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Exorcising the ISIS— Implications for the World at large and In-Af-Pak Region in Particular



AS Chonker is a Senior Fellow in CLAWS, is pursuing research on a very current and relevant topic “Perception Management in J&K”. While doing so, he is exploring the complex interplay of human behaviour with internal and external factors in J&K through a net assessment and system analysis study in order to evolve relevant strategies for the future.

The Road to Perdition

At its peak in 2014, the self-proclaimed Islamic State ruled over approximately nine million people across Syria and Iraq—equal to the entire country of Jordan. The group collected taxes and oil revenues and provided local services—but it also doled out punishment to men who did not keep their beards the right length or women who dressed immodestly.

The extremists caught the world’s attention after online videos began to appear showing prisoners in orange jumpsuits being brutally killed, often beheaded. After the militants stormed into Mosul and took over, the West decided it was time to act.

The United States formed a coalition, which launched unrelenting airstrikes against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) positions across Syria and Iraq. Russia joined the fray. Iraqi and Syrian government forces took aim at ISIS as well in a battle that has also involved other regional players, including Turkey and Iran.

Key Points

1. The US-led coalition launched unrelenting airstrikes against ISIS. Russia joined the fray. Iraqi and Syrian government forces took aim at ISIS as well, in a battle that has also involved other regional players, including Turkey and Iran.
2. ISIS will likely be pushed out of its remaining desert hideouts and the small urban centres it controls. But defeating its ideology will be much harder.
3. Unless a stable political settlement is imposed on Syria and Iraq, the vast ungoverned spaces of today’s Middle East will simply generate another terrorist organisation. Hence the importance of demobilisation, disarmament, deradicalisation and rehabilitation cannot be ignored.
4. Attempt will be made by the ISIS cadre to exfiltrate the countries of their origin or nearby regions so that they can find sympathisers and supporters while they mingle into known surroundings.
5. Europe and Afghanistan are likely to be on the boil in the coming years.
6. Afghanistan is already witnessing ISIS in its new avatar, the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISKP).
7. China plans to create a buffer by opening up a base in Afghanistan.
8. Pakistan has had no inhibitions in utilising foreign mercenaries in Kashmir.
9. Pakistani jihadi elements could also recruit the ISIS cadre to carry out 26/11 type of attacks on Indian commercial centres.
10. By containing the jihadi ISIS mercenaries in Pakistan, India can ensure that the perpetrators become the victims of their own strategy.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

Exorcising the ISIS—Implications for the ...

In an audio message released by militants in September 2017, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi accused the Americans of using scorched earth tactics in its campaign against his group, saying the US forces had “burned the people, trees and everything on the ground.” Ignoring the severe territorial losses suffered by his group, he made indirect references to attacks in Barcelona and London’s subway that his organisation had claimed responsibility for. “Now the Americans, the Russians and the Europeans are living in terror in their countries, fearing the strikes of the mujahedeen,” al-Baghdadi is purported to have said¹. Did these words have an ominous ring, or was it just egoistic diversionary tactics that Baghdadi was employing to hit back at the coalition.

Has the ISIS been Annihilated?

The militia tanks and armoured vehicles, which paraded through the streets of Raqqa in November 2017, marked the symbolic demise of ISIS rule in the Syrian city where militants had established their de facto capital. Fighters with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) celebrated their victory over ISIS in

Raqqa, which the militants had declared as their capital in 2014. (Reuters)

Fighters from the SDF held a victory parade of sorts in Raqqa’s central Paradise Square, a space that for three years looked more like hell, as it was where ISIS carried out public beheadings. “This is a historic victory, not only for us, but the entire world,” said Jihan Ahmed of the SDF. Raqqa may have fallen and the militants may control just a fraction of the territory they did in their heyday, but by no means is ISIS defeated in either Syria or Iraq. The group’s ideology lives on.²

What Now ISIS?

With its territorial conquests having been largely reversed, it is most likely going to revert to the tactics of a brutal insurgency that made the world sit up and take notice three years ago. ISIS militants continue to have the ability to launch suicide bomb attacks in Baghdad and Damascus with devastating results. Meanwhile, regional branches of the group continue to carry out attacks in Libya and Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula as well as in Afghanistan.



