

WHY ISIS WILL REMAIN A THREAT IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE

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More than 15,000 people from 80 countries have already flocked to Iraq and Syria to fight under the banner of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and their self-styled “Caliph” Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi¹. The dangers that these pose are clearly evident in the recent terrorist atrocities in Australia, Canada, France and Libya. Indeed, the threat sleeper cells holds for national and global security cannot be under-estimated.

The potential for future conflict along religious lines is a distinct possibility given certain demographic trends. According to the Pew Research Centre, Islam will grow faster than any other religion over the next four decades. To put it differently, the number of Muslims will grow by a staggering 73 percent between 2010 and 2050². Whilst the rise of the number of Muslims does not necessarily mean more conflict since the majority of Muslims do not subscribe to the austere Salafi takfiri brand of

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Islam which ISIS represents, the reality is that in societies with a history of sectarian strife (think here of India with ongoing tensions between Hindus and Muslims) or where there are scarcity of resources (think here of the Sahel) societies will divide along sectarian (ethnic and religious) lines in order to compete for such scarce resources. The city of Jos in Nigeria, for instance has, witnessed ethno-religious conflict since 2001 which has pitted Christian Berom against Muslim Hausas. At the heart of the conflict is access to fertile land at a time when the population is growing whilst the arable land has been under sustained threat due to the ongoing drought³.

The overall strategy of ISIS seems to want to increase such sectarian tensions as seen by the gruesome execution videos it routinely posts online of killings of Yazidis, Christians and the like whilst at the same time targeting those Muslims of a moderate dispensation. Clearly, ISIS believes that it can only stand to benefit from the growing polarization in society. Following the barbaric attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in January 2015⁴, a wave of Islamophobia has swept Europe. In Dresden, Germany, for instance a group calling itself the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the West (PEGIDA) soon spread to other cities in Germany like Cologne, Hamburg, Munster and Stuttgart bringing tens of thousands of people on the streets in anti-Islam rallies. This has been replicated in other European capitals⁵. This Islamophobia is bound to antagonize an already alienated European Muslim community – hundreds of whom have already left to join ISIS. According to David von Drehle⁶ the number of European Muslims who have fought in Syria and Iraq, include:

France – 1200

United Kingdom – 500-600

Germany – 500-600

Belgium – 440

Netherlands – 200-250

Sweden – 150-180

Denmark – 100-150

Austria – 100-150

Spain – 50-100

Italy – 80

Finland – 50-70

Norway – 60

Switzerland – 40

Ireland – 30.

A similar hardening of attitudes are taking place across the Atlantic – where according to the Pew Research Centre 42 percent of Americans say Islam is more likely than other religions to incite violence amongst its followers⁷

It is also important to recognize that ISIS views itself as a global, not regional caliphate. This is the true significance of the change of its name from ISIS to the Islamic State – it recognizes no geographical boundary. One ISIS statement clearly articulated the primacy of the ISIS caliphate to all other Islamist groupings, the world over, “*The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organizations become null by*

the expansion of the khilafah's [caliphate's] authority and arrival of its troops to their areas"⁸.

ISIS has already made some way headway towards these global ambitions having established sleeper cells in over 60 countries⁹. ISIS has also given birth to local franchises, especially within the African context. Across the Sahel, and North Africa, local ISIS franchises are emerging. Two groups which have split from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In Algeria, AQIM commander Grouri Abdelmalik aka Khaled Abu Suleimane announced that he and his troops were breaking away from AQIM which according to him had `deviated from the true path' and established themselves as the Jund al-Khilafah or Soldiers of the Caliphate. He made clear that this new grouping was now aligned to ISIS. Posting a communique on jihadi websites, Abdelmalik addresses the self-styled caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "*You have in the Islamic Maghreb men if you order them they will obey you*"¹⁰. Similar developments are also occurring in Tunisia where the Uqba Ibn Nafi Brigade also split from AQIM pledged their allegiance to ISIS¹¹. In strife-torn Libya, meanwhile, returning jihadis from Syria have established the al-Battar Brigade¹². Meanwhile, in the Sinai, the Islamists of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis have also declared their allegiance to al-Baghdadi¹³. It is easy to understand the attraction to ISIS and the growing disenchantment of younger militants with Al Qaeda with its ageing leadership and its inability carry out a major attacks against the West. By contrast, ISIS with its slick recruitment videos, it carving out a large swathe of territory in Iraq and Syria and its military successes in spite of Western airstrikes is appealing to the youth.

