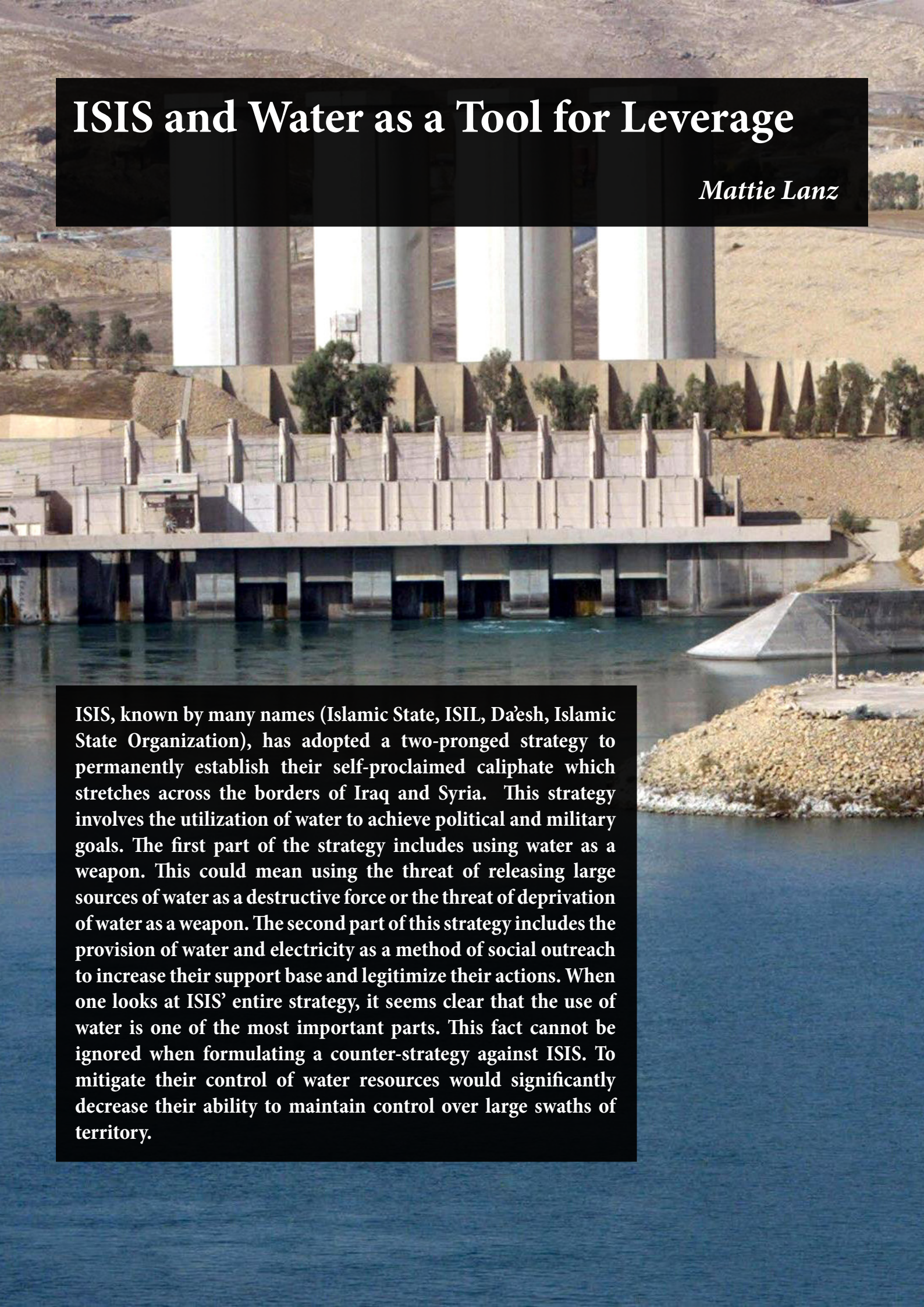


ISIS and Water as a Tool for Leverage

Mattie Lanz



ISIS, known by many names (Islamic State, ISIL, Da'esh, Islamic State Organization), has adopted a two-pronged strategy to permanently establish their self-proclaimed caliphate which stretches across the borders of Iraq and Syria. This strategy involves the utilization of water to achieve political and military goals. The first part of the strategy includes using water as a weapon. This could mean using the threat of releasing large sources of water as a destructive force or the threat of deprivation of water as a weapon. The second part of this strategy includes the provision of water and electricity as a method of social outreach to increase their support base and legitimize their actions. When one looks at ISIS' entire strategy, it seems clear that the use of water is one of the most important parts. This fact cannot be ignored when formulating a counter-strategy against ISIS. To mitigate their control of water resources would significantly decrease their ability to maintain control over large swaths of territory.

Water as a Weapon

When one thinks of traditional weapons of war, water is typically not the first thing to come to mind. ISIS is completely changing this, becoming famous for their use of water and water infrastructure as a way to achieve submission or to force out opposition forces. They realized that whoever controls water resources controls both the cities and the countryside, especially in arid environments. Additionally, much of Iraq's infrastructure was not rebuilt following the 2003 U.S. invasion, making it a target capable of inflicting enormous damage.

ISIS began its offensive in Syria, working their way down the Euphrates River and into Iraq.¹ Their most important military move in this advance was taking the Nuaymiyah Dam² near Fallujah and diverting large amounts of water by closing the dam's floodgates, causing severe flooding upstream. This flushed out the armed forces upstream from their locations as well as around 60,000 civilians who were forced to abandon their homes and livelihoods. By diverting the water, ISIS also deprived the Shi'a population downstream of their water supply. Their use of the Fallujah Dam set a precedent that caused the Iraqi government and coalition forces to focus on securing dams and water supplies, fearing ISIS would continue to utilize similar tactics throughout Iraq.



