The Future of ISIS: Strengths and Weaknesses
Dynamics of the "Virtual Caliphate" and the Gap in Counterterrorism Strategies

Dr. Muhammad Abu Rumman
November 2020

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This article examines hypotheses regarding the fate of ISIS, based on studying and analyzing the conditions, mechanisms, and general features that characterized the organization during the preceding period. This may help frame the discussion of future scenarios and the main variables of each of them.

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Neither international and regional policies, nor Arab regimes, learned the lesson. They did not seek out the actual and objective causes and circumstances behind the rise of ISIS. The thinking of counterterrorism strategies and policies was only to achieve military victories and security work both on the ground and virtually.

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Introduction

On 27 October 2019, US President Donald Trump announced that the leader of the so-called Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had been killed in the Syrian governorate of Idlib in an American special operation.[1] This came after years of intense security tracking by the largest and most prestigious intelligence services in the world. During this time, the most dangerous man in the world was able to run and hide while his followers around the world carried out the agenda of the organization he led, spreading terror from America to Europe, Australia, Asia, and Africa, as well as the Arab world.

Al-Baghdadi was not at the height of his power when he was killed in hiding. At the time of his death, his organization - which literally terrorized the world for nearly five years and was at the forefront of media attention and the monitoring of experts on security, terrorism, and strategic studies - had lost the caliphate it had established in Iraq and Syria. While its ideological and political influence extends to all continents of the world, nothing has remained of the Islamic State except mobile groups of fighters who have turned to guerrilla warfare in the desert stretching between the Iraqi and Syrian borders, and thousands of ISIS followers have been killed and detained in prisons and camps in both Iraq and Syria.

The organization did not acknowledge the defeat of the project and its mission, whether in its bloody rule in Iraq and Syria or in the actions that swept the world in the name of the caliphate and led to the murder of many people on various continents. On the contrary, its leader, al-Baghdadi, and his successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Qureshi, believed that, while they had lost a battle, the war was ongoing. And while the organization also lost its state, the stark irony is that the armed groups who pledged allegiance to the organization, and considered its leader a caliph, continue to declare loyalty to the Islamic State.

On the financial level, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned on 7 August that ISIS had funds amounting to $300 million, which remained with it after the removal of

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1   Speech on video by the US President announcing the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: https://tinyurl.com/yxz44ya3.

the «caliphate» in Iraq and Syria. In a report he submitted to the Security Council on the threat of the organization, Guterres said that the drop in its attacks «could be temporary.» He said he was certain that the organization could direct these funds to support terrorist acts inside and outside Iraq and Syria through informal money transfer companies. It also has financial self-sufficiency through a network of supporters and groups affiliated with it in other areas in the Middle East, Africa and Asia[2].

What ISIS accomplished during the period of its rise and growth represents a "quantum leap" in the ideology, strategies, and operating theories of terrorist groups, not only Islamist groups but also various ideological and nationalist groups. The organization turned the previous dynamics on their head and created an unprecedented situation in terms of the rise of sources of security threats in the world and the region.[3] This means we must

reflect deeply and accurately before we rush to prefer a particular scenario or direction among the organization's expected directions in the coming period. Some believe that the ISIS venture has ended, while others, on the contrary, believe that it is entering a new season that may be no less dangerous and consequential as before. To date, questions, debates, and narratives about the rise of the organization and the secret of its attraction-its ability to integrate and recruit tens of thousands of followers from various ethnicities, cultures, and languages-remain a source of discussion and debate among scholars, experts, and politicians. The topic of the future of the organization is no less complex and multifaceted than the issues surrounding the organization's spread, rise, and boom.

In this article, we will examine the expected hypotheses for the fate of the organization, based on studying and analyzing the conditions, mechanisms, and general features that characterized the organization during the preceding period. This may help frame the discussion of future scenarios and the main variables in each of them.

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2   See: "In numbers...The United Nations Reveals Total Wealth of Daesh", Sky News Arabia, https://tinyurl.com/y59sgfn8

3   Mohammed Abu Rumman, "The Secret of Attraction: ISIS Propaganda and Recruitment," in the book The Secret of Attraction: ISIS Propaganda and Recruitment, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Amman, 1st edition, 2014, pp. 9-16.

