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ISIS IN SYRIA

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The daring victories in the summer of 2014 of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) over rival groups, and the Iraqi and Syrian regime resulted in the declaration of a new caliphate. The international community led by the United States responded to the growing threat of the ISIS by forming a worldwide coalition to attack it by air. We attempt in this article to identify the reasons behind the ISIS resurrection in Syria, and how it took advantage from its surrounding to establish a de-facto state for itself in the Levant. We also underline the ISIS strategy in its conquest to power, and its high ability to learn from Al Qaida past experience. Finally, we describe the best strategy to counter it and to reduce its threat to the stability of the region.

Introduction

ISIS finds its root in Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (JTWJ) formed by Abu Musab Al Zarkawi in 1999.[1] ISIS has undergone major shifts during that time; from allying itself with Al Qaida (AQ) in 2004, to reaching a broader Jihadi spectrum in founding Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin (MSM) and later on the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006.[2] ISIS has emerged as a major anti-imperialist force in the Middle East. It succeeded in building a honeypot, attracting thousands of recruits across the globe, while maintaining a healthy and growing ecosystem, and establishing itself as a de-facto political force controlling a swath of land in a highly unstable region.

Learning from Jihadis experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans, and ex-soviet republics, ISIS leadership developed a very pragmatic expansion strategy by targeting and holding key natural resources, hence increasing their ability to best address the needs of the local populations they control. However, its real source of power comes from their aptitude to take advantage of the regional social and political chaos and the sectarianism introduced to the region by Iran through its militias that are fighting on behalf of the Assad regime.[3]

Indeed, ISIS has developed a powerful narrative that answers and exploits the injustice that Sunnis face across the region.[4] Following the fall of Baath rule in Iraq, the

American occupying forces and Iraqi government forces systematically persecuted Sunnis and succeeded in transforming the Sunni and Shi'a creedal split into colliding political forces. Similar trends have been observed all over the Levant with the rise of Hezbollah to the detriment of the popular uprising that broke through in 2011.[5] ISIS has been driving the Sunni thrust of taking back what is "rightfully" theirs, by promising them their rise back to power as well as revenge against the West and the Shi'a. Moreover, the failures of pan-Arabism and the secular regimes that ruled the region after independence, makes ISIS promises of change and a clear break from old habits with a Sharia based rule more appealing. Finally, traditional Islamic movements have lost a lot of their appeal after ridding themselves of their universal positioning and adopting more nation-centric visions, while ISIS is still faithful to the popular dream of recreating a unified Muslim state.

ISIS seized a golden opportunity in Syria, by exploiting the different regional interests in hosting a terrorist organization on or next to their territory, and how they used the international community's inactivity toward the Syrian peoples' suffering to feed their "conspiratorial" narrative. Additionally, we will draw out the strategy that ISIS adopted in their expansion in Syria and beyond and how it has succeeded in establishing a basis for their power in the region. Finally, we attempt to identify the general plan to face the ISIS threat to the instability of the region.

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

ISI as a transnational group relying on worldwide recruits to form their striking force, was in decline after Obama's announcement of US troop withdrawal from Iraq. Losing a major propaganda recruitment tool, ISI was unable to act against even the Iraqi's government persistent marginalization and persecution of Sunnis, which casted a shadow of a doubt on its capacity to achieve justice as they always promised. Moreover, the promise

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of democracy, rule of law, and equity that the Arab spring brought to the region and the succession of what seemed like victorious revolutions against totalitarian regimes, completely stole the appeal left of AQ. By the year 2011, ISI was no more than a small AQ elite group, hiding in small towns across the Iraqi desert.[6]

However, the Syrian regime's bloody crackdown on civilians following the popular uprising that started in 2011 presented AQ a golden ticket back to the scene. In the beginning, ISI hid its presence in Syria, and entered the scene through supporting Jabhat Al Nusra (JN), an extremist but highly efficient Syrian fighting group.[7] Even though the later secretively kept its allegiance to AQ, its resemblance in ideology and similar fighting tactics were evident to all the major actors in Syria. In October 2011, it was widely reported that the Syrian regime had released former extremists from prison, including Abu Mohamad al-Jolani, the leader and founder of JN; hence, the theory that Damascus was involved in creating a prosperous environment for Al Qaida in Syria is not mere conspiratorial imagination.[8]

Jabhat al-Nusra kept a low profile until April 2013, promoting their victories rather than their affiliations, and building-up popular support through accomplishment instead of preaching or using AQ traditional propaganda techniques. This strategy proved to

be successful; the Syrian revolutionary scene was already occupied by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), supported by a large faction of the Syrian people, and JN needed to standout to make a place for itself on the military scene. Following strategic victories of JN in Syria, ISI leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi announced in an audio recording, on April 9, 2013, the creation of ISIS, and annexed JN to it. Even though the later challenged this announcement and swore allegiance to Ayman Al Zawahri, the AQ leader in Afghanistan, JN lost many of its men to ISIS handing over large territories mainly in the northern and eastern parts of Syria.[9]