ISIS will likely be pushed out of its remaining desert hideouts and the small urban centres it controls in a swath of land that straddles the Syrian and Iraqi border, and it could happen within weeks, some analysts predict. But defeating its ideology will be much harder.

Any Plans after ISIS?

Many of the conditions that led to the formation of the ISIS persist even today. Syria's civil war shows no sign of ending. Iraq is still deeply divided, with two former allies—the Kurds and Iraqi security forces—turning their guns on each other earlier this week.

Momani, a professor of political science at the Balsillie School of International Affairs. Momani believes a detailed strategy, similar to the Marshall Plan that helped rebuild Western Europe following the Second World War, is needed for Syria and Iraq. This could ensure “there are functioning local economies, so that we don't have the similar kind of desperate situation that forced many locals to turn to ISIS.”

This is now the state of Raqqa—about 80 percent of the city has been destroyed in the battle to retake it from ISIS. (Reuters)

Post-ISIS efforts also need to include “some sort of rehabilitation” for those who continue to feel



There are serious splits along sectarian, ethnic and regional lines that continue to drive instability across the Middle East, leaving the region open to the expansion of extremism. “Unfortunately, the West has no plan on what to do the day after ISIS,” said Bessma

isolated and may still harbour ISIS sympathies, Momani said. “We need to basically re-educate these populations,” she said. “In many cases, children have...grown [up] under the ideology of this terrorist organization.”

The Western media is gung-ho and says that ISIS is clearly on its last legs: two years ago, the self-proclaimed “caliphate” controlled 90,800 km² of territory in Syria and Iraq, but now it probably holds not more than a quarter of that. Most of its top leaders – including, perhaps, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its founder – are dead, its troops are decimated, ISIS’ financial revenues are down to a trickle and foreign fighters are no longer pouring into the region, but fleeing it. In spite of all this, has the world still missed the plot?

When asked a question on the issue of safe passage being provided to many ISIS fighters in the thick of battle by the author of this issue brief, during an interaction at the recently concluded Raisina Dialogue on January 17, 2018 at New Delhi, Dr. Vyacheslav Nikonov of the Russian State Duma commented that the situation was extremely delicate because of so many groups operating in the region and therefore the anti-ISIS forces are prepared to err on the positive side when it comes to allowing militants to flee with their battle loads and weapons.³

Which Are the Factions Fighting In Syria and Iraq?⁴

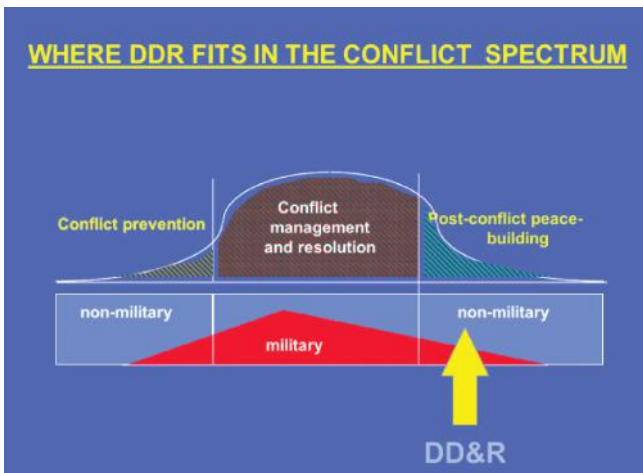
- Islamic State
 - A Sunni Islamist terror group, including tens of thousands of foreign fighters, which has moved into larger swathes of Syria.
- Syrian government
 - Bashar al-Assad is believed to have used chemical weapons against his people. His government considers all rebel groups as terrorists.
- Moderate Syrian rebels
 - Backed by the West and are known as the Free Syrian Army.
- Jabhat al-Nusra
 - An extremist rebel group affiliated with Al-Qaeda.
- Hezbollah
 - Lebanon’s Shi’ite group Hezbollah, backed by Iran, fights with the Syrian army.