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"ISIS boom" – Analytical review of the phenomenon

The topic of ISIS goes beyond the issue of establishing an extremist religious state in Iraq and Syria, since these states or authorities have historic precedents, whether the Islamic experience (the Taliban model in Afghanistan is similar to some degree, as are the emirates established by Islamic groups in parts of Asia and Africa). ISIS has transcended the borders of the "establishment of a state in a specific region" to become a global phenomenon, or more precisely, a global political and ideological message. The organization has overturned global theories on the operation of terrorist groups, brought about a leap in methods of recruitment, mobilization, and political propaganda, greatly affected regional and global security, and restored and revived traditional historical concepts, such as the caliphate and the strict application of Sharia.

At the moment, we find many contradictions in the "ISIS phenomenon." For example, despite adopting global rhetoric, its tone was sectarian and focused on the Sunni crisis, and its key leadership was Iraqi and hostile to Iranian influence and Shiites.[4] This is despite the fact that, as part of its embrace of Islamic heritage, the organization was eager to link the (claimed) caliph to the lineage of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). While the organization had established a rudimentary state, including its interpretation of the provisions of Islamic law, it was established only in the "ideological imagination" of Islamic extremists. It was able to attract thousands of educated people, scholars, Europeans, and talented people in the West, including doctors, students, teachers, and engineers.[5] Paradoxically, while ISIS viewed women from an extremist perspective, even by the standards of Islamism, the organization also attracted thousands of women, among them hundreds of educated European, Arab, and Muslim women, some of whom held leadership positions. One of them, Dr. Iman al-Bagha, was considered the main

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[4] Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammed Abu Rumman, The "Islamic State" Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Amman, 1st edition, 2015, pp. 26-67.

[5] Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," Soufan Center, translated by Amal and Shannan, Idrak Center for Studies and Consultations: https://tinyurl.com/y36699cr.

mufti in the organization.[6] ISIS developed its militant media discourse to become more able to access community media (social media sites) than Arab governments, which spent tens of millions on institutions that failed to achieve a fraction of what this organization succeeded in doing.[7]

Thus, when we reread the phenomenon at various different levels, it helps us avoid reductionism, generalization, and over-simplification when adopting a specific opinion or position on the future and paths of this complex phenomenon. Perhaps the most important aspects we must remember here, before entering into a discussion of the hypotheses and expected directions, are the following:

First, at the level of ideological and intellectual background:

ISIS shares a common affiliation with Al-Qaeda and other radical groups to what we call "Salafi-jihadism." However, the organization has a particularity distinct from Al-Qaeda, which became ISIS's peer and competitor, and the two have split dominance and influence over regional and local jihadist groups in various communities. ISIS goes beyond the ideology of Al-Qaeda, which deemphasizes the establishment of states or governments, while ISIS believes in the establishment of states – indeed, a global caliphate. Moreover, ISIS is also based on a more rigid and strict ideological and jurisprudential structure. One such example (which my colleague Hassan Abu Hanieh and me revealed in our book, The Islamic State Organization) is that the jurisprudential authority ISIS has adopted is a book of jihadi jurisprudence by someone named Abu Abdullah al-Mujahid. In its jurisprudential rulings, this book goes beyond Al-Qaeda in terms of legitimizing and codifying many bloody acts, resulting in the organization's justification for killing civilians, innocents, Shiites, and Christians and blowing up mosques. Its major expansion of suicide operations, such that the list of targets became so broad that it could expand to millions of people, also explains for us the magnitude of the major shift in the organization's operational theory (compared to Al Qaeda), as we will mention later. It also explains what the organization did to transform the content of the political and media message, so that its main goal became to intimidate and spread terror in the hearts of everyone.[8]

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6   Mohammed Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, "Infatuated with Martyrdom: Female Jihadism from Al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State,'" Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Amman, 1st edition, 2017, p. 35-75, 305-360.