The FSA's major assault on Aleppo, and the successive defeats of the Syrian regime forces conceded in 2012, pushed Assad's allies to militarily intervene. Indeed, the intervention of Hezbollah alongside Iraqi Shiite brigades in 2013 allowed the regime to regain control of central Syria, and managed to enhance its fighting conditions.[10] The impact of Shiite militias' involvement in Syria and the undivided political and financial support Iran provided to Damascus has largely contributed to growing sectarian tensions and supported the ISIS narrative. Indeed, the transnational Shiite intervention has legitimized the transnational Sunni counter intervention, mainly benefitting ISIS.

Additionally, ISIS exploited the political void left unfilled by the disorganized and divergent Syrian opposition; indeed, the Syrian political elite failed in many attempts to provide a common realistic vision. Although, the international community, represented by the Friends of the Syrian People group, once supported the Syrian National Council (SNC), and later on the Syrian National Coalition (SOC), the Syrian opposition was consumed and unable to provide services to local populations. Following important victories in northern and eastern Syria, large areas were left without effective administration, electricity, gas, and security, thus provoking discontent among locals against political leadership. On the other hand, ISIS has a bipolar vision that has the

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merit of being clear and simple. ISIS succeeded in restoring a semblance of law and order, although the harsh punishments (based on their literalist fiqh understanding) was both stifling to the Muslim local population and unforgiving to those deemed to be apostates, including non-Muslim minorities.

Western countries missed a golden opportunity to make good on their claims to promote justice and democracy in the region. It must be remembered that the United States invaded Iraq, in part at least, on claims to bring democracy. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed, while the country was left in shambles due to policies directly attributed to the American administration under Paul Bremer. In Syria, when the people rose in pursuit of democratic aspirations, the same United States was again not even willing to act seriously toward Syria. Regardless of political considerations, the people of the region view this as sheer hypocrisy and betrayal to the democratic impulses of then unarmed Syrian revolution. ISIS and AQ were quick and decisive in exploiting such inconsistency.

The Obama's administration weakness towards the Syrian people, following the use of chemical weapons against civilians on the 21st of August 2013 in Ghouta was a turning point in the Syrian conflict, an event that was fully exploited by ISIS, feeding its conspiratorial narrative and legitimizing again the discourse of AQ

affiliate groups after it has been completely lost after the break-through of the Arab spring. Moreover the AQ resurrection in the region was covertly acil-itated by the Syrian and Iraqi regimes that desperately need-ed a reason to present to the in-ternational community a predi-cate for legitimacy and support in claiming that they are fight-ing terrorism in the Levant.

ISIS strategy

ISIS was faithful to its predecessors. Its leadership implement-ed rigid management styles and were driven by launching spec-tacular and provocative attacks rather than focusing on build-ing an organization or estab-lishing ground for sustainabili-ty.[11] When Abu Baker al-Bagh-dadi took over in 2010, he was left with an organization on the decline with limited resources and less visibility. Al-Baghda-di's first mission was to put ISI back on tracks, and he largely succeeded accomplishing this objective by building a hierar-chical centralized but flexible organization. Furthermore, he adopted a pragmatic alliance strategy integrating former

Baath commanders and other Jihadi groups within ISI ranks, creating a Military Council orchestrating the organization military operations and a Se-curity and Intelligence Council protecting its best interests.[12]

Surely enough, ISIS under the same leadership continued employing the same methods; it adopted a political strategy that resulted in establishing its own institutions. In Syria, how-ever, ISIS succeeded for the first time to establish itself as a civil authority too.[13] They hold regular meetings called dawah as platforms for social indoctri-nation. During their brief pres-ence in Aleppo, ISIS has mul-tiplied dawah meetings, and allocated many resources to ensure that big masses attend. They engaged well-spoken an-imators, and offered gifts for the children who best learned their lessons. Even though ISIS relies on young recruits to fight, its primary target is the children, and it uses dawah meetings and other forms of social gathering to attract them and their parents. Indeed, ISIS has taken a huge interest in ed-ucation; all teachers must abide

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to an obligatory dogma course, only those who succeed are allowed to teach.

ISIS, from ISI past experience, has also learned the importance of rule of law, regardless of how harsh it can be, settling locals' disputes is a very strong source of power. The population has been plagued by warlords and bandits, thus found that the brutal methods employed by ISIS has ended the chaos and bought some order to the "liberated" areas.[14] ISIS's enforcement squads targeted local leaders with a reputation for warlordism, and made a case out of severely punishing ISIS soldiers whenever they break the law.