ISIS militants have also heavily targeted the Mosul Dam, but were only able to control it for a short

time before coalition air strikes pushed them out. Controlling this dam would be a huge victory for ISIS as its destruction has the potential to cause massive damage. Having the threat of the dam in their arsenal would give them enormous leverage in any negotiations.

Throughout their Anbar offensive, upwards of 56 bridges have been destroyed in the Diyala, Anbar, Salahddin, and Nineveh provinces, either intentionally destroyed by ISIS or indirectly as a result of conflict. Many bridges were destroyed to prevent the Iraqi Army from crossing rivers that would bring them closer to ISIS positions, specifically on the road to Mosul.

There have also been instances of destroying water infrastructure and poisoning the water supply. In Shingal province, in their assault on the Yezidi population, ISIS removed pipes that delivered water³ to the population and cut wires that brought electricity. In the northern district of Balad, south of Tikrit in Iraq, ISIS reportedly poisoned the water supply with crude oil⁴, rendering it undrinkable. They have also been known to cut off the water supply to cities who do not comply with their demands. The most recent example of this occurred in December 2014 when the ar-Roz river was prevented from reaching Billoz in the Diyala province.

Social Outreach in the 'Islamic State'

ISIS has implemented a detailed plan for social outreach⁵ in their self-proclaimed caliphate that includes a cabinet of ministers which is in charge of the treasury, transport, security, prisoners, and war. They are responsible for making sure citizens of the 'Islamic State' receive what is due to them, including water resources. This has included digging wells in villages using their own funds, maintaining existing water infrastructure, and rebuilding where needed.

In Syria, ISIS controls the Tishrin and Taqba dams,

1. Jermy Ashkenas, Archie Tse, Derek Watkins and Karen Yourish, "A Rogue State Along Two Rivers", New York Times, July 3, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/03/world/middleeast/syria-iraq-isis-rogue-state-along-two-rivers.html?_r=1

2. Paul Mutter, "Dam Warfare - Floods as weapons, from ancient times until Iraq today", Jul 9, 2014. <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/dam-warfare-3da6ee24518a>

3. Judit Neurink, "Kurdish official: ISIS Capture of Shingal was

part of Arabization campaign", Rudaw, December 29, 2014. <http://rudaw.net/english/interview/29122014>