7   Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate:' Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," translated by Yasser Al-Bashir, National Opinion Research Center, May 30, 2016: https://tinyurl.com/y5gpew48

8   Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammed Abu Rumman, The Islamic State Organization, pp. 181-185, an electronic PDF copy of the book can be accessed at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11262.pdf

Second, operational theory in recruitment and indoctrination

From the above, it follows that the organization advanced a paradigm shift in operational theory from Al-Qaeda's elitist framework. Instead of a process of recruitment and indoctrination that is a long period of choice, selection, training, undercover operation, and often complex preparation, ISIS adopted a grass-roots, horizontal framework. Instead of Al-Qaeda's arduous and cumbersome process, it is very easy to be a member or loyalist of ISIS: one need only own a smart phone, send a video supporting the caliph, and mow down people on the beach or open fire on them in a restaurant, nightclub, or even a Shiite mosque. Quite simply, you are ISIS as soon as you do that, and there are many examples of bloody operations carried out by people without any long or complex recruitment process or religious background. On the contrary, some of them were known for their criminal backgrounds or for being totally at odds with the organization's strict moral tenets. Hence, the concept of "lone wolves" emerged to describe those who are affected by the organization, adopt its media and ideological message, and decide to play their role in achieving this mission by targeting the huge list of those whom the organization considers enemies.

Third, structural transformations in the "jihadist community"

With ISIS, another transformation took place, no less important than previous transformations. The organization incorporated women, children, and families in its political and ideological project. Here, it diverged from the experience of previous radical groups, especially Al-Qaeda, in filling its ranks and supporters with a large number of women, children, and minors who carry out suicide or combat operations or provide logistical support. Al-Qaeda had previously rejected this concept before a change occurred, beginning with ISIS's founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, which then became a reality with the rise and spread of ISIS globally.

Fourth, complex reasons behind rise and spread

One of the main difficulties in sketching an outline of the next stage for ISIS lies in the fact that the reasons and circumstances behind its rise and spread are complex. We cannot speak of one reason alone or one particular circumstance for all cases, nations, and communities. In Iraq and Syria, the Sunni crisis is a main key for understanding the reason for the organization's power and depth in confronting growing Iranian influence after the occupation of Iraq in 2003. ISIS exploited Sunnis' feelings of anger and marginalization to recruit thousands and attract former leaders in the Iraqi Army and Baath Party. A merger took place between angry Sunni actors and

the global jihadist ideology as represented by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who, being more militant than al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden, utilized sectarian sentiments as part of the organization's ideological structure. Similarly, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a set of factors is an important key to understanding the rise of ISIS and its split from Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. In places like Nigeria and Sinai, local policies of governments along with social conditions contributed to providing fertile ground for ISIS's rhetoric. In Europe and America, the issue of religious identity in Western societies contributed to a new generation of Muslim youth searching for a cultural and community haven with a religious heritage that extols the caliphate and Islamic rule. Online networks break all media barriers, especially in Arab countries, and ISIS was able to deploy these religious, historical, and cultural symbols to recruit thousands under the claim of the "promised Islamic state."

Despite the diversity and multiplicity of reasons for the rise and spread of ISIS thought, there are certain key concepts that help explain the phenomenon, such as feelings of marginalization, oppression, and exclusion, a sense of injustice, and the question of identities. However, the way that these those concepts are manifested must be understood within the specificities of each society and nation.[9]

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[9] On the secret of attraction and the ability to recruit, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Amman held an international conference in which many studies and papers were presented and published in a book in both Arabic and English. For the conference and its results, see: "Researchers examine 'the secret of ISIS attraction at an international conference in Amman,'" Alquds Alarabi newspaper, June 16, 2015.