The ISIS *modus operandi* is quite clear across North Africa. Exploit existing grievances in a particular area, utilize returning ISIS fighters to serve as a force

multiplier for existing local militias who have pledged allegiance to the group and in order to ensure command and control from ISIS central send one of the senior ISIS commanders as the leader of the local franchise. It is this strategy which was used with such devastating results when young militants of the Islamic Youth Shura Council managed to capture Derna in north-eastern Libya¹⁴. This strategy was also evident in July 2014, as rival groups fought for control of Benghazi in Libya. Ansar al-Sharia's alignment with ISIS proved decisive. Libyan who fought in Iraq and Syria were then ordered to return to their home country and fight on the side of Ansar al-Sharia. These hundreds of battle-hardened veterans proved decisive in Ansar al-Sharia's capture of several parts of Benghazi¹⁵

Beyond buying into the global caliphate ideology of ISIS, local groups such as Nigeria's Boko Haram which have pledged an oath of allegiance to Al- Baghdadi¹⁶ also make a rational choice that their allegiance would translate into greater military assistance and greater funds. After all, many former Baathists of the Saddam Hussein regime, specifically their Republican Guards have gone on to bolster ISIS' ranks. Moreover, with 6 out of 10 oil fields in Syria and other such oil fields in Iraq, under its control, ISIS is in possession of a vast war chest – estimated at US\$ 2 billion¹⁷. Moreover, ISIS makes an estimated US \$1 million per day through the sale and control of oil, according to the US Department of the Treasury¹⁸. This can greatly finance Boko Haram's own regional ambitions. In the immediate short-term, Boko Haram's Abubaker Shekau has already benefited from his allegiance to the ISIS leader. Boko Haram, for instance, is already benefiting from shared intelligence and tactics as well as materiel support from ISIS¹⁹. In addition, the ISIS leadership immediately made contact with Ansaru – a faction of Boko Haram who took issue with Shekau's leadership style – urging them to reintegrate with the main body of Boko

Haram. With the two factions of Boko Haram now united, expect there to be more vicious terrorist attacks in Nigeria and the West African region²⁰.

It is important to understand that ISIS expansion and penetration into regions and countries is not willy-nilly but strategic. Nigeria, for instance, is Africa's most populous country, the biggest economy and a regional hegemon in West Africa. The strategic importance of Nigeria for ISIS should not be under-estimated. As Peter Pham²¹ recently noted about Boko Haram, "*We have a group holding territory and shooting down jet fighters ... If Nigeria collapses – it is the strong state in the region – there are no strong states to contain what would happen if Boko Haram succeeds in carving out an Islamic state in that area*".

In similar fashion, Tunisia, too was targeted by ISIS because according to Larry Diamond²², it is, "*Alone among the Arab States, it has achieved a remarkable level of political compromise among secular parties and the principal Islamist party, Ennhada*". Indeed, the moderate Islamists of Ennhada has one minister and three junior ministers in the coalition government²³. The terrorist attack on 18 March 2015 on the Bardo museum in Tunis in which 21 foreign tourists were killed and a further 42 were injured²⁴ then aimed to undermine Tunisia's relative success at forging a democracy with compromises between secularists and moderate Islamists. From this perspective then, the objective of the attacks was to cause greater polarization within society between more liberal-minded and those more religiously-oriented. With more than 3,000 Tunisian trained jihadis having returned to their home country after receiving training in camps in Iraq, Libya and Syria²⁵, one can expect more attacks in the future.

A key to the growth of ISIS also remains their ability to spread their ideology through the technologically savvy approach to social media propaganda – Facebook, Twitter and You Tube. The use of rap music in their recruitment videos is especially appealing to young alienated youth and is a far cry from the staid videos in which the older generation of Al Qaeda jihadis like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri appeared in. The penetration of ISIS ideology even in far-away South Africa is seen in the writing of an 18-year-old South African from Johannesburg using the pseudonym of Abu Huraya al-Afriki who stated, *“I joined the Islamic State because their aim is to establish the world of Allah (There is no God, but Allah) as the highest, and the word of Kufr (disbelief) as lowest, and this is what Allah tells us in the Qur’an to do. So it is a compulsory duty upon all the Muslims around the world to join the Jihad, although many of them are misguided and Allah did not choose them...”*²⁶.

On this issue, an important point needs to be made – part of the problem dogging an effective response to the spread of ISIS is the danger of political correctness – the notion that ISIS reflects some deviation in major Islamic political thought and that its ideology is therefore anathema to most Muslims. The Obama Administration, Bob Taylor argues, *“...seems to have a rule never to identify Islam with “terrorism”*²⁷. Such a perspective, of course, is reinforced by clerics and other Muslim bodies denouncing ISIS²⁸.

