

# After the Caliphate

Ideology, Propaganda, Organization and Global Jihad

Will ISIS Make a Comeback ?



Editor

Mohammad Abu Rumman

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Politics & Society Institute

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**“After the Caliphate”**: Ideology,  
Propaganda, Organization, and  
Global Jihad

# **WILL ISIS MAKE A COMEBACK?**

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Will ISIS Make a Comeback?

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# Contents

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<b>Preface</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Researchers and Experts Participating in the Book</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Post-Caliphate Phase</b>	<b>29</b>
Retransmitting the Caliphate	31
Shifting Intellectual Foundations of ISIS after Tamkin	51
Discussion	74
<b>Chapter Two: The Future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq</b>	<b>81</b>
The Future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq	83
Discussion	103
<b>Chapter Three: A Battlefield Assessment of ISIS After the Caliphate.</b>	<b>117</b>
Regrouping: Resilient Desert Warriors Reconstitute Their Forces	119
Bannermen of the Forever Jihad. ISIS 2.0 Reverts to an Insurgency	145
Discussion	169
<b>Chapter Four: The Human Legacy of ISIS</b>	<b>187</b>
Al-Hol Camp: Tracking Data and Projecting Solutions	189
Discussion	220
<b>Chapter Five: Strategies and Policies to Combat Extremism and Terrorism</b>	<b>235</b>
Review of Global Counterterrorism Strategies	237
Discussion	255
<b>Chapter Six: The Future of Global Jihadism</b>	<b>267</b>
After the Caliphate: Terrorism and International Political Transformations	269
Beyond the Caliphate and the Future of Jihadism in Africa	283
Discussion	287



## Preface

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This book is the product of research papers and academic discussions during the proceedings of a closed research workshop held by the Politics and Society Institute in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Amman. The workshop was held via Zoom from 17-18 July 2021, with the participation of a select group of Arab, Western, and Jordanian researchers, experts, and specialists. Most of the participants attended all the intensive sessions over two days, while some participated only in some of the sessions, discussions, and remarks.

The conference participants attempted to gauge the repercussions and consequences of the collapse of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. They explored this at the level of the ability of the organization itself in recruitment, political and media propaganda, mobilization, ideological resilience, and organizational cohesion, as well as its ability to rise again.

A loss of the territories which were under the control of the terrorist group (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq has significantly weakened the extremists' facilities not only on the battlefields in these countries. The ISIS propaganda machine is undermined, too. However, it does not mean a complete victory over the "Islamic State". The group still demonstrates a capability to adapt to new conditions, proceeds with the use of new tactics (sabotage and guerrilla activity, terrorist attacks, etc.).

The Islamic State transformation from a "quasi-state" towards a global terrorist organization without a territorial bond designates a considerable increase of this group's peril on a regional and global level. The continuing instability in the conflict zone raises serious concerns referring to a capability of the ISIS revitalization and even

some kind of revenge (including a takeover of territories). There is also a possibility of the state's militants' relocation to different regions of the world both in conflict areas (Afghanistan, Yemen, Lybia, etc.) and other countries (not excepting European countries and Russia).

This conference expected the transfer of fighters from one place to another, whenever conditions of «international discord» existed, such as Afghanistan, which - after the conference ended - constituted a distinct destination for ISIS, especially in conjunction with the American withdrawal from it, and the assumption of the Taliban, the old friend, the current apostate enemy, the reins are there.

In this context, there is a real danger of foreign Jihadi fighters' returning to their home countries for sabotage and terrorist activities, as well as for the creation of "autonomous Jihad" sleeper cells. ISIS will continue to inspire its present-day followers and recruit new ones (especially among young people) in different countries of the world. It makes coordination of international counter-terrorism efforts and the use of "smart force" against ISIS necessary.

There is also a strong hypothesis that the caliphate will switch - with its communication tools - from the realism and controlling of actual lands to the realm of virtual, so that there will be an extremist caliphate that crosses borders and continents, taking advantage of the widespread of means of communication, especially among young people.

Whereas the countries of the Middle East did not provide any real solutions to deal with the returnees from the battlefields, but rather made prisons a unique environment for meeting and transferring ideas and promoting extremism and violent extremism, without rehabilitation programs or treatment for the brainwashing suffered by those who join these organizations, as victims in the first place, the main driver of extremism is to confront «injustice».

The conference was limited to the group of researchers and experts participating in it. The goal was to discuss and develop approaches to studying the “jihadist phenomenon” (here, meaning radical groups that take violence as a path under the pretext of implementing Islam). Another aim was to promote dialogue and an exchange of opinions, experiences, and knowledge to be shared among researchers specialized in this field. The specialized academic discussions aimed at building a deeper conceptual and methodological framework in studying, understanding, and reaching conclusions and findings about the phenomenon.

It may be useful here to emphasize the Politics and Society Institute’s firm conviction in the importance of moving from individual research efforts to a collective format in studying the various variables and phenomena. It also believes in forming groups of researchers and experts working in a particular field to form more scholarly, precise, and consensus-based conceptions, as well as to discuss the approaches, tools, and concepts in the theoretical framework. By doing so, we can fashion more fine-tuned approaches to understanding the events and variables taking place, as well as explaining phenomena, policies, and attitudes.

Here, we should thank all those who had an important and key role in completing this project, either in holding the conference or producing this book. In particular, we would like to thank Husein al-Sarayreh, the Projects & Studies Senior Coordinator at the Politics and Society Institute—the coordinator who took charge of preparing the program, communicating with participating researchers, participating in reviewing and editing the papers, and managing the sessions—as well as Tim Petschulat, the Director of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Amman, and Yousef Ibrahim, the Project Manager at FES office. We also thank the Politics and Society Institute team, who worked to

transcribe the discussions and draft and edit the book, especially Alaa Aqel, Abdullah Mohammad al-Taei, Anas al-Dabbas, and Bashar Abu Rumman.

**Mohammad Abu Rumman**

Amman, 20 September 2021

# Researchers and Experts Participating in the Book

A group of experts and researchers specialized in the field of terrorism and extremism and combating it participated in the work of this conference. Some of the researchers submitted joint papers with other researchers and academics, but the following list contains those who directly participated in the workshop activities, discussions, and remarks.

## 1- Arab Experts

**Maher Farghali**, an Egyptian expert and researcher specializing in jihadist movements.

**Dr. Khaled Salim**, a Palestinian researcher working on his PhD thesis at Carthage University in Tunisia. He specializes in counter-extremism and counter-terrorism strategies and policies, and is an expert in the field of institutional assessment and development. He has worked for more than 25 years in senior executive and supervisory positions as an international expert in the fields of security and justice sector reform, societal peacebuilding, and individual, governmental, and civil society capacity-building.

**Dr. Ali Taher al-Hamoud**, Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Baghdad and an Iraqi researcher and expert specializing in extremism, terrorism, political Islam, and Shiism.

**Dr. Waleed al-Rawi**, former brigadier general in the Iraqi army, a soldier and political writer who served as secretary to the Minister of Defense in Iraq from 1996-2003. He has several books, including: *The Peaceful Approach in Spreading Da'wah in the Early Days of Islam*, *The Iraqi Resistance and the American Dilemma*, *Spotlight on*

Contemporary Islamist Movements and Groups, The Military Doctrine of the Islamic Caliphate State (ISIS), and The Islamic State of Iraq.