The Middle East Conundrum



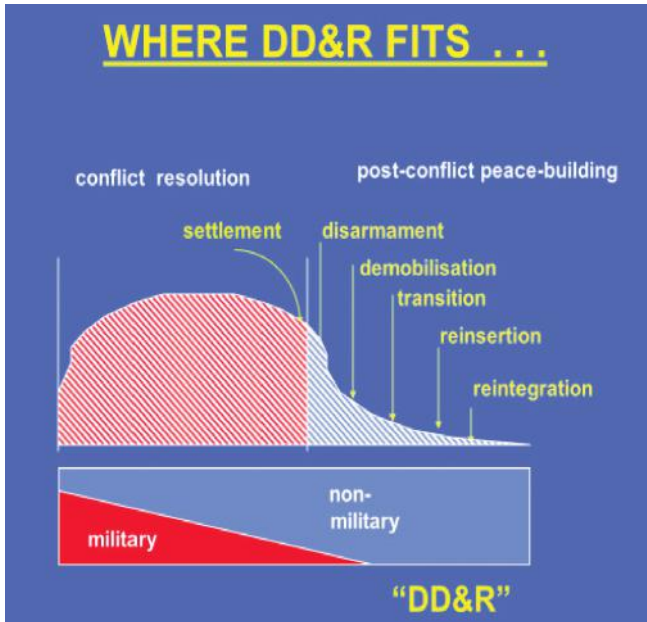
- **Islamic Front**
An alliance of seven rebel groups who want to create an Islamic state but criticises ISIS for its brutal tactics.
- **US, UK and other coalition forces**
The coalition forces are fighting to defeat the ISIS and oust Assad. Coalition forces are in Turkey and Jordan training moderate Syrian rebels.
- **Russia**
Vladimir Putin says that Russia is attacking ISIS and supporting Assad. Evidence suggest that it is attacking non-ISIS rebels.
- **Iran**
Iranian troops are to join government forces and Hezbollah in a ground offensive backed by Russian air strikes. Iran wants to defeat ISIS and prop up Assad.

What Needed/Needs to be Done?

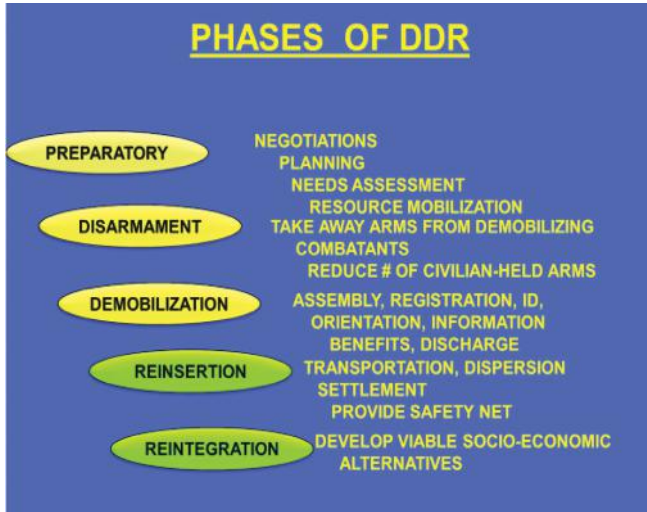


Disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation (DDR) is an important time-tested activity that needs to be carried out by a credible organisation like the United Nations. Post-conflict peace-building can only succeed in case the violent actors at play in these areas are made to go through the steps of DDR.

