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A World After ISIS – Part II

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Summary

As a diverse range of adversaries – from US to Russian, Iranian to Gulf Arab, Turkish to Kurdish – continue to advance into territory formerly controlled by the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, the probability of IS reforming as a post-territorial armed movement increases. Evidence from Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia and Jordan indicates how extreme Islamist movements have evolved over time in response to geopolitical rivalries as well as the marginalisation of young Arabs within increasingly fragmented and oppressive states.

Introduction

The [April](#) and [June](#) briefings in this series analysed the position of Islamic State (IS) following major military offensives against it, especially in Iraq. While IS has been in sustained retreat in several countries, the conclusion of the June briefing was that:

“there have been the previous instances when Western states appeared to be winning the war against al-Qaida, IS and other radical groups. As before, it is highly likely that the position we are now in is essentially little different to the earlier periods of optimism. Instead, we would do well to recognise that the underlying circumstances that allow these extreme groups to gain and maintain support have not been addressed. Unless they are, new movements will arise, much as did IS, and war will continue.”

The [July briefing](#) developed this further, emphasising the manner in which IS was operating well beyond its Iraq/Syria stronghold, and also had potential to capitalise upon the marginalisation of the Sunni minority in Iraq, concluding that:

“IS strategy is now aimed at preparing for an extended insurgency if its current areas of control are overrun by various coalitions. The main focus of such an insurgency will be Iraq, together with expanding its influence in south and south-west Asia and by doing as much damage as possible to the cohesion of a number of western states.

Early successes of this strategy are seen as Brexit, the rise of the Front National in France and the consequent possibility of Frexit, the substantial support for Donald Trump and other radical political changes in the West. In practice many other factors may be involved in these developments but for the IS leadership it is the movement’s role, and future potential, which will be at the forefront of strategic thinking. A geographical entity or Caliphate may not endure but IS may already be

looking beyond that to what otherwise might be thought of as a post-IS world.”

This briefing continues the analysis by looking at the wider issues that were mentioned in the June briefing and that appear to be aiding support for IS in the Middle East, North Africa and the wider world. Thus the earlier briefings examined an “after IS” world in which the movement had largely lost its geographical identity following the predicted substantial suppression of its activity in Iraq and Syria. In such circumstances, are there factors which might plausibly suggest that it will be replaced by further paramilitary movements arising from a similar extreme Islamist base?

After Suppression

Before looking at two elements that suggest there is a formidable long-term problem favoring further Islamist resurgences in the region, it is worth remembering that IS is far from being alone as an extreme Islamist paramilitary movement. Indeed, the group began as an offshoot of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), supposedly defeated by US and UK counter-insurgency forces inside Iraq by 2008.

In addition to those loosely linked with IS, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria or Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya, a movement that was until recently closely linked to al-Qaida and opposed to IS has recently made substantial gains in Syria. This is the Al-Nusrah Front (Jabhat al-Nusrah: JAN), which has restyled itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (loosely “Front for the Conquest of Syria”), has formally distanced itself from al-Qaida and has been able to attract support from some significant if smaller anti-Assad militias. In doing so it is this expanded group that has recently made progress against Assad’s forces in Aleppo, achieving some success in relieving the government’s siege of much of the city.

More generally, though, the two substantive issues to examine are the attitude of Saudi Arabia and the reasons for the support for movements such as IS across the region, support which might be expected to survive the demise of IS itself.

The Saudi Element

Saudi Arabia has major concerns over the increasing influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East, seeing a “Shi’a Crescent” in process of development from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. This stretches from Hezbollah with its substantial influence in Lebanon, to the Alawi-dominated regime in Syria, through to the Shi’a-majority government in Baghdad and its suppression of the Sunni minority, and on to Iran itself. There is a further fear of Shi’a influence in the Saudi Kingdom itself where the Shi’a minority – about 15% of the population of 21 million (excluding nearly 10 million expatriates) – is located mainly in the oil-rich Eastern Province. That minority has suffered considerable suppression and control, especially since the beginning of the Arab Awakening five years ago and remains bitter in its exclusion. Furthermore, Saudi security forces have done much to support the Sunni royal family in Bahrain where the Shi’a majority (some 70% of the island’s citizens) has been suppressed.

Saudi fears of Iran stem partly from the Sunni/Shi’a divide but more significantly from its view of Iran, with a population of 80 million compared with 21 million Saudis, as a state that sees itself as the regional leader. By contrast, successive Saudi kings have regarded their role as the Keeper of the Two Holy Places as giving them the true leadership of the Islamic world.

This has been an historic view that was seen to be seriously threatened at the end of the 1970s with the Islamic Revolution and the fall of the Shah. Following this, it was Iran that represented itself as the leader of a revitalised Islam, much to the anger of the government in Riyadh which, boosted by 1970s surges in oil revenues, responded with a programme of support for spreading its own austere Wahhabi vision of Sunni Islam. This involved the funding of madrasas and many other educational programmes right across western and southern Asia and extending also into Africa and parts of Europe. Many would argue that this process did much to encourage the development of extreme movements anywhere from Pakistan to Algeria, Somalia and Sudan.