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Analysis of strengths and weaknesses "after the collapse of the ISIS state"

Based on the previous analysis, the important question is what does ISIS's military defeat in Iraq and Syria and the defeat of its "state" mean? (ISIS also lost the province it established in Libya.) Does it mean that the pillars of the entire ideological and intellectual project have been shaken? If so, this would entail the end of the "dream" ISIS represented for a large number of supporters and sympathizers of establishing a "strong Sunni state under the rule of the jihadist version of Islam, which challenges the great powers and supports the weak" – as the organization wanted to present itself. Or was the military defeat temporary, and does the ISIS boom still exist in terms of recruitment, mobilization, and attraction? The experience of extremist, radical jihadist groups has confirmed that their military defeat or the killing of their leaders does not necessarily spell the end of the organization and its religious ideology.

We are not dealing with a single variable here; rather, we are dealing with a complex phenomenon and a multiplicity of data. It is a mistake to jump to conclusions on the basis of a single factor. We must instead re-interpret and analyze the set of key variables that represent sources of power and capability for ISIS.

First, at the military level

we distinguish between the center and the peripheries. At the center, i.e. Iraq and Syria, the organization's military defeat was major. It lost territory, the state, and equipment, and the institutions it had built on the ground collapsed, such that it was no longer capable of general mobilization as it was before. In addition, thousands of its followers were killed, especially in Mosul and Raqqa, and thousands are in detention centers and jails.

Is this military defeat total or final? The answer is emphatically, no. ISIS did not declare surrender or acknowledge defeat. It continues to maintain effective dynamics to restructure, reproduce, and adapt to the current phase. The organization gained important expertise from its experience in Iraq, where, after the collapse of its first state following the death of al-Zarqawi and the formation of the Sunni Awakening in 2007-2008, the organization rebuilt and rose once again. The same thing

happened with Al-Qaeda itself, after the Afghanistan War in 2002, when it shifted to decentralization and was able to survive and return to work and effectiveness.[10]

Thus, to begin with, at the military level in Iraq and Syria, before the elimination of the caliphate, ISIS was in a phase of restructuring and transitioning to "guerrilla warfare" and field work in the desert. This reveals another development in its speed of adaptation, restructuring, and military strategy transformation. Indeed, the global numbers, indicators, and reports provide important information and data on the evolution of the organization's operations since the end of the caliphate, including the hundreds of terror attacks it has carried out and its development of new dynamics to obtain funding and combat tactics.

What is the organization's future in Iraq and Syria? That depends on more than one variable, the foremost of which is the political process. The political process needs to develop and integrate the Sunnis, mitigate feelings of exclusion and marginalization, and reduce the politicization of the sectarian situation there, in favor of the growth of consensual national policies that govern political and security institutions. If this happens, then this will deal a severe blow to ISIS's ability to recruit and propagandize, as long as its political and media

rhetoric continues to focus on "the Sunni crisis" and the same situation in Syria. The converse is also completely true: if the Sunnis are not integrated and the political crises remain at the fore, then the field remains wide open for the growth of disgruntled radicalism, whether via ISIS or other fundamentalist groups.

Also associated with this is the variable of regional and international policies, since it is known that ISIS's defeat only occurred when everyone worked together to achieve it. The Americans, Russians, Turks, the Iraqi government under Haidar Al-Abadi together with pro-Iranian Militias and Kurdish Peshmerga contributed to containing the organization and eliminating its state. Ironically, in Iraq the two major foreign rivals – Iran and USA - put their differences aside to finish off ISIS together. It was only after the declared victory over ISIS in December 2017 that tensions between both adversaries grew again. They reached a peak when American planes bombed and killed General Qasem Soleimani (the leader of the Iranian Quds Force) alongside Iraqi militia strongman Abdul-Mahdi al-Muhandis at the beginning of 2020. Policies reverted to disagreement and conflict in both Iraq and Syria. American-Iranian tension is severe, relations between Turkey and Russia as well as between Turkey and Iraq are not getting better. On top of it inner-Iraqi relations between the Kurdish Regional Government and the central Iraqi government are strained, leading to a security vacuum in the so-called disputed territories in Northern

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10 Institute for the Study of War, "ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency," June 2019: https://tinyurl.com/y4mf69qm