**Dr. Mouayad al-Windawi**, consultant at the Iraqi Center for Strategic Studies in the Jordanian capital, Amman. He previously served as a political consultant in the offices of a number of United Nations organizations operating in the Middle East out of Jordan. Al-Windawi has taught at many Iraqi universities and holds a PhD in international relations from the University of Reading in the United Kingdom.

**Dr. Abbas Mohammad Saleh**, a Sudanese researcher and media writer specializing in African affairs.

## 2- Western Experts

**Charlie Winter**, a Senior Research Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR). He studies terrorism and insurgency, with a focus on strategic online communication. Winter received his PhD in War Studies at King's College London, and is an Associate Fellow at the International Center for Counter-Terrorism in the Hague.

**Brian Glyn Williams**, Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts. He is a researcher specializing in Ottoman history, Islamic Eurasia, identity and nationalism in the Caucasus, armed groups, and al-Qaeda. He has his own website.

**Charles Lister**, an American researcher and Director of the Countering Terrorism and Extremism Program at the Middle East Institute, and a former Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. His research has focused on terrorism, insurgency, and sub-state security threats in the Middle East, particularly in the Levant. His recent work has focused almost exclusively on assessing the state of the conflict in Syria in general, and the makeup of the anti-government rebellion and

its various jihadist components in particular. That has required face-to-face contact with the leaders of more than 100 opposition groups from across Syrian society.

### **3- Jordanian Experts**

**Dr. Mohammad al-Azamat**, a Jordanian researcher specializing in terrorism and extremism, and a retired colonel in the Jordanian Armed Forces.

**Dr. Saud al-Sharafat**, a Jordanian researcher specializing in terrorism and extremism, and a retired brigadier-general in the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate. He is chairman of the Shorufat Center for Globalization and Terrorism Studies.

**Dr. Marwan Shehadeh**, a Jordanian researcher specializing in terrorism and extremism issues. He has many publications on the subject.

**Hassan Abu Haniyeh**, a Jordanian researcher from the team of the Politics and Society Institute. He specializes in political Islam and has many publications and studies.

**Husein al-Sarayreh**, Project Coordinator at the Politics and Society Institute, and coordinator of the conference.

**Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman**, researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies and Senior Researcher at the Politics and Society Institute. He specializes in issues of political Islam.



## Introduction

# The Future of 'Post-Caliphate' Daesh Challenge of 'Jihadists' in Unstable Middle East

Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman

### 1- Idea and Objectives of Seminar

On 27 October 2019, US President Donald Trump announced the killing of the leader of the so-called organization of Islamic Caliphate (Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi) in the Idlib governorate in Syria in a US special operation<sup>1</sup> after years of intensive security surveillance by the largest and most experienced intelligence services around the world. The most dangerous man globally had managed to elude capture and to go into hiding, while his followers in hundreds of countries were implementing the agenda of the organization he is leading and sowing terror, from the United States to Europe, Australia, Asia and Africa, let alone the Arab world.

The organization acknowledged the killing of al-Baghdadi. At the same time, the spokesman for ISIS<sup>2</sup> (Daesh), Abu-Hasan al-Muhajir, was killed. Within days, the organization announced that the new leader would be Abu-Ibrahim al-Hashimi<sup>3</sup>. This confirms that the experience of handling jihadist movements, which have a global and regional character in particular, such as Daesh and al-Qaeda, shows

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1 See televised speech by the US President in which he announced the killing of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/yxz44ya3>

2 The Arabic uses "State organization", and "Islamic State" organization, which are both translated as ISIS throughout; Daesh is used when the text uses the Arabic acronym Daesh

3 See: What Do We Know About New "Caliph of Islamic State" Abu-Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi? BBC Arabic, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y44ps7em>

that the strategy of killing leaders does not necessarily mean the end of the organization or its ideological message. This also means that the challenge of Daesh or ISIS, on the level of regional or global security, or even the crises inside many countries, has not ended with the killing of the “caliph” or the end of the state of the organization and its loss of the territories it had previously controlled.

Going back a little, ISIS posed a significant military and security challenge over the past years to the fragile regimes of the Middle East and caused great concern to the international community. It maintained control over large areas and exceeded previous global jihadist organizations in terms of ideology and strategy, as well as recruitment, mobilization, and methods of propaganda and media. Its ambitions exceeded acts of vengeance and revenge to control and holding territory. It managed to impose a “de facto caliphate state” in western Iraq and eastern Syria and its presence extended to many countries by setting up active wilayas [Islamic term for provinces].

The activities of the organization and its resilience and ability to recreate and reposition itself are significant. Despite expelling it from the areas of its control and ending its caliphate in the wake of the creation of a broad global coalition, the organization is still active and launching scattered attacks. The end of the political project of the organization and its governance suggests the end of the stage of the project of the “state” and the system of “caliphate” and returning to the status of “organization”, which depends on the approach of guerrilla warfare, attrition, and decentralization. The defeat inflicted on the caliphate project has not undermined the status of the organization as the organization still enjoys combat, financing, and media capabilities and has appeal in different regions.

The reason why the successive blows that it received did not end its existence and role is that the root causes and objective conditions that

contributed to its rise still exist without real treatment. The political, economic, and security situation in the Middle East is more fragile, and the region is suffering from weak stability. In most of the countries where the organization is active, especially at its epicenter in Iraq and Syria, the local official forces lack efficiency and the necessary resources to hunt down the members of ISIS within the context of the shift of the organization to the approach of attrition and tactics of guerrilla warfare.

Afterward, the corona pandemic came as an additional gift to the return of the activities of ISIS amid doubts about the future role of the mission of the global coalition in the Middle East. The global efforts that seek to prevent the return of ISIS seem to be vital and required more in the coming period. Everybody agrees on the need to continue the war on terror without being influenced by the circumstances, whether they involve the outbreak of the coronavirus or others. The organization will take advantage of any gap to return, as it did previously<sup>4</sup>.

The quick response shown by ISIS in handling the COVID-19 pandemic shows the long experience of the organization in using the disruption in political, economic, and social conditions. It has also added a new experience of handling exceptional health conditions. The organization has always been a reflection of the failure of the local policies of the “national state”, the mismanagement of sectarian and ethnic splits and political and ideological disputes, poor governance, and misery of foreign interventions.

This background has constituted the main idea for holding the seminar “The Future of Post-Caliphate Daesh: Challenge of ‘Jihadists’ in Unstable Middle East”, in which prominent researchers and experts take part and is held by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) office in

<sup>4</sup> See: Hassan Abu Hanieh “ISIS and Gift of Corona Pandemic”, ‘Aabi21 website, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y3o77pjj>

Amman. The seminar aims at discussing the factors and changes affecting the future of Daesh and its impact regionally and globally and the possibilities arising from this. It also seeks to develop a realistic vision of the fate of ISIS after the end of the “caliphate” project and its shift again to the status of “organization” from an ideological and strategic aspect; knowing the size of its military and media capabilities, its influence and map of its spread, and numbers of its fighters; knowing the possibilities of its return; knowing the reasons for its survival and the objective conditions that help it to stay; and providing visions on curbing its appeal and eliminating its activities.

The premise of this background paper is that the end of the caliphate state does not necessarily mean the end of the organization and its ideological message, which has constituted the source of the greatest threat and the main source of inspiring its members worldwide. Consequently, it is necessary to first look into the factors that affect the next stages and its rise and power and threat to global and regional security, and second to review the global and regional strategies in place to counter terrorism and radicalism.

