What Next?
Islamic State After the 'Caliphate'

By Romain Quivooij

SYNOPSIS

The recapture of territories held by Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria has enticed then Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and US President Donald Trump to proclaim victory over the group. Do such statements reflect on-the-ground realities? How should IS be expected to mutate over the short and long terms?

COMMENTARY

THE ONGOING battle for Baghouz, a hamlet reported as the last stronghold of IS in Eastern Syria, marks the conclusion of the military campaign launched by the United States and its partners against the insurgent organisation. Ousted from the towns and villages it used to control, IS has lost a great deal of soldiers, commanders, and, more importantly, the momentum that was initially associated with its expansion.

This development raises questions about the impact of the 'Caliphate moment' on the strategies and tactics favoured by IS, not to mention its ideological approach and the ways it communicates online.

Turning Point & Lessons Learned

Failure to preserve territorial gains has highlighted the value of clandestine warfare IS has been prompt to revert to. The sharp fall of the 'Caliphate' leads to question how the religious ideology of Salafi-Jihadism will evolve to remain as attractive as it has been for prospective recruits. Additionally, changes in the production and dissemination of online contents will have a lasting effect on the architecture of virtual Jihad.

IS's transition to asymmetric warfare is a turning point which is common to the life

cycle of guerrilla movements. When non-state armed actors (NSAAs) find themselves unable to prevail against one or several opponents through conventional means, they resort to unconventional tactics to gain time and weaken the resolve of their adversaries.

In the case of IS, this phase of adjustment is all the more familiar that it has been widely used by the group from the end-2000s. In what appears to be a carefully planned repetition of IS's recent past, small cells have conducted offensive operations in several Iraqi provinces in the last months.

These have included bomb attacks on city infrastructures and government facilities, kidnappings for ransom and assassinations of local chiefs.

Strategic Crossroads?

Such an attrition campaign works as a strategic crossroads as it is either concomitant with a NSAAs' slow demise or, conversely, its growth into a more threatening force.

For example, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) remained stuck in a spiral of terrorist violence for two decades before its leaders came to accept the prospect of a peace settlement. By contrast, sections of Chinese Communist troops gradually moved from indirect to open confrontation with the enemy during the Second World War and the Chinese civil war.

Whether IS will share the PIRA or the People Liberation Army's fate, its current iteration looks less like a defeat than a well-informed attempt to reborn from its ashes.

Is ideology Overrated?

On the conceptual side, a primary objective is for the Salafi-Jihadist message to remain as appealing as it used to be when the flow of aspiring fighters and supporters trying to enter Syria was at its peak.

The group's ideological focus has already shifted from occupying new lands to overcoming what is presented by propagandists as a temporary setback and a divine trial. The same evolution could be observed in 2016 when Jihadists lost the village of Dabiq which they liked to depict as the site of an eschatological battle between Muslims and non-believers.

To put the eviction from this highly symbolic place into perspective, online followers put a great deal of emphasis on the achievements of IS' affiliates in other continents. Attempts to keep up appearances underline the gap between realities on the ground and the idealised description of the caliphate that prevailed during the 2014-2016 timeframe.

These efforts to save face look particularly disconnected if we compare them with incipient cracks in ideological unity. As pointed out by Dr. Nelly Lahoud, official statements have revealed divisions within the group.

Lahoud further believes that an internecine strife would oppose the pragmatic and

radical wings of IS, with a number of hardline ideologues having been killed. At its most basic, this conflict shows that internal consistency is significantly eroded. Targeting theorists also suggests that some members would aim at transforming the organisation's narrative to regain a high level of support.

Adapting and Surviving Online

Just like in the physical world, pressure in the virtual realm has compelled IS to modify its behavioural patterns. A hybrid environment has emerged in which emblematic features of IS' rise on the global scene, such as its extensive presence on messaging applications, are concomitant with old-fashioned techniques of Internet uses.

Methodological duality is obvious in the ways propaganda is now shaped and spread. Analysts have described a decentralised ecosystem that is based for the most part on the activities of supporters rather than IS' public relations managers.

While the key role of volunteers in editing and relaying contents produced by media branches of terrorist groups tends to be portrayed as an innovation, it is in fact anything but new. The first generation of 'armchair Jihadists' was active as early as the 1990s.

These individuals' importance, which is said to have considerably increased since IS' output began to drop from late 2017, merely demonstrates Jihadist networks' flexibility in associating contemporary methods of communication with those that have proven their reliability.

Similarly, the growing use of storage platforms to upload materials is reminiscent of the pre-social media era when static websites were filled with a massive amount of short lifetime URLs.

The full combination of Web resources is thus likely to become a defining characteristic of online Jihad for the years to come, thereby posing a renewed challenge to Internet companies and the law enforcement community.

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