Iraq. All of this in addition to the uncontrolled presence of pro-Iranian Shia militias in areas predominantly inhabited by Iraqi Sunnis signal a return to the former circumstances and conditions that ISIS used to fuel its rise. These tensions do not necessarily mean a repeat of the past, but they mean giving the organization a better opportunity to restructure, adapt, and consider its next strategies.[11]

The secondary military level is associated with the other branches of the organization throughout the world. There are 12 known provinces (ISIS branches). After the organization's separation, there are provinces in Iraq and Syria, Sinai, Yemen, West Africa (Nigeria and the vicinity of Lake Chad), Central Africa (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Chad), East Africa (Somalia), Khorasan (Pakistan and Afghanistan), Southeast Asia (the Philippines), the Caucasus, Tunisia, and Libya. Before his death, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced his intention to establish provinces in Saudi Arabia and Turkey.[12]

Although there is no single trend for all of these organizations and branches (in terms of activity and power, they vary in their capabilities and conditions in relation to the conditions in each country), it is important to note that most of the branches remain loyal and committed

to ISIS. Similarly, it is noteworthy that Africa has become a fertile and broad field for the organization's branches.

Thus, at this level, too, the military activity of the branches outside Iraq and Syria has not declined or been interrupted. Operations and activities remain widespread in many countries.

Second, at the level of propaganda, recruitment, and operational theory

We noted earlier that the real, major leap forward taken by ISIS was at the level of media propaganda, immense recruitment capability, and transition from an elite to a grass-roots operational theory. This entailed a shift from selective methods to speed in recruiting and planning operations, from specific and limited goals to a broad list of goals, and from structured planning to unrestricted individual action.

There are a variety of factors, not just one, behind ISIS's effectiveness at recruiting, unprecedented among terrorist groups. Its recruitment relies heavily on internet propaganda and the political narrative that stems from grievances, real crises, and feelings of anger and marginalization, to make a case for joining the organization, which has become in itself a "political message" that is its greatest source of power.

Such an analogy requires an approach to the most prominent aspects of ISIS's attractive media discourse. One of its main themes is reaching the "promised land" (in Iraq and

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11 Edmund Fitton-Brown, "The Persistent Threat from the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda: The View from the UN," Washington Institute: https://tinyurl.com/yy3t8r9r

12 Note that Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, the spokesman for ISIS, talks about these provinces in detail, in his video, "Tell the stories, so perhaps they will reflect," Al-Furqan Media Foundation, October 18, 2020.

Syria), a dream that kindles the imagination of millions of Muslims haunted by a historical model of the caliphate that takes on a symbolic nature. This was one of the most prominent sources of recruitment and propaganda power for the organization.

This model collapsed militarily, and there are suspicions and strong arguments that it also received a political and intellectual blow within a wide cross-section of the community of ISIS supporters and sympathizers, especially in Western nations and among those who do not have a robust religious culture. The organization came to them through the "identity doorway" (i.e., those who consider the establishment of the state synonymous with Islamic identity and Islamic Sharia rule). Now they have discovered that the model is imaginary, unrealistic, and impossible and that the model of governance offered by ISIS was counter to their expectations. However, such an assessment is relative and is not considered a decisive factor today given the collapse of the state itself, at least for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, one of the key pillars of ISIS rhetoric and fundamental factors in its rise and ability to recruit is the claiming of grievances and marginalization in many segments of society. This includes the Sunni in Iraq and Syria, the Pashtun in Afghanistan, and certain regions, tribes, and religious divisions in Africa, as well as the weak status of Arab and Muslim communities, authoritarian policies, and the

crisis of political legitimacy in official Arab regimes. Such policies and issues give ISIS fertile ground for attracting individuals-or perhaps social segments-and unleashing revolutionary rhetoric against these issues, especially given what we can now call the "new era of authoritarianism" in the Arab world and the failed Arab Spring. These policies, which stifle and greatly diminish democratic spaces and freedoms, also provide considerable room for the organization's activity and propaganda. ISIS is both the legitimate offspring of official Arab authoritarian policies and the logical and natural result of political obstruction and the closure of legitimate spaces for public action, freedoms, and energies. This leads many young people to other spaces, as happened with many followers of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after the military coup of 4 July 2013. The events that followed the dispersal of the Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda sit-ins led to thousands of Brotherhood youth being thrown into prisons and detention centers and thousands fleeing Egypt or joining radical groups inside Egypt, including Ansar al-Sharia (which later became part of the ISIS network). There is also the situation of members of the dissolved Iraqi army, who were demobilized and prevented from working again in the military and security services. Their profession is armed work and combat, so the logical alternative would be the jihadist radical stream, with its ISIS version in Iraq.[13]

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[13] Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammed Abu Rumman, The Islamic State Organization, pp. 221-226.