Go beyond the superficial denunciation of ISIS, however, and look closely at its ideology and one cannot but come to the conclusion that ISIS is a natural outcome of much discourses in political Islam for the past 200 years. Ideologically speaking, how is ISIS’ violent attempts to “purify” Islam different from the Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia which declared even fellow Muslims who did not follow the Wahhabist creed apostates? Is it not contemptible that whilst we decry the decapitations committed by

ISIS, there is no similar outcry in the West against the beheadings committed in Saudi Arabia? Can we see no parallel between ISIS now and Abd al-Qadir's jihad in North Africa in the 1830s and 1840s who like Al-Baghdadi called himself "Commander of the Faithful"? Similarly in the late 19th century Muhammad Ahmad called himself the Mahdi (Redeemer) and conducted his own jihad in Sudan²⁹.

Ideologically, too, there is little to separate ISIS from its Islamist antecedents. Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (CE 1703-1792) famously declared all those who did not conform to his purist vision of Islam to be apostates and worthy of death³⁰. Maulana Abul Ala-Maududi (CE 1903-1979) the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami organisation in Pakistan and the ideological father of the Taliban movement in Pakistan is perhaps the best exemplar on the use of force and coercion to deal with difference. He had this to say, "*...force may be used, in fact should be used to prevent people from doing wrong. Non-Muslim countries and cultures cannot be allowed to practice immoral deeds*"³¹. Can policy-makers not witness the ideology of Wahhab and Maududi when ISIS beheads Coptic Christians, destroy Muslim Sufi shrines or executes members of the Yazidi community?

The global ambitions of ISIS, meanwhile, also follows a logical trajectory from a previous generation of Islamists. The Egyptian Hassan al Banna (1906-1949), founder and Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood declared, "*It is the nature of Islam to dominate and not to be dominated, to impose its laws on all nations and to extend its power to the entire planet*"³². In similar vein, Maududi declared that, "*Islam does not want to bring about the revolution in one country or a few countries. It wants to spread it to the entire world. Although it is the duty of the Muslim Party to bring this revolution first to its own nation, its ultimate goal is world revolution*"³³.

ISIS also is quite aware of Islamic tradition and its version of the “End Days” which witnesses the forces of *Al-Masih ad-Dajjal* (literally the ‘False Messiah’ or in Christian terms – the ‘Anti-Christ’) pitted against the forces of the Mahdi which would pave the way for the second coming of Jesus³⁴. The significance of the territory under ISIS control and threatened by ISIS cannot be underestimated. According to Islamic tradition, the *Dajjal* is to appear on the way between Iraq and Syria³⁵, whilst Jesus is to re-appear to the east of Damascus³⁶. From various ISIS statements, then, they believe the End of Days is near and they are preparing for the Mahdi and the final battle.

The point being made here is a simple one: ISIS is a logical product of Islamic history – not some deviant new creed which unfathomably emerged on the Islamic landscape. In similar vein, viewing ISIS as an aberration is extremely problematic given the support their views have amongst large sections of Muslims. Believing such a fairy-tale as the Obama White House would have us believe, obfuscates reality and serves to undermine any serious counter-terrorism effort by drawing a false dichotomy between mainstream Islam and the purported aberration which is ISIS. In the process, intelligence agencies are blind-sided from the real trajectories of radicalization.

By way of example, consider the following: a rigorous survey conducted by the University of Maryland and World Public Opinion; for instance, found that 76 percent of Moroccan Muslims and 74 percent of Egyptian Muslims wanted the strict application of shar’ia law in every Islamic country. Further, the survey revealed that 71 percent of Moroccans and 67 percent of Egyptians desired this outcome: “*To unify all Islamic countries into a single Islamic state or Caliphate*”³⁷. Should we then be surprised when a YouTube video surfaces of a football match in Morocco where

fans of the Casablanca club – Raja Club Athletic – chant “*Daesh, Daesh*” (the Arabic acronym for ISIS) and “*God is Great, let’s go on jihad*”. Should we be surprised that an estimated 1500 Moroccans have joined ISIS?³⁸.

Given these developments it is erroneous to view the war against ISIS in mere terms of seizing this or that town as when Kobane had fallen following sustained United States and coalition airstrikes followed by a ground offensive of Kurdish Peshmerga troops – or indeed the reported wounding of Al-Baghdadi in an aerial strike. This is first and foremost an ideological struggle between liberal democracies and radical Islamists and will continue long after Kobane or Raqqa changes hands for the umpteenth time and will continue even after the death of an Al-Baghdadi. The West needs to prepare its citizens for a generational struggle.

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