## **2- Historical Background: Rise and Decline of Organization**

ISIS (Daesh) took advantage of the upheavals in the Middle East in the wake of the shift against the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011, the rebuilding of authoritarianism, and fueling of sectarian conflicts. It did this by establishing a “caliphate” over large swaths of territory that it seized in western Iraq and eastern Syria in 2014. It sought to expand the scope of the “caliphate” by establishing numerous external wilayas in the regions. The local forces in Iraq and Syria alone failed to regain control over the areas of the influence of Daesh’s caliphate. Removing Daesh from the areas under its control required creating a global military coalition, led by the United States, which caused large human and material losses as the expulsion of Daesh from the Iraqi

city of Mosul and the Syrian city of al-Raqqah necessitated destroying the two cities<sup>5</sup>.

The organization succeeded in expanding and spreading in most of the areas in which the manifestations of invasive dictatorship, sectarian and ethnic conflicts, and foreign interventions were visible. The organization quickly imposed its control in a very dramatic manner over large swaths in Iraq and Syria and managed to create geopolitical space, which extends between the two countries. It maintained absolute governance over more than 7 million people, having crowned its military operations with the capture of the Syrian city of al-Raqqah in January 2014, and controlled the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014. The expansion and spread of the organization resulted in the announcement of the establishment of the “caliphate” state on 29 June 2014 and pledging allegiance to Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph of the Muslims<sup>6</sup>.

By March 2019, Daesh lost the last pockets of the caliphate through its expulsion from the village of al-Baghuz east of the Euphrates River when US President Donald Trump announced on 22 March 2019 that he had managed to destroy ISIS. Trump claimed that Daesh was defeated by 100%. The claims of destroying Daesh were reinforced after the killing of its leader, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, on 26 October 2019 by a US special force in the Idlib governorate northwest of Syria. On the next day, Abu al-Hasan al-Muhajir, the official spokesman for the organization, was killed in another operation carried out by the US forces in the city of Jarablus in Aleppo in northern Syria. However, this success was a tactical achievement and a moral victory, which marked the end of one stage and the beginning of another in the history of

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5 See text of joint communiqué by Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, issued by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Department of State on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/yyz32smu>

6 For more details on the rise of ISIS and the reasons and conditions that accompanied its emergence, see: Hassan Abu Haneih and Mohammad Abu Rumman, *ISIS: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle Over Global Jihadism*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

the organization which is most widespread, most appealing, and most dangerous in the history of global jihadism<sup>7</sup>.

ISIS did not abandon the caliphate project after it lost its control on the ground. The physical caliphate has turned into a “virtual caliphate” online and on social media. It is also observed that Daesh is working on exporting its vision of the caliphate to external branches. It is further seeking to turn its ideology of the caliphate from physical society into an organized virtual society that conveys the ideological goals independently from the organization<sup>8</sup>.

**The presumed defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq may not be enough to defeat the global Daesh organization. Over many years, ISIS has revealed an ideology that has noticeable capability in the domain of propaganda, mobilization, attraction, and recruitment, as well as quick handling of geopolitical changes in the region.**

The organization has developed media rhetoric, which is based on “pre-propaganda” issues through strengthening the ideas and concepts that are already common in the region. The organization does not create these ideas and concepts; it adopts and directs them. It focused on thorny issues, which the region is suffering from, and presented itself as a representative of oppressed Sunni Islam and a spearhead in the fight against the US occupation of Iraq and global “imperialism” at an early stage. Then, it presented itself as opposed to the “Shiite” Iranian influence and regional sectarianism, and afterward as working against local “dictatorship” and for the restoration of the Sunni caliphate<sup>9</sup>. Finally, it presented itself as a defender of the Palestinian cause and as opposed to Zionism.

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7 See: Hassan Abu Haneih, The Symbolic and the Tactical in the Killing of al-Baghdadi, TRT Arabic website, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/yydgpots>

8 See: Experts Warn of ‘Virtual Caliphate’ of ISIS, Al Jazeera Net, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y49zr2ue>

9 See: Charlie Winter: “The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy”, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y5gpew48>

### **3- Restructuring Strategies and Tactics**

Five days after the killing of its former leader, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS announced a new leadership on 31 October 2019 in an audio message broadcast by its media arm (al-Furqan Foundation), by the new spokesman, Abu-Hamzah al-Qurashi. It appointed Abu-Ibrahim al-Qurashi (Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla) as "commander of the faithful and caliph of the Muslims.<sup>10</sup>" The organization completed the process of organizational restructuring after it lost all the areas under its control to return to work as an underground organization, which enjoys great flexibility, by shifting from a centralized approach to a decentralized status. It rebuilt its military, security, administrative, financial, sharia, and media structures and started approving its military plans based on the requirements of "war of attrition" and tactics of "guerrilla warfare" not only in Iraq and Syria, but also in many other countries where it established branches (it named them wilayas). These exist in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Khorasan (Afghanistan and Pakistan), Caucasus, and East Asia. It is active in the Philippines, Somalia, and West Africa: It is active mostly in Nigeria.

#### **Overview of the Activity and Effectiveness of the Organization Globally**

In Iraq, ISIS became active again and stepped up its attacks. It tried to benefit from the accumulating crises of Baghdad, which include the escalation between the United States and Iran, the drop in oil prices, the protests chiefly in Baghdad, the south, and Kurdistan, and the poor reaction of the Iraqi Armed Forces to the fight against the organization and the coronavirus pandemic. Daesh claimed responsibility for 100 attacks throughout Iraq

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10 See: Newspaper reveals true identity of successor of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, DW website, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/yyae9dru>

during August alone, according to an assessment by the Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC). The operations attributed to the organization increased by 25% from July. The increase in the attacks suggests a worrisome trend, which is the steady return of Daesh<sup>11</sup>.

It grew steadily in Syria where the attacks of the organization saw a visible increase. The organization carried out a series of attacks, which totaled more than 34 attacks in less than two months, distributed between eastern Euphrates (areas where SDF is in control) and western Euphrates (areas where Syrian government forces are in control), specifically in eastern Homs and southern Dayr az Zawr and the areas south of al-Raqqah governorate. The attacks mainly targeted the road of Damascus/Dayr az Zawr, which is considered one of the most important supply lines of the regime forces in the areas of eastern Syria. The attacks of the organization also hit the border strip between Syria and Iraq near the Syrian city of Albu Kamal and the Iraqi city of al-Qa'im.

As the government in Egypt focused its efforts on combating the epidemic, given the noticeable increase in infections, the "Islamic State in the Wilaya of Sinai" took advantage of the pandemic by intensifying its attacks in Sinai. On the 1st of last May, it targeted a vehicle of the Egyptian army, which resulted in the death and injury of 10 members. An Egyptian military spokesman said that an IED blew up in one of the armored vehicles south of the city of Bi'r al-'Abd, which resulted in the killing and injury of one officer, one NCO, and eight soldiers.