ISIS also distinguished itself from its predecessors and the FSA groups in its financial stability. ISIS initial territorial expansion strategy relied on controlling water resources. ISIS territory is concentrated around the Euphrates and al-Khabour in Syria, and such geographical existence availed to them a considerable advantage in a region that suffers from water shortage and allowed them to plant and yield strategic crops, hence offering the population and the organization water and food security. Additionally, ISIS enjoys substantial financial support from private donors in the Gulf countries.[15] Moreover, it controls major oil reserves in eastern Syria.

Military-wise two main trends emerged from ISIS strategy. First, they employed a very pragmatic expansion strategy, as their choice of next targets

is determined by three factors: a) appropriating new strategic natural resources, b) releasing popular tension and pressure by either attacking bandits or pro-regime forces, c) eliminating direct competition targeting Islamic fighting groups. Unlike the FSA, ISIS is not primarily concerned with toppling the regime; rather, it is mainly focusing on consolidating its power. Second, ISIS adopted a hold-then-expand strategy; they rarely attack a new territory before securing newly acquired lands. Unlike the FSA that could not hold on its quick expansion areas, ISIS conquest is steady.

Finally, ISIS has distinguished itself in its outreach to Syrian populations and worldwide Jihadists by employing social media with remarkable effectiveness.[16] Indeed, ISIS public relationship strategy is its main asset. In order to attract new recruits, and to install fear in its opponents' hearts and minds, ISIS launched a huge war propaganda machine. ISIS virtually employs thousands of sympathizers over the Internet, speaking of its victories, propagating its ideological teachings, and broadcasting brutal images and footage of its bloody conquests. Many of ISIS opponents surrendered or fled out of fear, anti and pro-regime forces alike. ISIS does not only exercise terror, it uses terror to limit its investment too.

ISIS success in Syria

The successes of ISIS on the ground in Syria and Iraq provided Al Baghdadi with the right opportunity to assert its growing power on the expense of AQ, which on many occasions contradicted him and even asked him to return to Iraq and to leave Syria to JN. On June 29, 2014, ISIS began to refer to itself as the Islamic State, and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its Caliph.[17] The declaration of the caliphate created a stir in AQ circles, and the event divided jihadist leaders and religious personalities as well as jihadist movements. AQ traditional leadership and old guards disapproved this move; Ayman Al Zawahiri argued that the requirements for establishing a caliphate have not been reunited yet. An argument that fail on deaf ears and was completely

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rejected by Al-Baghdadi and his supporters, stating that the military successes of ISIS provided both the legitimacy and opportunity to declare a caliphate.[18]

More importantly the Caliphate declaration moved the center of the Jihadi project from Afghanistan to the Levant, a geographical presence that grant ISIS a higher moral ground, AQ has never been that close to Palestine. Moreover, it implemented Abu Mus'ab al-Souri strategy on which AQ was founded -- a theory which is centered on the prophecy of an epic battle between Muslims and Christians in Dabiq to the north of Aleppo.[19] Finally, ISIS offers a direct confrontation with the Shi'a, an evil force that divided the Muslim world for century as they believe.

Indeed, ISIS so far has succeeded in what AQ has failed to accomplish in the last decade. Its declared caliphate that is expanding, established solid bases for rule, and acquired stable sources of income. With passing days ISIS is consolidating its territory to the east of the Euphrates, and it is establishing itself as a de-facto state.

Conclusion

Even though ISIS strongly relies on its financial capacity to support its governance strategy and military expansion, it is its worldwide vision and propaganda is its most valuable asset. ISIS's narrative is constantly fed by the international community's inaction towards the regime in Damascus and by the intervention of Shi'i transnational groups' in the Iraq and Syria. In order to rid ISIS from its persuasion power, the international community needs to firmly act against Assad's regime, and heavily sanction and limit Shi'i transnational groups' mobility.

ISIS strives to obtain legitimacy among local populations through providing security, governance structure, and services. The local support that ISIS receives is not genuine. Past experiences in the Syrian conflict show that when the time is opportune and the conditions are appropriate for action, the local population would not hesitate in supporting the groups that work against. Empowering military groups that are not affiliated with AQ and strengthening civil society will present alternatives to

local populations. Even though it is difficult to identify reliable groups, it becomes more difficult with time to positively engage moderate opposition. The later is faced with growing challenges, their margin of maneuver is getting narrower by passing days, and their options are growing scarcer too. The international community's inaction towards the moderate opposition will eventually leave these groups with two options only: either becoming more radical themselves, or disappearing from the scenery; both options serve ISIS best interests.

Finally, Change can only come through supporting a solid national alternative that the people recognizes as a legitimate protector of their inspirations, and through which genuine and profound political reform can be established. Half-heartedly international efforts and hesitation in squeezing the Assad regime only fuels ISIS and AQ propaganda and makes later interventions harder and more costly.

ENDNOTES

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