In this respect, particularly, neither international and regional policies, nor Arab regimes, learned the lesson. They did not seek out the actual and objective causes and circumstances behind the rise of ISIS-oppression, marginalization, and the feeling of not belonging to the countries in which the disaffected live. The thinking of counterterrorism strategies and policies was only to achieve military victories and security work both on the ground and virtually, while the causes and factors that led to the rise of ISIS remain, and in some cases and regions are worsening.[14]

In terms of the speed and reach of recruitment that occurred by moving from the elite/vertical to the grass-roots/horizontal model, this is a feature that will not stop or retreat. It is in part related to the infomedia era (the communication and information revolution) and the online world, where ISIS jumped to the forefront very quickly. The organization began to address the world in multiple languages and easily reached followers and devotees throughout the world, introducing its rhetoric through social media. ISIS mastered the game of cat and mouse with global counterterrorism policies. When one channel closed, it opened another, and so on, so that it is no longer possible to achieve decisive and final results (at least in the current situation) preventing the organization's messages and propaganda from reaching everyone.

In the online era, ISIS has become similar to a franchise, like a company with trademarks and proprietary characteristics, with the difference being that ISIS does not complicate the conditions for joining, opening branches, or belonging to the organization. This situation represents a definitive and irreversible leap in jihadist methods, meaning that internet recruitment capabilities remain powerful when accompanied by a message, goals, and the operations necessary to convey them.

Based on all of the above, it can be concluded that the idealized model of the state and Islamic life, which the organization very effectively and professionally marketed in its media and political messages, has been shaken because of the military defeat and the model's illusory nature. The great disparity shocked many of those who went there or who followed the development of events. The specific historical model in their imagination was at odds with the alleged reality. While we do not have accurate field readings to support this phenomenon, there are many testimonies confirming this "shock." However, political,

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14 After the events of 11 September 2001, important qualitative reviews took place in the US at the level of think tanks and the US administration. A conviction grew in Washington that Al-Qaeda was an Arab-manufactured bomb exported abroad, and that the historic deal between American administrations and Arab autocratic regimes was a major reason for the rise of al-Qaeda at the time and its targeting of American administrations. The thinking involved the need to adopt general reform in the Arab world as a main pillar of US foreign policy, and the US Secretary of State at the time, Colin Powell, announced the well-known initiative to spread democracy in the Arab world. However, the policies changed and differed after that with the deterioration of the situation in Iraq, and then returned later, under President Donald Trump, to the traditional historical bargain, i.e., support for tyrannical regimes in exchange for US interests and the security of Israel.

economic, and social causes and drivers still exist, and the capabilities, possibilities, and leaps that occurred in the field of propaganda and recruitment also remain active.

Third, the community incubator

One of the most significant, consequential, and important variables in the analysis of radical armed groups is the availability of a "community incubator." Had ISIS not existed within the Sunni community during previous stages, with a network of protection allowing it to lurk and hide, it would not have been able to succeed security-wise and militarily in the face of professional international and regional intelligence services. The incubator provides a number of advantages to these groups: first, a protective network; second, a recruitment reservoir; and third, a sympathetic popular base. We can see this situation in Iraq and Syria at certain stages with ISIS and other groups, in parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan with the Taliban and the Jalaluddin Haqqani network, in Sinai and Nigeria, and so on.

If we return to the circumstances surrounding the rise of ISIS in 2013, its control of Mosul, and its major operations in Anbar and other areas before that, we will find that it had clear Sunni sympathy at that point, due to the hardship of Sunnis under the policies of the prime minister at the time, Nouri al-Maliki. A great number of women were detained in prison and tortured[15].