Africa has constituted a promising arena for ISIS during the corona pandemic. It intensified its attacks in the areas of West Africa and the Sahara and Sahel, and east of the continent in Somalia, where its branches, which are more developed, have been active. The branch

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<sup>11</sup> See: Report monitors large increase in Daesh attacks in Iraq and warns of "sleeper cells", website of Alhurra TV, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/yx9aptzd>

of the organization in the Wilaya of West Africa carried out a series of bloody attacks in the Borno State northeast of Nigeria and around Lake

Chad, which resulted in the killing of dozens and the wounding of hundreds. The branch of the organization in the Wilaya of Central Africa launched violent attacks between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, down to the Gulf of Guinea. In Somalia, the attacks of the Wilaya of East Africa increased, besides the attacks by al-Shabab Movement.

In Afghanistan, ISIS (Wilaya of Khorasan), which is the pivot of the organization in South Asia, intensified its attacks despite facing a difficult year after the agreement between the United States and the Taliban Movement, which ended in the elimination of its base in the Province of Nangarhar. The organization reordered its combat forces and launched several attacks on the Afghan capital, Kabul. Also, Bagram Air Base, which is the largest US base in Afghanistan, came under rocket attacks.

In the Wilaya of Southeast Asia, which is affiliated with ISIS, the organization launched an attack on 17 April one month after the president of the Philippines issued quarantine orders throughout the country, which is located in Southeast Asia. Gunmen affiliated with ISIS opened fire on a military convoy in the remote province of Sulu when 11 soldiers who were trying to carry out an operation against the leader of the organization in the Philippines were killed in the ambush. This ambush was one of several attacks claimed by ISIS, which also claimed responsibility for setting several boats on fire in the Maldives.

#### **4- Unaccomplished Defeat and Expected Return**

The announcement by US President Donald Trump on the elimination of ISIS and the end of the age of terror is nothing more than political propaganda, often repeated by former presidents.

Since the United States launched the policy of the “war on terror” in the wake of the attacks by al-Qaeda on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, the declared objective has been the elimination of al-Qaeda and defeating global transnational supportive jihadist movements. Former US President George Bush Jr. had repeatedly declared the defeat of terror and its elimination. Former US President Barack Obama did the same. Successive administrations have issued numerous death certificates of global jihadism.

The irony is that the results of the war on terror soon showed the emergence of stronger, more violent, and more widespread jihadist versions. Over the past three decades, global jihadism has proven its capability of renewal and resurgence despite international, regional, and local military and security efforts in the war on terror. The history of ISIS shows high capability and sufficient resilience to return and spread. Comparing the birth of the first “State” organization in the declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006 with the second birth after the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2013 shows the capability of the organization of resurgence<sup>12</sup>.

A quick look at the paths of the formation of ISIS confirms that there is a highly complex, solid, and flexible bureaucratic organization, which enjoys a high capability of development and adaptability. The speed of the recent transition to a new leadership shows this organizational

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12 In the beginning of 2009, the “Islamic State of Iraq” saw a clear decline and suffered a tactical defeat after the United States depended on a strategy, based on troop surge and supporting the awakening movements. The organization became weaker and the numbers of its fighters became smaller in isolated and remote areas. In 2010, the “Islamic State of Iraq” organization issued a review and situation assessment and defined its future vision in Iraq with the approach of the date of the withdrawal of the US forces. It issued a strategic document titled “Strategic Plan to Strengthen the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq”. After the departure of the US forces from Iraq in 2011, it announced the start of the plan of “Demolishing Walls” in July 2012. It then announced a new plan titled “Soldiers’ Harvest” on 29 July 2013, which ended up in the control of Mosul in June 2014.

development<sup>13</sup>.

ISIS also attracted around 40,000 foreign fighters from 110 countries at the peak of its activities between 2013 and 2016, according to a report by the Soufan Group for security consultancy published in October 2017<sup>14</sup>. The report of the “Monitoring Team” of the United Nations, which was finalized at the end of December 2019, says that the member states assess that half to two thirds of the individuals who exceed 40,000 fighters who joined the “caliphate” are still alive. The US Government, the United Nations, and other parties confirmed that there are around 25,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria combined: Around 11,000 in Iraq and 14,000 in Syria. This is in addition to 25,000 others who are active in the other branches of the organization in the Middle East region<sup>15</sup>.

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 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

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13 The appointment of a new leadership required more time despite the fact that it exists in a limited geographic space in Iraq. When al-Zarqawi (Ahmad Fadil al-Khalailah) was killed on 6 June 2006, he left for his successors a solid, strong, and influential organization. Abu-Omar al-Baghdadi (Hamid Dawud al-Zawi), who is a former officer in the disbanded Iraqi army, established the “Islamic State of Iraq” on 15 October 2006. During his time, the organization turned into a more centralized bureaucratic organization. When it was announced that Abu-Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu-Hamzah al-Muhajir were killed on 19 April 2010, the Islamic State of Iraq organization pledged allegiance to Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi (Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri al-Samarra’i) on 16 May 2010.

14 See: Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, Soufan Center, translated by Amal Washnan, Idrak for Studies and Consultations, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y36699cr>

15 See: Edmund Fitton-Brown, *The Persistent Threat from the Islamic State and al-Qaeda: The View from the UN*, The Washington Institute, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/yy3t8r9r>

it in other areas in the Middle East, Africa and Asia<sup>16</sup>.

### Capabilities of the Organization and Possibilities for the Future

All the above raises the possibility of the rise of the organization in the region and even in the world once again. The US Department of State (in its annual report on terrorism, issued after the killing of al-Baghdadi) underlined the flexibility of ISIS and its resilience. The report concluded that ISIS was still capable of maneuvering and warned that the terrorist groups developed their tactics and ways of using technology<sup>17</sup>.

The military, financial, and media capabilities of ISIS under the circumstances of its possible return indicate great superiority than what it was during the era of the “Islamic State of Iraq”. Identical figures published by the United Nations and the Intelligence Agency and the US Defense Department in 2018 indicate that the number of the fighters of the organization in Iraq and Syria is between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters<sup>18</sup>. The networks, coordinated groups, individual sleeper cells, and “lone wolves” of the organization still pose a threat

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16 See: In numbers...The United Nations Reveals Total Wealth of Daesh, Sky News Arabia, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y59sgfn8>

17 According to a report by the Institute for the Study of War in Washington titled “ISIS’s Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency” published toward the end of June 2019, ISIS today is stronger than what it was during the era of the “Islamic State of Iraq”, which inherited al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. When the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the organization had in Iraq around 700 to 1000 fighters, while the number of the fighters of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in August 2018 was 30,000 fighters, according to estimates by the Defense Intelligence Agency. ISIS managed to establish a large army from the remnant that was left in 2011, which enabled it to recapture Fallujah, Mosul, and other cities in Iraq and to dominate most of eastern Syria in only three years. It will recover much faster and to a much more dangerous level from the far larger force it still has today. <https://tinyurl.com/y4mf69qm>.

18 According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, this number does not include the fighters of the organization in its other branches. The map of the activity of the organization and its spread is expanding in numerous regions and countries. The organization has significant presence in Afghanistan. It is also still launching attacks in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and maintaining its operational capability in Southeast Asia and in Central Asia and in Yemen. The African continent is considered an alternative arena for ISIS, while it insists on multiple fronts and safe havens, especially the area of the Sahel and the African Sahara, as well as Western and Eastern Africa. See: Joseph Hincks, With the World Busy Fighting COVID-19, Could ISIS Mount a Resurgence? Translated by Alaa’eddin Abu-Zeineh, Al Ghad newspaper, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y3tgnmbw>

to the United States and Europe. Given the outbreak of the coronavirus, the organization's exploitation of the pandemic by carrying out attacks in different regions, increasing the efforts of its electronic propaganda, and intensifying recruitment and mobilization become dangerous<sup>19</sup>. The handling by ISIS of the corona pandemic was not confined to health, ideological, and media guidance; it started intensifying its diverse attacks at the center of the organization in Iraq and the rest of its branches in the Middle East and other regions<sup>20</sup>.