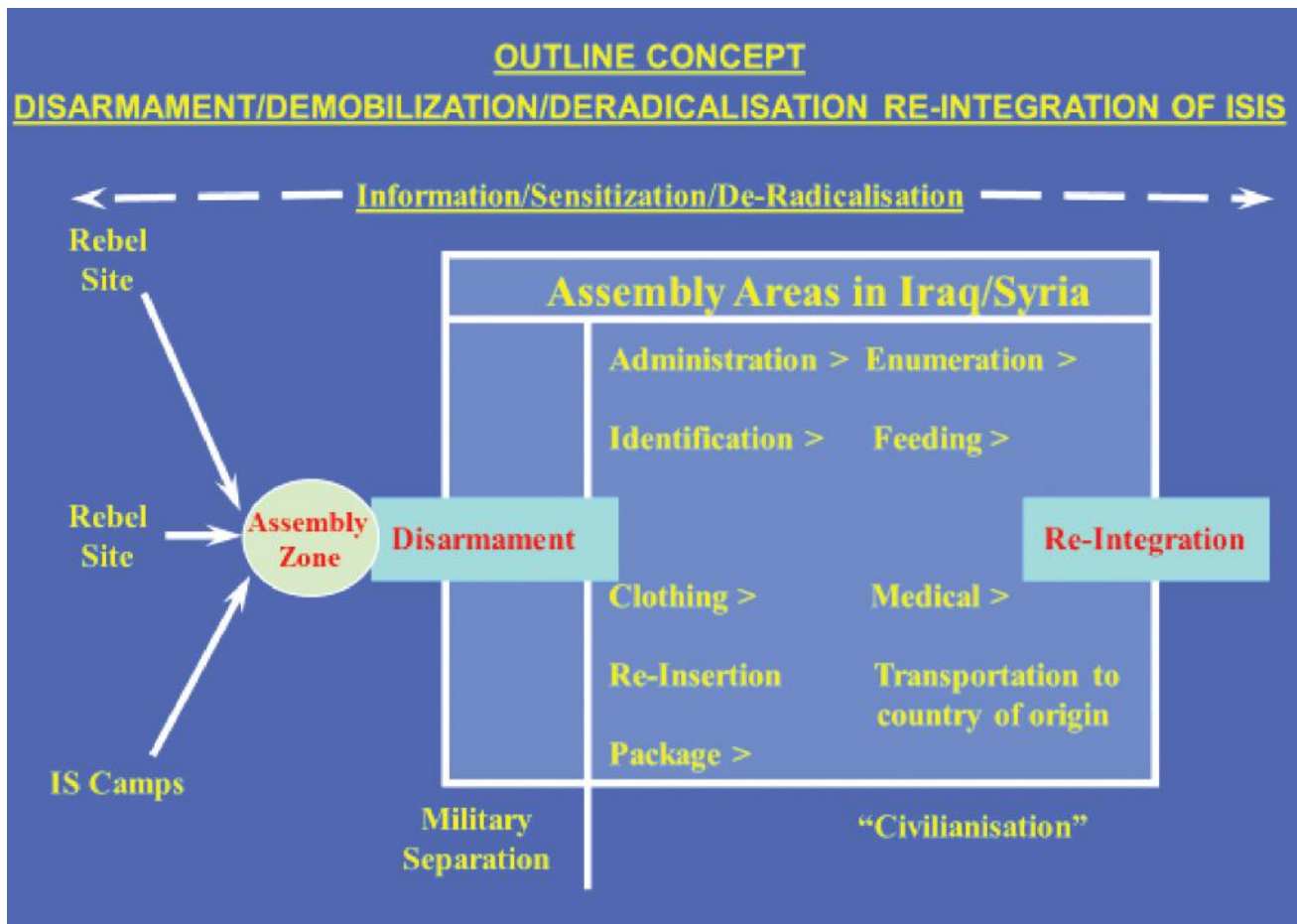
For lasting positive peace in the Middle East and in the rest of the world, in turn, there is a need to go



beyond the short-term objectives of causing minimum casualties to troops fighting the ISIS. By giving a safe passage to the battle-hardened groups in their battle loads, we are just shirking responsibility because of which a far greater effort will have to be put into fighting the resultant insurgency. Suggested phases of DDR required to be carried out are given below:



Unless a stable political settlement is imposed on Syria and Iraq, the vast ungoverned spaces of today’s Middle East will simply generate another terrorist organisation. We may soon forget what ISIS stood for. However, we could well encounter the emergence of yet another deadly organisation, branded under another sinister acronym.⁵