This was also true of Riyadh's sponsorship of the long-running Mujahidin struggle against Soviet-occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s, which became a crucible for Jihadist development and laid the foundations for the original al-Qaida network. As with the fall of Saddam's Sunni regime in Iraq in 2003, so the US-backed overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan has exacerbated Saudi Arabia's fears of rising Iranian influence among confessionally divided regional states. This can be seen more acutely in Yemen, the collapsed Arabian state where Saudi and its allies believe they are fighting a proxy war with Iran's local Shi'a allies. The point here is that such struggles illuminate the extent of long-standing Saudi unease at the current progress of Shi'a Islam in the Middle East.

This does not mean that there will be direct government support for IS if it faces a possible demise, not least as IS itself regards the Kingdom as fundamentally unacceptable and therefore presents a threat to the Kingdom. What it does mean is that in the longer term Saudi Arabia will do much to ensure that Sunni movements that may supplant IS and are opposed to the growing of influence of Iran and Shi'a-dominated Iraq will be given substantial support. Thus, if IS does decline, whatever might replace it from a radical Islamist perspective is likely to be viewed with quiet approval.

Al-Qaida's Reboot

This could well extend to JAN in Syria if it distances itself even further from al-Qaida and, in doing so, attracts longer term support from other militias. In this sense, the recent success of JAN in developing what amounts to a local coalition opposing the Syrian government around Aleppo may serve as a longer-term model that might even privately find some favour in Riyadh.

A further significant element of the al-Qaida legacy, which will find far less favour in Riyadh, relates to its offshoot in Yemen known as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This is currently the focus of considerable action by the United States in the form of armed drone strikes, and also by Saudi forces in Yemen. However, as in Syria, the Saudi-led war on Yemen's Shi'a Houthi movement has engendered strange and complex alliances. Riyadh sees its Yemen campaign primarily in terms of its wider conflict with Iran for regional influence, and has duly taken its attention off the expansion of rival Wahhabi groups like AQAP, which has exploited the political vacuum and carefully built support among eastern Yemen's Sunni tribal leaders.

In quite different ways, JAN and AQAP are examples of developments in al-Qaida which should serve as a reminder that the movement is far from finished. Indeed, Osama bin Laden's son, Hamza bin Laden, has made speeches in recent months urging Saudis to support AQAP as a prelude to overthrowing the House of Saud. In doing so he may be positioning himself in an attempt to wrest the leadership of al-Qaida from Ayman al-Zawahiri and work to revitalise the movement.

Revolts from the Margins

An indication of whether such extreme movements will persist in new forms is given by countries that currently see a disproportionate number of their young people attracted to the cause. Two in particular stand out – Tunisia and Jordan.

Tunisia is a country that is undergoing a welcome transition to a democratic model of governance that is radically different to the long years of autocracy under the pre-2011 Ben Ali regime, yet it has seen proportionally more of its young people flock to IS than any other country in the region. There are several explanations but perhaps the most relevant is that it has well over a hundred thousand unemployed graduates out of a population of just 11 million, together with many hundreds of thousands of other people who see themselves as marginalised, despite the efforts the elected government might seek to make to improve their life prospects.

A similar situation exists in Jordan which has seen 4,000 young people go to fight in Iraq and Syria in the past five years. Many of them come from middle class families but see themselves as relatively marginalised and turn to radical Islam. This is made worse by a public education system that is rooted in schools advocating a very conservative orientation of Islam, especially for those likely to become prayer leaders. As [Yom and Sammour](#), two Jordan-based researchers, commented recently:

“Observers have described classes in such programs as breeding grounds for extremism, with religious and analytical instruction based upon conservative Islamic texts that discourage debate.

“Whenever pupils find such teachings unfulfilling, they can turn to the one source of Islamic discourse which is louder and more extreme – the Islamic State. The topic is so sensitive that, apart from vague promises to make religious instruction more open-minded, the government does not permit any systematic survey of its prayer leaders and Islamic instructors.”

A particularly well-informed commentator, Rami Khouri of the American University in Beirut broadens out this view to look more generally at support for IS in the Middle East. Khouri [cites](#) the work of political scientists and pollsters within the Middle East who estimate the extent of support for, or at least an understanding of, the IS outlook at between 5% and 20% of the Muslim population of the region. He then puts in a highly relevant caveat but, in turn, qualifies that:

“The actual number of hard core supporters, financiers, admirers, members, and logistical facilitators of Islamic State (Daesh) in the Arab world is probably no more than a few hundred thousand – but the pool of prospective adherents or sympathizers must realistically number in the millions.

The really worrying aspect of this is that these people mostly do not embrace Islamic State (Daesh) because they buy its ideology; they do so mainly because it is the most available alternative to the miserable lives they suffer, a misery that they see as the lifelong destiny for their children and grandchildren. These political and socio-economic dimensions of their lives and their societies offer them mostly poverty,

pain, exclusion, discrimination, suffering, and other bewildering, degrading realities that grind the humanity out of them over time.”

Conclusion

This kind of analysis highlights that one of the principal security risks facing elite societies is what Oxford Research Group terms “revolts from the margins”. It should be emphasized that this is in no way an apologia for IS or its actions but, as Khouri points out, there is scarcely any evidence that Western or Arab governments who dominate the international coalition currently ranged against IS have any appreciation of this perspective.

Non-governmental groups and other elements of Western and Middle Eastern civil society may be addressing this key issue analytically, as ORG has done for over a decade, but it is up to the governments, local and external, that wield power and influence in the greater Middle East region to embrace a sea change in policy that would begin to address the social drivers of violent extremism there.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His [‘Monthly Global Security Briefings’](#) are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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