## 5- Questions and Themes Raised at Seminar

The seminar will try to approach a number of key themes and questions:

**First - On the ideological level:** The organization formulated an ideological vision, which is independent from al-Qaeda. This vision is based on the establishment of the state and global jihadism and integrating local and international dimensions. It adopts a fiercer version of Fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence] positions and bloody combat

19 According to International Crisis Group, even as COVID-19's toll mounts, the world should brace itself for attacks by ISIS, which believes it can exploit the disorder the contagion is causing. This continuing jihadist threat requires the sort of international cooperation that militants hope the virus will sap. While UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has argued that mankind faces a common enemy in COVID-19, and thus appealed for a "global ceasefire", ISIS has made it clear that it sees things differently. In a new editorial in its weekly newsletter, ISIS has told its membership that their globe-spanning war is to go on, even as the virus spreads. Moreover, it has told them that the national and international security regimes that help keep the group in check are about to be overloaded, and that they should take maximum advantage. ISIS has now instructed its affiliates worldwide to do just that. See report of International Crisis Group titled "Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus" on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/spu4kzy>

20 The Security and Defense Committee in the Iraqi parliament on 2 April warned of ISIS exploiting the circumstances of the state and the preoccupation of the Iraqi Security Forces with the novel coronavirus. The Iraqi Ministry of Defense announced that the organization intensified its attacks, and the Iraqi Security Forces announced on 28 April that 10 members of the Popular Mobilization Forces were killed in an attack launched by ISIS in the Salah al-Din governorate in the north of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. The organization had earlier claimed responsibility for a suicide operation that targeted the Kirkuk Intelligence Directorate on 28 April, which wounded four people. The organization launched several coordinated attacks in the Kirkuk-Diyala-Salah al-Din triangle and in Al Anbar and Ninawa. The organization is now capable of launching attacks within the rural belts of the cities and in the heartland of urban cities. See: Iraqi concern over ISIS exploiting corona crisis, Monte Carlo Doualiya, on the link: <https://tinyurl.com/y4wstd60>

tactics. Therefore, it is necessary to raise questions on whether there is a change on the ideological, Fiqh, and intellectual levels and whether the successive events have weakened the ideological and Fiqh structure or the other way around. Has the idea of caliphate of the organization realistically ended at present? How does the organization ideologically justify what happened to it? What are the promises that it offers to its followers in the next stage?

**Second - On the level of recruitment, mobilization, and propaganda:** Daesh has created a big boom in recruitment and managed to attract thousands of young men and women from dozens of countries around the world, whether to get to the “promised land” or turn into “lone wolves”. So can we say that this capability has declined and dissipated? Or are there other signs? Can the organization regain it in the future?

On the level of media and political propaganda, this, too, has seen a large jump with the organization addressing the world in several languages (Arabic, English, French, Urdu, and others). It developed the technologies used in videos and speeches. What is the fate of this large machine of media and political propaganda? Has it declined? What are the possible paths in the future?

There has been a great shift in the method of mobilization and organization with Daesh. It shifted from an elite (al-Qaeda) style to a horizontal style. Now, it is enough for a person to have a mobile phone connected to the Internet to become a member linked to the organization through the notion of “lone wolves”. This has caused the organization to turn into something like a “virus” that is transmitted easily without obstacles. So what is the fate of these recruitment and mobilization capabilities? Will they survive after the removal of the caliphate and renew once the circumstances change and pose a threat to many countries and communities?

**Third - On the level of regional and global reach:** Daesh has reached an unprecedented reach in all continents, even on the level of jihadist movements, either through establishing wilayas or groups or through lone wolves. What is the status of these organizations and have their relationship with the mother organization declined? What is the future of the relationship between Daesh and al-Qaeda as both today represent the ideological and political incubator of most “jihadist organizations” operating worldwide?

**Fourth - On the level of counterterrorism strategies:** These have taken different forms, including military and security strategies, cultural strategies, and financial strategies. How do we assess the development of these strategies and international, regional and local efforts in combating the organization?

**Fifth - Pending questions on the “legacy of the organization”:** There are still questions on the level of the organization and the legacy of its state whose answers are not clear. What is the fate of its detainees and returnees? What are the plans of governments in dealing with them? What is the fate of juveniles and women who joined the organization and moved to its territory?

**Sixth - The organization and international, regional and local policies:** International, regional, and local policies and internal crises in many countries constitute an important variable in explaining the rise and decline of Daesh and the jihadist organizations associated with it, especially in the Middle East. How do we assess the current strategic changes and their impact on the spread or decline of radicalism?

## **6- Organization of the seminar and proposed sessions**

Based on the above, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung – Amman office will invite experts, researchers, and specialists to take part in this international seminar to discuss the above themes and questions by submitting papers and interventions to reach conclusions and results.

The themes of the seminar will be divided as follows:

- A. The current situation: Assessing the status of the organization in Iraq and Syria, its current legacy, the numbers of fighters in Iraq and Syria, and its activity, operations, and current positioning.
- B. The ideological and political project of Daesh: Assessing the ideological and political project of Daesh and whether it is likely to decline or rise in the next stage. Is it linked to the state that collapsed or can it be renewed and built on by Daesh and other organizations?
- C. Political and media propaganda of the organization and its capability of recruitment. Has it declined or increased, and what are the factors affecting this?
- D. Strategic changes in the Middle East region and their expected impacts on the capabilities of the organization and its rehabilitation and resilience.
- E. International, regional and local strategies in combating extremism and terrorism: Assessing and defining gaps and recommendations in this regard.

One of the researchers will present a paper on each one of the previous themes and two researchers will comment on it, followed by a discussion by experts and researchers in every session.

There will be note-taking of the discussions and papers, and a detailed report will be prepared for these and for the proceedings of the seminar.

## **Chapter One**

# **The Post-Caliphate Phase: Ideology, Propaganda and Recruitment**

This chapter addresses a pivotal question: what impact did the collapse of the ISIS state and de facto caliphate have on the organization's main capabilities: media and political propaganda, political recruitment, and ideological structure? This is particularly relevant given that it was these elements that enabled ISIS to capitalize on Sunni crises and employ historical and religious symbols and terms—such as that of the Islamic Caliphate and others—to attract tens of thousands of loyal followers all over the world.

In the first paper, Charlie Winter from the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (together with Haroro Ingram of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University and Craig Whiteside, associate professor at the American Naval War College in Monterey) presents a quantitative and analytical reading of the paths by which ISIS ideological discourse evolved. He presents the techniques and transformations that the organization's media apparatus and prominent influential figures have undergone, and the transformations that have taken place in its discourse. He also presents the techniques ISIS uses following the collapse of its state and the loss of the territory it controlled.

In the second paper, Dr. Maher Farghali presents an analytical reading of the most prominent disputed issues between ISIS and other jihadist groups, as well as the trajectories along which the organization's jurisprudential vision developed in parallel with organizational, political, and military contexts. He then surveys the main wings of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and ideology within ISIS, and the impact of the fall and collapse of the state it established on its ideological unity, as well as the conflict between different ideological wings within ISIS.