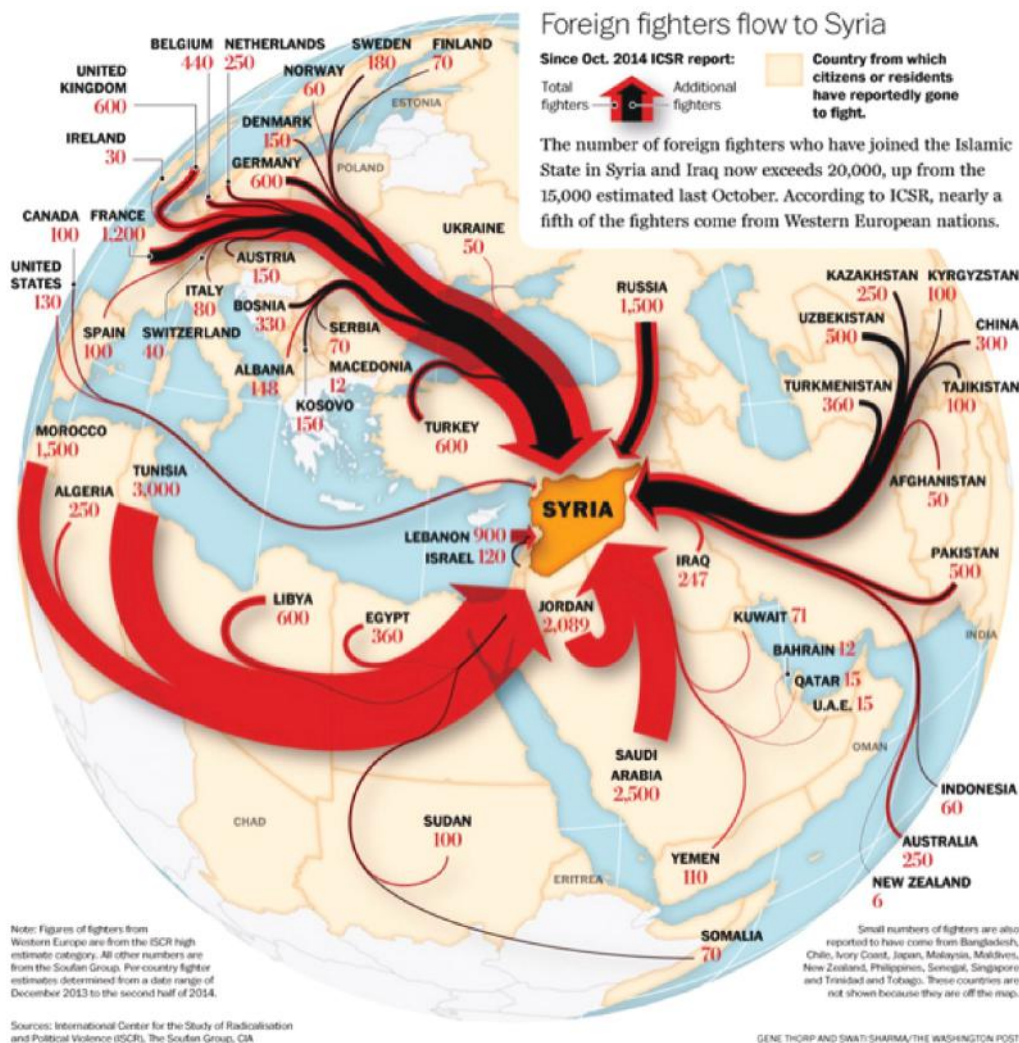
Allowing the ISIS to Flee a Big Mistake?

Given below is the net intake of ISIS cadre from different parts of the world⁶. At a conservative estimate, even if 50 percent of the cadre is likely to have fled or given a safe passage through the under siege areas, approximately 1,250 each will be headed towards Europe and Afghanistan (elements belonging to CARs, Pakistan and China as well). It is but natural that an attempt will be made by the ISIS cadre to exfiltrate the countries of their origin or nearby regions so that they can find sympathisers and supporters while they mingle into known surroundings. Afghanistan is already witnessing ISIS in its new avatar, the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISKP).⁷

As a result, Europe and Afghanistan are likely to be on the boil in the coming years. Due to the operational

space available, Afghanistan per se, will also become a catchment area for jihadi organisations to recruit battle-hardened mercenaries to further their cause.

