Homs and Deir-ez-Zor but are also expanding and have been present in Hama, Raqqa, and Dar’a. The following chart from ACLED displays the number of events and fatalities reported of IS activity between January 2019 – Jun 2020 in Iraq.

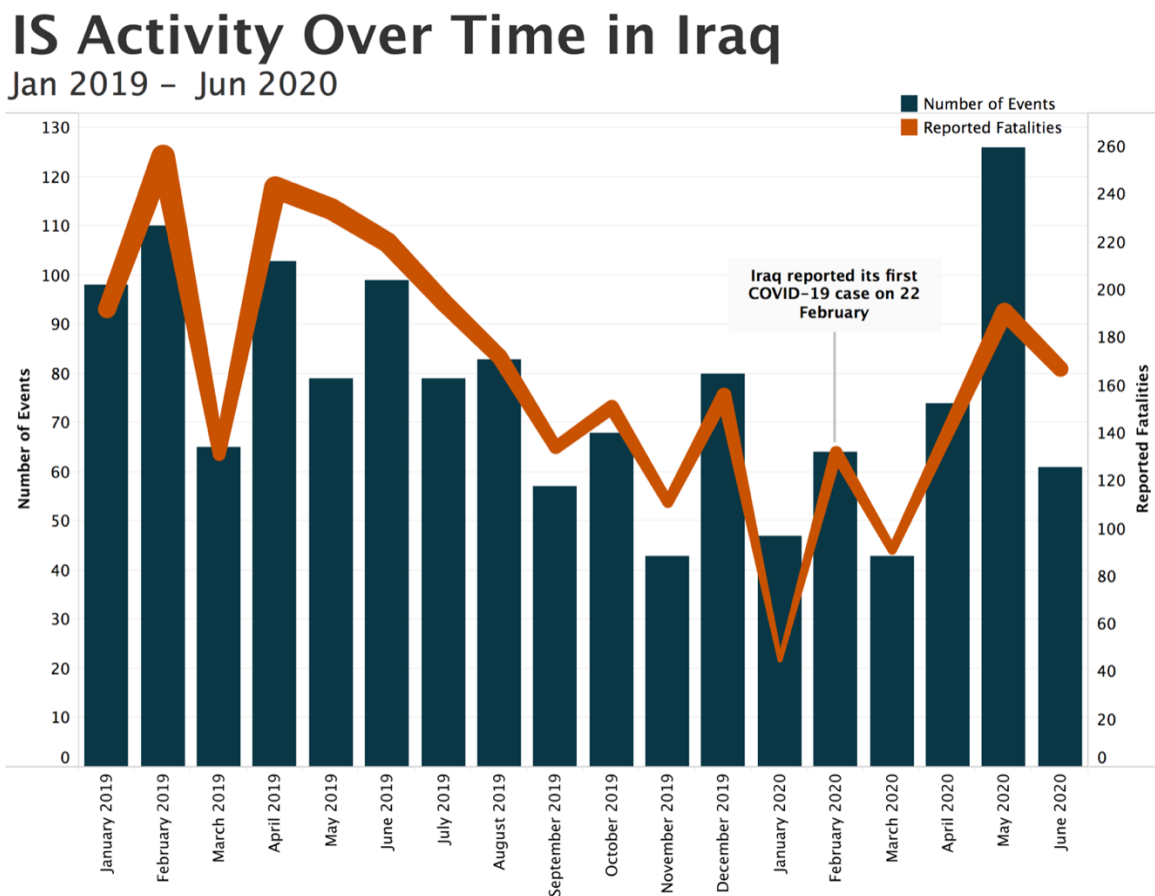


Figure 2. Events & Fatalities by ISIS between Jan. 2019- June 2020 in Iraq.

This dataset backs the ideology that ISIL is a motivated offender who with a lack of guardianship will exploit that opportunity and will increase their attacks. The assumptions in this paper did not take into account the potential impact of COVID-19 and upticks in attacks. Prior data from open source did mention that as of May 2020 there has been an increase in attacks due

to the lack of guards and soldiers being posted for social distancing measures. It seems that attacks declined when COVID-19 was reported in Iraq with a reoccurrence of attacks in May. Since the end of their caliphate, the previously discussed attacks have raised fears that the jihadi group could regroup and recover if western forces leave the region (Rose, 2019). As Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory states, ISIL is a motivated offender who has been forced into sleep cells and recruitment via displaced persons camps. The announcement of complete U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria correlated to an attack a few weeks later and a continuation of attacks since. This does raise further questions for the United States military such as will they be forced into staying in these States forever? What constitutes complete faith that the group has been abolished?

Policy Recommendations

Connable et al. (2020) outline four policy recommendations; Continue to actively support the development of stability and democracy in Iraq, select an optimal risk-benefit balance between no withdrawal and limited withdrawal, and to maintain an enduring advisory mission to help develop Iraq's security forces. These policy recommendations are crucial as the previous data analysis has represented an uptick in attacks in correlation to troop withdrawal. The United States must develop a long-term strategic plan to defeat ISIS. The United States State Department plan for the 2018-2022 strategic plan is a long-term strategic plan that should be updated as the group's movements continue to increase. Prioritizing engagement and assistance in stabilizing areas liberated by ISIS is crucial to ensure this group does not reclaim territorial hold. A focal approach on the triangle of death should be prioritized as the data presented shows an increase in attacks occurring primarily in northern and eastern Iraq. Further, a brief detail was discussed that the U.S. should not stay in Syria and Iraq forever, local authorities are now trained and capable of defending their own states. Therefore, if complete troop withdrawal is done shortly, the U.S. can always

return with congressional authorization. Policies must also focus on the humanitarian crisis that is occurring, working with local and global partners to address the instability and poverty of the States to ensure individuals do not resort to ISIS as means of living. Any policies discussed and implemented must keep in mind international law and international humanitarian law.

Limitations

For this research project is the projected data that was consumed has the potential to be an error because assumptions can be made that the attacks were done by ISIL. Also, the lack of security and relying on open-source data leaves room for faulty research. Lack of ethics and inability to question policyholders and others on their hypothesis. The primary use of data was open source from the collection of news articles through a filtered search and by google alerts. The main source of confirming this data was through the ACLED dataset which limited the prove a definitive correlation of an uptick in attacks with the announcement and enactment of troop withdrawal. The lack of ethics in the ability to interview and produce survey also puts limits to this study. Heavy reliance was on open source.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the removal of troops coincides with an uptick in attacks claimed by ISIS. Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory can be used for policymakers in arguing for the current continued stay of U.S. troops in Syria and Iraq as the group is still motivated and has no plan of going anywhere any time soon. The data found showed no clear target victim for ISIS therefore their targets are random and arguably the attacks are to highlight their resurgence as a group and instill fear. Moreover, the main assumption was that ISIS would increase their attacks due to troop withdrawal in Syria and Iraq not taking into account the attacks in other regions across the globe nor the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is a key assumption that

was not brought to thought on its correlation to increased attacks. The pandemic has played a role in forcing the international coalition to suspend its training of Iraqi soldiers to prevent outbreaks among troops which emphasized the uptick in attacks that were seen in the ACLED figure two graph. The back argument that U.S. troops can leave because they may not be needed as General McKenzie noted, local forces have the capabilities to counter the group. The caliphate is destroyed but the organization itself has yet to be defeated. The U.S. must ensure to not make the mistake of deprioritizing ISIS as an enemy and should continue to regulate and ensure policy implementations such as the ones discussed are carried out.

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