This chapter also includes the most prominent discussions and comments from the participating researchers and experts on what the researchers presented in their papers, as well as the researchers' final comments.

# Retransmitting the Caliphate

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The Islamic State's complete loss of territorial control in Iraq and Syria in 2019 forced its central media unit to adapt in order to continue to produce the high quality products for which it had become infamous. This paper evaluates this transformation, and measures both output, themes, and quality of product in the years since the collapse of the territorial caliphate. We distill some of the elements the group has used to successfully produce and disseminate products from strengthening affiliates abroad, and the impact the central media has had on these distant media cells. Through our research regarding non-state actor influence operations, a sense of the larger, comprehensive character of the ever-evolving information environment can be derived.

## Introduction

The Islamic State's caliphate has collapsed into uniform insurgency in its core turf of Iraq and Syria, and provinces near and far. Its Central Media Diwan, which heralded the first "caliph" in almost a century, still functions despite the loss of territory. At its heart a clandestine yet prolific enterprise, the Islamic State's media department long ago

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learned how to produce quality products for strategic communication purposes in a secure and careful manner, in order to protect its experienced workers and the leaders they serve.

This paper attempts to explain the resilience of the media department as a function of the combination of the structure, people, and ideas that have sustained it since 2016, when it suffered catastrophic leadership losses. We used Islamic State propaganda and other sources to put together a picture of how this vital organization works to build a global level of support for the group to facilitate its return to prominence and the achievement of *tamkin*, (territorial and political consolidation). We start with a brief summary of the media department's history, describe its structural evolution to date, and follow with an explanation of current media production. We conclude with an analysis of its vulnerabilities for exploitation, and generally, what we can learn about the current information environment from this media unit's practices.

### **Background and History**

We cannot understand the impact of the Islamic State Central Media Diwan without an appreciation of its history, and the lessons it absorbed into its DNA as a clandestine and innovative outlet, under great pressure by counterterrorism forces, for almost two decades. The media unit has provided continuity for the group, managing the release of the first leadership speech by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in January 2004 and continuously serving the movement in its various name changes and political transformations since then. To this point, the current spokesman claims to have served in the department under its first spokesman Abu Maysara al-Iraqi while it served *Tawhid wal-Jihad* and later *al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Islamic State of Iraq, 2011).

The early media unit saw relentless targeting by US counterterrorism forces. As a result, it developed strong security practices that allowed

it to serve the leadership safely, while consistently producing products for its online supporters and Iraqi Sunnis. These early successes, and the emphasis the group had on Abu Maysara's position of spokesman, raised the political value of the unit within the organization. By 2006-2007 the group was led by prominent figures Muharib al-Jubouri and Khaled al-Mashadani. The Islamic State of Iraq's defeat in 2007 during the Surge led to a revamping of the department by Abu Mohammad al-Furqan and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, amir and spokesman, respectively (Whiteside, 2016).

Al-Furqan is credited with founding the al-Furqan Media foundation in 2006 (which still produces the group's strategic communications), the first of many specialty units he created during his long tenure: al-I'tisam (social media), al-Hayat (foreign language translations and magazines like *Dabiq/Rumiyah*), al-Ajnad (religious songs), al-Furat (non-Arab propaganda), al-Naba (weekly online and print newsletter), al-Bayan (radio), and the gray media/unofficial outlet *A'maq News Agency* (Roggio, 2016; Islamic State, 2016; Whiteside, 2016). Furqan's partner, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, spent five years as the public face and voice of the Islamic State movement, as well as the spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq, ISIS, and finally the Islamic State (al-Binali, 2014). Some claim he was being groomed to replace the caliph before al-Adnani and al-Furqan were killed in 2016 along with al-Furqan's deputy Abu Harith al-Lami (McCants, 2016; United States Department of Defense, 2016). All three were killed during the same week, in what must have been a catastrophic security breach of the media department.

The triple leadership decapitation event introduced flux at a critical moment, as the Global Coalition Against ISIL gained traction and the end of the caliphate became a matter of time. For the first time, the media was led for a time by a spokesmen and leaders from outside of

Iraq and Syria, beginning with Abu Hassan al-Muhajir and Abu Hakim al Urduni respectively (al-Tamimi, 2019). Al-Urduni's tenure was short and controversial, with the group's leadership council stepping in to replace him with Abu Abdullah al-Australi sometime in 2018 (al-Tamimi, 2018; Schliebs, 2018). Most of the media leadership was killed in the final fight of the physical caliphate in Baghuz, including al-Australi, French language editor Abu Anas al-Firansi, and Russian language editor Abu Jihad al-Shishani. Al-Furqan's other lieutenants, including A'maq News Agency founder Rayad Meshal<sup>24</sup>, Abu Yasir al-Belgiki, Abu Muqatil al-Amriki, Mohammad Khalifa from Canada, and the American Ahmad Abosamra did not survive the fall of the caliphate (Weiss, 2019; Mr. Orange, 2019; Orton, 2019; Van Ostaeeyen, 2019; Caki, 2019; Callimachi, 2019; Islamic State, 2017). Al-Adnani's successor Abu Hassan al-Muhajir did survive the battle, but later died during the same week as caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late 2019 (Ingram, Whiteside & Winter, 2019).

A new spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, was named in the same announcement introducing the new caliph, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi, once again signifying the significance of the position. As has been the pattern with new amirs appointed during down cycles in the movement, the new caliph has relied on the spokesman to be the sole voice of the movement until there is sufficient momentum for the new caliph to speak with authority and legitimacy. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi set this pattern in his own early reclusiveness—balanced by his outspoken media frontman al-Adnani in 2010—a pattern we see repeated today (Ingram & Whiteside, 2019). The amir of the media department is currently unknown, and the loss of foreign talent might explain why the new spokesman Abu Hamza is thought to once again

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24 An Islamic State unofficial biography from Telegram related al-Furqan's mentoring of the A'Maq News Agency's founder and encouragement to start the innovative outlet that used "scoops" from insiders to feed Western media looking for "legitimate" sources.

be an Iraqi, based on his accent/dialect (Counter Extremism Project, 2021).

### **Current Structure**

As early as 2007 the media structure mirrored the larger organization, with branches in each region, district, and locality, and controlled through its parallel hierarchy in different Iraqi provinces. This design meant local media offices were directed by higher level offices and the central media department, while also supporting (and being supported by) the local or regional commander. The department back then already had public relations, internet, photography, production, publishing and distribution, and archival offices. A media committee that worked for the media amir vetted products (Anonymous, 2007a). Even in its earliest stage, the department transcended being a media outlet, but also functioned as public relations office, a library for institutional memory, and a communication hub for leadership and other departments in the organization (Anonymous, 2007b).