It is no surprise that China plans to create a buffer by opening up a base in Afghanistan. Beijing has long refrained from engaging militarily beyond its borders. However, as some recent reports suggest, this situation may soon change. Fergana news reported that China will build a military base in the Northern Province of Afghanistan and according to the news agency, the Ministry of Defence of Afghanistan is already expecting a Chinese expert delegation to discuss the location and further technicalities of the base. If these reports are true, China will fully fund the new military base in Badakhshan, covering all material and technical expenses, including both lethal and nonlethal weaponry and equipment.⁸



There is a school of thought that suggests Pakistani jihadi elements like the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Harkat-ul-Mujahedeen (HuM) and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) are not likely to involve the ISIS and loose nationalistic space in Kashmir⁹, but history suggests that they have no inhibitions in utilising foreign mercenaries in Kashmir¹⁰ as force multipliers and therefore, the day is not far when we see some of these mercenary elements of ISIS in Kashmir if steps to the contrary are not taken now.

Pakistani jihadi elements could also recruit the ISIS cadre to carry out 26/11 type of attacks on Indian commercial centres like Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata, Gurugram and Pune which also have a sizable expat population.

Conclusion

Although India has been keeping a close watch on the situation in Syria and Iraq, mainly due to the presence of Indian diaspora as contract workers in the region, during the early part of the conflict, more needs to be done in order to exorcise the ISIS from the IN-AF-Pak region. Some of the initiatives that India needs to take are given below:

- Assist in securing a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution for initiating DDR activity in Syria and Iraq.
- Assist in the reconstruction of these areas by sponsoring skilled labour and engineers.
- Keep a close watch on the developing ISIS situation in Afghanistan through it and its allies' intelligence networks.

... World at large and In-Af-Pak Region in Particular

- Protect its assets in Afghanistan and Iran so that they do not become easy targets.
 - Keep a close eye on Pakistani jihadi elements and their recruiters wooing ISIS mercenaries.
 - Name and shame Pakistan-based terror organisations and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), who plan to direct ISIS cadre towards us, on the international stage.
 - Seal its maritime and land borders including the eastern ones bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh as well as beef up the Line of Control in order to contain the recruited personnel in Pakistan.
 - Activate internal intelligence agencies to identify probable sympathisers and supporters to ISIS mercenary attacks.
- By carrying out the above, India can manage to not only stem the flow of ISIS into our borders, but also ensure that an implosion takes place within the territory of the perpetrators and supporters of the radical jihadi thought and state-sponsored terrorism. It would not be long before these contained elements of ISIS attack their own sympathisers that is, the Pakistanis in their own courtyard. With the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) progressing at a fast pace through the heartland of terror, China should be ready to now open bases not only in Afghanistan to ward away the ISIS, but also in Pakistan to protect its long lines of communications.

Notes

1. www.straitstimes.com/world/.../news-analysis-the-fall-of-raqqa-and-the-future-of-isis, accessed on January 20, 2018.
2. Ibid.
3. The comment was made by Dr Nikonov as a response to a question by the author during the session “The terror state: Innovative Solutions to New Threats” during the Raisina Dialogue, 2018 and is available on You Tube
4. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3261603/Don-t-make-worse-Helicopters-drop-leaflets-ISIS-rebel-fighters-warning-ahead-huge-Russian-backed-ground-offensive.html#ixzz54ePRu61B>, accessed on January 20, 2018.
5. www.straitstimes.com/world/.../news-analysis-the-fall-of-raqqa-and-the-future-of-isis, accessed on January 20, 2018.
6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/foreign-fighters-flow-to-syria/2014/10/11/>, accessed on January 21, 2018.
7. Kabir Taneja, ORF Issue Brief No 220, The Fall of ISIS and its implications for South Asia, pp. 5–6.
8. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-military-base-in-afghanistan>, accessed on January 21, 2018.
9. Kabir Taneja, ORF Issue Brief No 220, The Fall of ISIS and its implications for South Asia, p. 7.
10. Kasturiranga Santhanam, *Jihadis in Jammu and Kashmir: A Portrait Gallery* (Sage Publications, 2003), p. 59.

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