The Sunnis accused the US administration and the Iraqi government of changing the results of the parliamentary elections in 2010, after Ayad Allawi was ahead. He was Shiite, but he led a coalition representing Sunni forces, especially the Baathists and the nationalists, to confront other powers.[16]

Thus, the security and political situation at various stages helped ISIS find a nurturing environment, promote its radical rhetoric in the surrounding social circles, and then establish a network of protection and supporters. However, this situation experienced a violent shock as a result of ISIS's hardline rule that caused misfortune for Sunnis themselves. ISIS cannot expect to be embraced again by Sunnis unless it changes its strategy and tactics and makes revisions that suggest to the Sunni community that it will not find itself in a situation worse than the status quo.

The same situation applies to most of ISIS's branches in Syria and other areas. The organization does make good use of the surrounding circumstances and the actual conditions, using them in its rhetoric, propaganda, and recruitment capacity. However, the seeds of its destruction are found at the core of its militant ideology, which makes its past record a disturbing specter for the societies in which it has spread.

15   Rahma Al-Rawi, Iraq Women's Prison, Al-Arabi Al-Jadid Newspaper, 9-7-2015. The article can be returned at the following link: https://cutt.us/aQPPO

16   Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammed Abu Rumman, The Islamic State Organization, pp. 23-67. Also, Renad Mansour, "The Sunni Predicament in Iraq," Carnegie Papers, Malcolm Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, March 3, 2016: https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/03/ar-pub-62945

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New dynamics for ISIS

Thus, local, regional, and international factors continue to provide fertile ground for radicalism, especially feelings of marginalization, injustice, anger, and a desire for revenge, in many regions where ISIS and its branches exist, particularly Iraq and Syria. This gives the organization the capability and effectiveness in recruitment and propaganda, as well as expertise in military and security activity and ability to adapt, that enable it to regenerate a new leadership and structure and shift its tactics from one stage to another with high efficiency.

Perhaps the most notable observation regarding this restructuring and adaptation is the shift from a model of an actual to a virtual caliphate. The organization is acutely aware that the caliphate - in a tangible, physical, on-the-ground sense - ended with the loss of major cities. However, at the same time, it has preserved the symbolism of the caliphate among its followers and supporters. The shift from actual to virtual caliphate provides the organization with intellectual and ideological cover for the relationship between it and its various branches around the world. Its global

message remained effective, with the leader of the organization still addressing his supporters as the caliph. The media machine constantly pumps this message, which means that the official and public declaration of the end of the caliphate has not left a vacuum.

Despite this, a tangible decline has been observed in the individual and small-scale operations that plagued many of the world's nations during the period of ISIS's rise and spread, from 2014 - 2018. This is because a large part of the luster of the organization's propaganda has faded. Previously, two images had struck a chord with ISIS sympathizers: first, the image of power, decapitations, and brutality in dealing with and punishing enemies; and second, the embellished image of the reality in the territory controlled by the organization, whereby it appears to be an Islamic state under Sharia rule. The situation has completely reversed in this regard, and the propaganda that stoked the thirst for power of many young people of Muslim and Arab societies, in the context of the severe weakness of the Arab regimes vis-à-vis the present challenges, has disappeared.

Moreover, it has been noted that the organization's concerns and rhetoric during recent times have refocused on the Palestinian issue, after the latter had been largely excluded from its rhetoric (compared with Al-Qaeda, which used the Palestinian issue effectively in it media messaging). ISIS now exploits current situations, such as the "deal of the century" and normalization between Arab states and Israel.[17]

The issue of women detained in camps and imprisoned ISIS members has become one of the organization's priorities and is at the top of its rhetoric in the current period. Most likely the organization will try to carry out operations similar to the Abu Ghraib prison operation in Iraq, in which dozens of the organization's members were released, or similar to other Al-Qaeda operations in Yemen and Afghanistan. This media message is important because it signals its followers and their families that ISIS does not abandon its responsibilities.[18]

17   Hassan Abu Hanieh, "Palestine...a new phase for ISIS at the time of the 'deal of the century,'" aljazeera. net, January 30, 2020.