Today, despite the downgrade of all other departments in the caliphate structure and distribution under governors for Iraq and Syria (al-Hashimi, 2018), the media office is still officially titled the Central Media Diwan—another indication of its centrality to the larger movement. Despite the title, the media department is more of a hub connecting geographically distant parts. The department is divided into a Media Council (board of directors), a Judiciary Committee (religious advisors), a Security Office, media agencies, geographically outlying offices, and the Information Bank (archive) (Winter & Almohammad, 2019). Much of the work beyond strategic communication (largely leadership statements) has been pushed out of the central department and into the specialty agencies that al-Furqan established (described above). The Central Media Diwan has also expanded beyond media personnel, integrating religious and

security experts from the Islamic State's other departments in order to better regulate content for quality and ideological purity, as well as to secure the transmission of raw media products to the production teams in the central media. This centralized support serves provinces near and far. For example, captured media documents from the Islamic State's Khorasan Province demonstrate the involvement of the central media unit in serving as "the focal point for the distribution of external content" (Milton, 2018b). For provinces like Khorasan, East Asia, and West Africa, this level of centralized support often means remote editing, production, publication, and dissemination to a variety of official outlets. The management of unofficial online outlets and social media channels that have expanded in the post-territorial caliphate era has been the newest challenge for a department that no longer operates in a contiguous area, but still desires a high level of narrative control.

### **Media Trends of the Post-Territorial Caliphate**

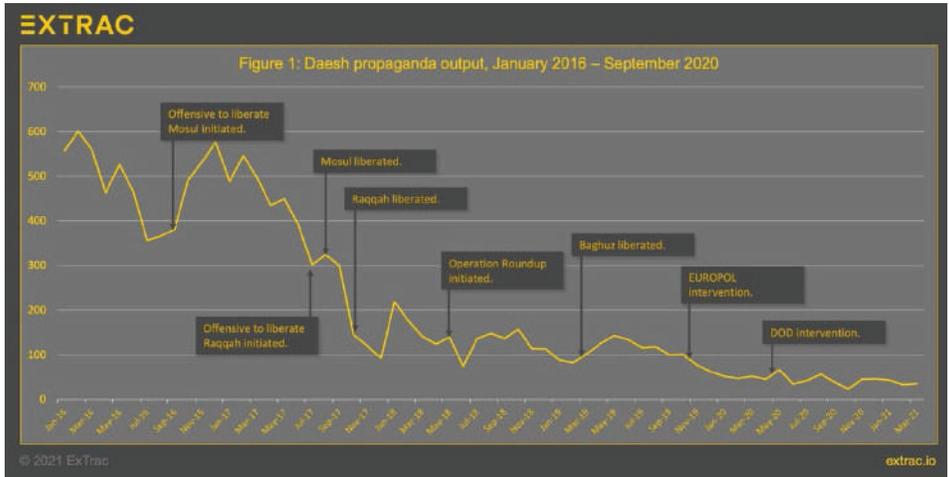
Since the Islamic State's territorial prime back in 2015-16, its media output has declined dramatically. This trend is evidenced in the below visualizations, which are based on a complete archive of Islamic State media output dating back to 2015. The archive was collected from its closed-access official channel on the encrypted social media platform, Telegram. Each of its 50,000+ data points—every single attack claim, photograph, video clip, radio program, leadership statement, and so on—was ingested and processed using ExTrac, a conflict analytics system that uses artificial intelligence (AI) to augment human subject matter expertise.<sup>25</sup>

When rate of output is considered longitudinally, as in Figure 1, the extent to which the Islamic State's media enterprise has suffered due to territorial loss is easily apparent. The data offer incontrovertible

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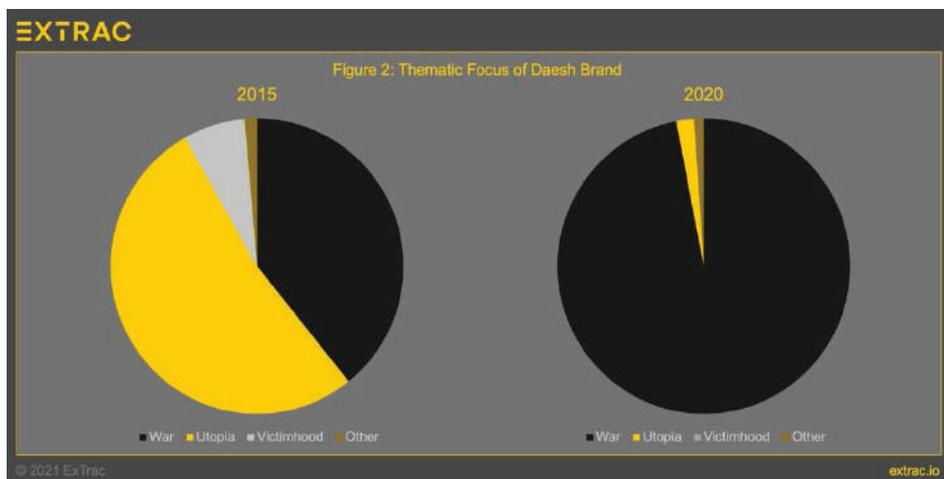
<sup>25</sup> Visit [extrac.io](http://extrac.io) for more information

evidence that, by early 2021, its media infrastructure was about seven percent as productive as it had been in early 2016. This finding is consistent with Milton's work, which noted an across-the-board propaganda deceleration through 2016 and 2017, as the territorial caliphate was forced to contract (Milton, 2016; Milton, 2018a).

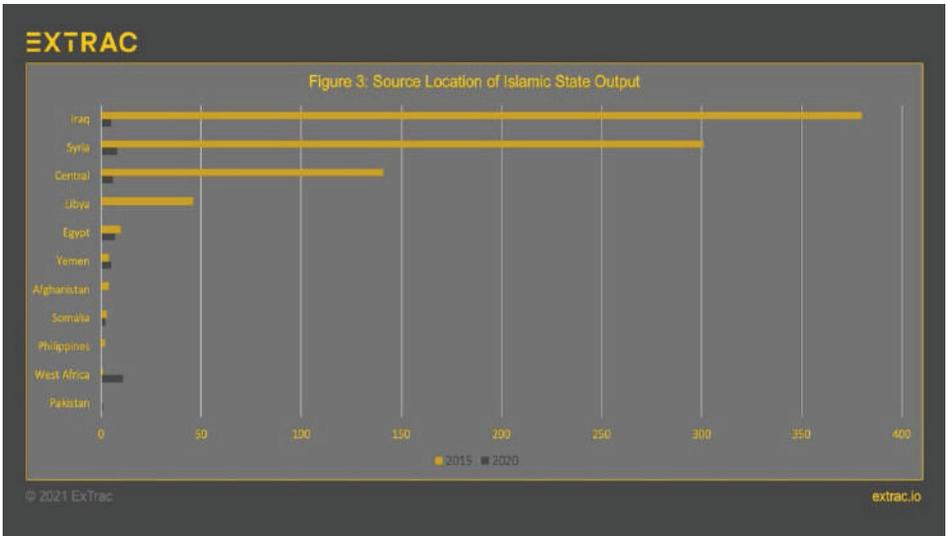


Similarly, the thematic constitution of the Islamic State brand utterly transformed between 2015 and 2020, something that is captured in Figure 2. Whereas more than 50 percent of its day-to-day output revolved around civilian affairs in 2015/16, this proportion had dwindled to just two percent by 2020. This massive turnaround in the its thematic priorities saw its story shifting away from utopianism towards simple emphasis on its military capabilities and agenda.<sup>26</sup> It tracked a change in its overarching strategic communication objectives away from recruitment and towards retention—that is, maintaining the coherence and consistency of pre-existing networks of supporters (Winter, 2020b).

<sup>26</sup> This shift was identified as far back as 2017. See Winter, C. (2018). Apocalypse later: A longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 35(1), 103-121.