4. Abdelhak Mamoun, "ISIS poisons drinking water with crude oil in Balad district", Iraqi News, December 3, 2014. <http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/isis-poisons-drinking-water-crude-oil-balad-district/>

5. Elliot Friedland, Special Report: The Islamic State, Clarion Project, May 10, 2015. <http://www.clarionproject.org/sites/default/files/islamic-state-isis-isil-factsheet-1.pdf>



both upstream of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, initially using them to provide increased electricity and water supplies to the residents of Raqqa who had previously been living with just a few hours of water and electricity per day. When they established their capital in Raqqa, ISIS began running the dams at full power⁶ in order to increase the water and electricity available in the city. Since then, however, ISIS's ability to provide has decreased significantly and the city of Raqqa has returned to the state it was in before ISIS arrived.

Originally, their ability to provide for the people earned them support and gave them some legitimacy. Now, however, their social projects are failing and they are quickly losing support. There are currently severe water shortages in Mosul and Raqqa.⁷ In Raqqa, infrastructure has been severely damaged by government and coalition airstrikes. In Mosul, citizens have been forced to dig their own wells which is still no guarantee of fresh water. The number of patients admitted to hospitals as a result of water poisoning continues to increase and there seems to be no solution.

Conclusion

As ISIS continues to utilize the water infrastructure of Syria and Iraq as a weapon, they are knowingly sending the region into greater peril. As stated previously, this part of their strategy cannot be ignored. There are already severe ongoing humanitarian crises in both Syria and Iraq and the destruction of important infrastructure, as if it is nothing more than a grenade from their arsenal, will only exacerbate these crises.

ISIS' goal is to establish its legitimacy and consolidate its hold on the land it has while continuing to expand its territory. In order to maintain what legitimacy it has established, ISIS should be able to provide the services of a state, as it has promised to do. If ISIS is unable to provide water to those living within its territory, that would be the nail on the coffin in their efforts for a state. While their utilization of water has proven effective in their land grab, the current situation within the so-called "Islamic State" is unsustainable and if it does not improve, will end in its demise.

In the second issue of its publication, Dabiq⁸, ISIS gives its readers a choice: "It's either the Islamic State

6. Abdelhak Mamoun, "ISIS poisons drinking water with crude oil in Balad district", Iraqi News, December 3, 2014. <http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/isis-poisons-drinking-water-crude-oil-balad-district/>

7. Liz Sly, "The Islamic State is failing at being a state", The Washington Post, December 25, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-islamic-state-is-failing-

[at-being-a-state/2014/12/24/bfbf8962-8092-11e4-b936-f3afa-b0155a7_story.html](http://www.dabiqmagazine.com/2014/12/24/bfbf8962-8092-11e4-b936-f3afa-b0155a7_story.html)

8. Clarion Project - Media File, "IS Magazine: Dabiq 2nd Issue, The Flood", September 10, 2014. <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/09-2014/isis-isil-islamic-state-magazine-Issue-2-the-flood.pdf>

or the flood”. This threat is a reference to the story of Noah who was saved from the giant flood because he was a true believer, while the unbelievers, who refused to heed the warnings of a man, perished. Meant as a reference to the Qu’ran, the images used in the issue also offer a visual of what it might be like to find oneself on the receiving end of one of ISIS’s artificial floods. In her new book, Loretta Napoleoni appropriately calls ISIS the “Islamist Phoenix”. Taking into account the rise of ISIS, from the ashes of Iraq and Syria to become one of, if not the, most feared and successful terrorist organizations in the world, Ms. Napoleoni is quite right in her decision to equate ISIS with a bird that is repeatedly reborn from the ashes of its predecessor. Their recognition of the importance water plays in the region has provided them the military power that they needed in order to establish themselves as a contender in the region, rising from a previous unknown to a household name in a matter of days.

By Mattie Lanz

Mattie Lanz works at Center for Maghreb Studies in Tunis. She attended Middle East Technical University and currently lives in Ankara, Turkey.



Kurdish peshmerga forces stand guard near Mosul dam at the town of Chamibarakat outside Mosul, Iraq.