18   Note the rhetoric of Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, "Tell the stories," focusing on this subject, op. cit.

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Conclusion

ISIS was able to make a major pivot by making adjustments, restructuring, and shifting the caliphate towards a virtual model. At the level of field, military, and security tactics, and at the level of media and political rhetoric, it began to rearrange its priorities according to regions. However, at the level of discourse, the organization explains its military losses due to the connivance of major and regional states against it. It employs that discourse on the sectarian and regional levels as well, exploiting two factors: first, Arab authoritarianism, which reinforces the crisis of legitimacy in the Arab world and creates feelings of marginalization, frustration, and anger, thereby often providing a fertile environment for polarization and recruitment, and second, developments with the Palestinian issue as a result of the deal of the century and the normalization between Arab states and Israel.

ISIS is not expected to regain its ability to build community "incubators" in light of the previous bitter experience of these communities under ISIS rule. Nor are there indications or harbingers of ideological revisions that would reassure communities that, if they were to support the organization, they would not pay dearly, as happened previously. The leaders of the organization remain on the same ideological footing as their predecessors, unless there is a sudden development in that regard, or in terms of its relationship with Al-Qaeda, as they split influence and relationships with local jihadist groups. Such a scenario would lead to other transformations that enhance the organization's ability to capture a social base or restore its ability to recruit strongly.

On the other hand, counterterrorism policies remain focused on results, not on causes, conditions, and context. This means that ISIS, or other organizations, will always find a fertile environment for recruitment and propaganda, and perhaps a community "incubator," in many regions.

The second issue concerns the legacy of ISIS. Over the past years, the organization has trained and raised an entire generation in the regions it controlled. This includes those who migrated to those lands, many of whom are in detention centers and camps, especially those who were called Lion Cubs of the Caliphate. Meanwhile, neither local communities,

nor international organizations, nor even nations that could take them back from ISIS camps, have developed any clear strategy to rehabilitate those individuals and integrate them into their communities. This means that we have an entire generation for whom we still have no convincing policy answers.

If there is to be serious global reflection on countering terrorism and extremism, it is necessary to focus on the causes and drivers, primarily the political, economic, and social circumstances in many countries. This includes building a climate of freedom and democracy, developing the capacities of these countries to integrate young people, and reducing the state of discontent, anger, and frustration among a large proportion of them. It is also necessary to continue to cooperate at the level of global and regional policies, reflect on political solutions in tandem with security and military efforts, and create precise conceptions for dealing with ISIS's legacy of jihadist families who are expected to return to their countries and communities, especially in the European countries that have severe legal and rights restrictions around prosecuting and dealing with returnees. The situation requires a political and societal strategic vision to ensure these individuals (returnees) do not became a threat to the security of their communities.

About the author

Bessma Momani is Interim Assistant Vice President of International Relations and Professor of Political Science at the University of Waterloo. She is also a Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance and Innovation (CIGI) and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute, Washington, DC. She was formerly a fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., the Stimson Center, and a visiting scholar at Georgetown University's Mortara Center. She is a Fulbright Scholar and a 2015 Fellow of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation. She has also worked as a consultant to the International Monetary Fund's Communications Office and the Independent Evaluation Office.

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ISIS was able to make a major pivot by making adjustments, restructuring, and shifting the caliphate towards a virtual model. At the level of field, military, and security tactics, and at the level of media and political rhetoric, it began to rearrange its priorities according to regions. However, at the level of discourse, the organization explains its military losses due to the connivance of major and regional states against it. It employs that discourse on the sectarian and regional levels as well, exploiting two factors: first, Arab authoritarianism, which reinforces the crisis of legitimacy in the Arab world and creates feelings of marginalization, frustration, and anger, thereby often providing a fertile environment for polarization and recruitment, and second, developments with the Palestinian issue as a result of the deal of the century and the normalization between Arab states and Israel.

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