On the very day of the proclamation of the “Caliphate”, on 29 June 2014, the so-called Islamic State (IS) published a video in English, through one of its official media channels, titled “The End of Sykes-Picot”. In this sophisticated video, a Chilean-Norwegian militant showed and narrated the destruction of a border crossing between Iraq and Syria as well as the hoisting of the “Caliphate”s flag. This was a highly symbolic scene with a telling title: as is well-known, the so-called Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret convention that had been signed between the United Kingdom and France in May 1916 to divide the Ottoman Empire into spheres of control, and is generally held responsible for establishing the current state borders of the Middle East. Through the destruction of the border, IS sent a powerful, well-crafted message: it was a transnational group that was breaking borders drafted by foreign imperial powers and setting up its own “state”.

Naturally, the border is not only important for the narrative and propaganda of the armed group. In fact, the border between Syria and Iraq has long played an important role as a logistical hub for IS and other armed groups. The vastness of the desert and loose government control makes the porous border an ideal area for illicit crossing and activity. At the time of writing, IS fighters are held up in its last tiny enclave in the Syrian village of Baghuz, just a few hundred meters from the border with Iraq, with the organization having lost 99% of the territory that it once controlled. From a jihadist proto-state with expansionist ambitions1, the group has returned to its roots as a clandestine guerrilla group engaging in local terrorist activities.

Although it is rather difficult to predict what will happen in the region2, if the past offers any insight it is that the “Syraq” border could continue to be used as a staging area.
by the Islamic State and possibly other terrorist groups from which to wage a smaller-scale insurgency.

Between 2009 and 2013, the Islamic State, which was then known as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), had been severely weakened and its capabilities degraded. The group however managed to resist in small pockets inside Iraq and continued to engage in an insurgency campaign that featured the assassinations of local Sunni leaders and members of the Iraqi security forces. With the eruption of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, its leadership saw a chance to rise again. The porousness of the Syrian-Iraqi border and the power vacuum that had ensued following the break-out of the civil war played a key role in this respect. IS fighters moved to Syria to build support and draw fighters to its cause. In January 2014, once it had mustered enough forces, its mujahedeen managed to capture Raqqa from the Syrian rebel forces, turning the city – their new de facto capital – and the surrounding area into a logistical area for the operations that would be launched into neighbouring Iraq. From there, Islamic State fighters targeted Iraqi Army border outposts and Iraqi towns, ultimately capturing Mosul in June 2014.

It was in this resource-rich space (as there are large oil and gas fields around the Euphrates river valley in Syria) that the Islamic State established its roots and consolidated power. There, it recruited and attracted fighters, enjoyed the support of parts of the Sunni population, and prepared its future offensives. Its fighters captured weapons and vehicles from other rebels, Syrian and Iraqi positions, amassing an enormous amount of war material. In other words, the group prospered in either completely ungoverned or weakly governed areas between the two states, taking advantage of the vast terrain, division between tribes and ethnicities, and low trust in the governments (and various security forces/militias).

The risk that this may occur again is elevated and there are indications that this is already happening. While the desert presents opportunities for hit and run tactics and border crossing, the towns and cities in the area could allow the Islamic State to assimilate among the population.

Evidence of guerrilla and terrorism activity like the placement of IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), raids, and targeted attacks have been already been recorded in liberated areas. For example, a CSIS report from November 2018 found that attacks against government targets have increased from 2017 to 2018 and that Iranian-backed Shia militias continue to exacerbate ethnic tensions in the Sunni-majority provinces of Iraq. Recent videos published by the Islamic State seem to back this interpretation, as jihadists are shown engaging in these kinds of operations in the Anbar and Kirkuk provinces.

According to a December 2018 study that analyzed the number and types of attack the Islamic State has carried out over the past year, IS appears to continue to operate aggressively and maintains permanent operating cells within Iraq. In particular, the report found that the areas that saw the greatest amount of activity were the Mosul and Kirkuk provinces, where the group has mounted well planned attacks and executions against Iraqi security forces, local leaders, and Shia militiamen. It should be noted, however, that the operational tempo registered was lower compared to the previous years, signifying a certain degradation in capability and manpower. Similarly, in Syria, the group recently launched a deadly suicide attack on US forces in Manbij, in the north of the country. The attack killed at least 14 people, including four Americans, in a Kurdish-held town that was largely considered to be secure.

In general, suicide bombing has played and may continue to play a key role in IS future guerrilla campaign,
where high-profile terrorist attacks against civilian or government targets may be accompanied by smaller “harassment” actions against opposing military forces. In this key, the border area may serve as an important corridor through which men and supplies can be transferred.

Presently, however, the main threat to jihadist fighters operating along the “Syraq” border has come from the air. The Iraqi Air Force and the Iraqi Army’s Aviation have undergone a deep modernization process, and the two branches now field a modern force of combat and reconnaissance aircraft11. Airstrikes from Iraqi, Coalition, and Russian air forces took a heavy toll on jihadist forces operating in the open, away from cover. Furthermore, official statements from the Iraqi Air Force and the Operation Inherent Resolve spokesperson in April 2018, also revealed how the Iraqi Air Force bombed targets inside of Syria with the assistance of the Coalition’s aerial assets12. For this role, the US led Coalition has fielded a vast number of ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) and SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) aircraft that can use powerful optics to scout the desert and sensors to pick up or disrupt jihadist transmissions. 13

To cope with this technological gap, IS fighters has refined a set of tactics that are ideal for guerrilla warfare. The armed group has often mounted raids while using the cover of sandstorms, when aircraft cannot fly and use their optics and sensors. Two recent examples include an October 2018 raid in Syria that almost overran a group of American Special Forces and Marines outside of Hajin and a November 2018 raid on lines of the Kurdish-led SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) that almost resulted in the capture of Gharanij (both Hajin and Gharanij are small cities near the border crossing of Abu Bukamal). 14 These bold actions usually feature dozens of jihadists mounted on technicals (light improvised fighting vehicles) 15 and DIY-armored vehicles that offer greater firepower and mobility.

Another important tactic that has been used extensively by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is the use of tunnels. Long networks of tunnels were built in Mosul, Iraq, and Deir-Ezzor, Syria, to be used as hideouts and to allow fighters to manoeuver around the cities. The employment of tunnels has also been documented in the last strongholds of the Islamic State in Syria (next to the border with Iraq), where jihadists used suicide bombers and tunnels to hold out the Kurdish-led forces in Baghuz16.

In conclusion, what has been observed from the different waves of militancy, is that each wave tends to draw from the last one, incorporating previous networks, narratives, and connections17. This is rather troubling considering that the magnitude of the IS’s “phenomenon” that saw thousands of people travel to Iraq and Syria to join the jihadist cause, while many other sympathizers and affiliates committed terrorist attacks in the name of the Islamic State18. A lthough making predictions is always difficult, the “Syraq area” will surely be a region to monitor closely to understand the future of terrorism in the region. Political, social and economic dynamics, such as influences from different states and non-state actors in this area will greatly affect the security situation in a particular portion of the two countries that is rich in natural resources but still weak in state presence.
1. B. Lia, “Understanding Jihadi Proto-States”, Perspective on Terrorism, vol. 9, no. 4, August 2015.
8. CTC Sentinel, December 2018.
15. In particular, pick-up trucks equipped with machine guns, small calibre cannons, recoiless rifles, anti-tank weapons and artillery.