Interestingly, from a geographic perspective, the data indicate that the Islamic State’s brand, as of 2020 at least, now relies more on the communication dividends it reaps from affiliates external to its logistical bases in Syria and Iraq—first and foremost from its Nigeria- and Sahel-based Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya (West Africa Province), but also the likes of Wilayat Sinai in Egypt and Wilayat Wasat Ifriqiyya (Central Africa Province) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (BBC Monitoring, 2019; Munoz, 2018). Given that the reverse was true in early 2017, when the Islamic State’s brand had contracted to become less global, this recent branding expansion becomes even more noteworthy as depicted in Figure 3 (Ingram, Whiteside & Winter, 2021). Its implications are clear; as the caliphate territories dwindled in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State’s Central Media Diwan systematically sought to shed more light on its exploits elsewhere, framing the Islamic State—both operationally and in terms of its overall branding—more to the global adhoc aspects of its insurgency than to its ‘conventional’ core in Syria and Iraq.



We can be almost certain that the above-tracked trend of decline did not come about solely as a result of strategic choice (though internal policy will have had some bearing on it). This notion, i.e., that the Islamic State’s media operations altered course because they were forced to by external circumstances rather than because they were an outcome of centralized decision-making, can be tracked through the timeline presented in Figure 1, which lists key real-world and cyber-based military campaigns against the Islamic State between 2016 and 2021. Notwithstanding a significant productivity uptick in the first few months of the battle for Mosul in late 2016 and a smaller, less impactful acceleration in mid-2017 with the launch of the campaign to liberate Raqqa, the data clearly show that, as time passed and the Islamic State lost territory (and, along with it, resources and manpower), its media capabilities inexorably collapsed.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For more on the Islamic State’s Mosul campaign, see Winter, C. (2020a). Framing war: Visual propaganda, the Islamic State, and the battle for east Mosul. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(5). 667-689.

The decline dynamic can be explained by three sets of overlapping factors relating to territory, expertise, and the cyber environment. Regarding the first of these, it is patently clear that, based on its current structure at least, the Islamic State needs to be in control of territory—and administering said territory—in order to produce propaganda at levels comparable to 2015/16. This requirement steps from the finding that, besides acting as subject matter for its propagandists to work with, ample territory is needed to house safe spaces for the compilation and editing of media products (Winter, 2018; Winter & Almohammad, 2019).

Regarding the second set of factors, which are related to manpower and expertise, targeted strikes on key figures in the Central Media Diwan are also certain to play a critically important role, as we can see from the unit's output after the catastrophic leadership losses listed in the first section of this paper (Wright, 2016). Given the importance of technical expertise in the field of media, there can be little doubt that depleting human capital adversely affected the group's ability to produce propaganda.

The last set of factors relates to online environments, i.e., the spaces in which the Islamic State distributes its content. Due to the ramping up of counter-propaganda moderation efforts, the Islamic State's internet ecosystem in early 2021 barely resembles its 2015/16 counterpart and, while still an undeniably potent force, the group's virtual operatives are nowhere near as accessible or ubiquitous as they once were. As numerous studies have tracked, this decline in infrastructure and capability has led to an across-the-board drawdown for overt pro-Islamic State activism online (Conway, et al., 2019).

## The Islamic State's Global Adhocratic Insurgency

Having established the history of the Islamic State's propaganda apparatus and identified key trends in its media strategy and output since 2016, it is important to understand the strategic principles and organizational traits that characterize the contemporary Islamic State movement. The Islamic State has only recently evolved into a transnational enterprise with its formal extension into Syria in 2013.<sup>28</sup> However, it was in 2014, after announcing that it had established its caliphate, that its network of transnational affiliates exponentially grew as the group framed joining its ranks as an obligation for all Muslims (al-Adnani, 2014). While the Islamic State's management of its transnational network has been inconsistent, and the group went through a significant restructure and rationalization of its affiliates in 2018, a core set of criteria has generally been central to being formally accepted as an affiliate: pledging allegiance to the Caliph and adopting the Islamic State's aqeeda (creed) and manhaj (method) (Unknown author, 2014; BBC Monitoring, 2018). This practice has been especially important for facilitating its media strategy during this current period of decline in two important ways.

First, by requiring its affiliates to adopt and apply its ideology and strategy in their specific corner of the world, the Islamic State provides its propagandists with constant fodder for its media outputs. Little wonder that as pressures in Syria and Iraq have persisted, its propagandists have increasingly featured the activities of its affiliates, especially those in Africa.<sup>29</sup> This shift in content does more than just demonstrate that the Islamic State persists and is active in dozens of countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. It also showcases

28 For a detailed analysis of the Islamic State movement's history from its founding in the 1990s to the death of al-Baghdadi see Ingram, H., Whiteside, C. & Winter, C. (2020). *The ISIS Reader*. Oxford University Press.

29 For example see, Candland, T. et al., (2021). *The Islamic State in Congo*. George Washington University Program on Extremism.

the practical efficacy of its way of war and governance. The Islamic State's claim that its method for establishing an Islamic State reflects the will of the Prophet lies at the heart of its claims of credibility over those of fellow jihadi rivals.

Second, the Islamic State's central media output is, itself, a way to coordinate and synchronize actions across its network of affiliates. For instance, the Islamic State's media spokesman or caliph periodically calls for a global campaign. The campaign could involve what it calls "harvesting", which involves the killing of government officials and security personnel, or "breaking the walls", involving attacks on prisons. Whether affiliates already have actions planned or actually respond to the call is secondary to the perception it creates: the Islamic State's symphony of violence is global and coordinated. Enabling and driving these strategic dynamics of the Islamic State's global insurgency is indicative of an organization characterized by adhocratic traits.

The Islamic State has a demonstrated ability to organizationally transition as strategic conditions change. While for the vast majority of its history, the Islamic State has operated as an insurgency below the threshold of tamkeen, during periods of fleeting success it has hybridized its military activities with greater conventionality, and even bureaucratized its governance efforts (e.g. 2014-16). Throughout its history the Islamic State organizationally is characterized by centralized command and control<sup>30</sup> with decentralized management and execution (Mintzberg, 1989). Adhocracies, like the Islamic State, tend to emerge in dynamic, high risk environments with a "structure of interacting project teams" all working to achieve a purpose and/or express a shared identity (Mintzberg, 1981). It is due to the fluidity of the environment within which adhocracies tend to operate that

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30 As highlighted earlier, the Islamic State's centralized media production is one of the core functions that has remained centralized with regional media units typically channeling their content centrally prior to release.

decision-making tends to be operationally and tactically decentralized with overarching strategic direction, often emerging from a hierarchical leadership core (Waterman, 1990). This inherent operating structure imbues adhocracies with an ability to operationally and tactically exploit opportunities as they emerge at the coalface. Moreover, as an organization calibrated to respond and adapt, the Islamic State's adhocratic qualities enable it to move towards more or less formal and bureaucratic organizational structures, depending on current or forecasted strategic conditions (Mintzberg, 1981).

As an adhocracy, the Islamic State demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses that are typical of this type of organization. Flexibility, innovation, and adaptability are important strengths, but within those strengths lie the roots of its key weaknesses. For one, adhocracies rely on the deployment of liaison personnel and/or communication technologies for coordination. If these communication mechanisms break down, that flexibility and adaptability become brittle, and the organization is susceptible to fraying. Competition within adhocracies can fuel intra-organizational rivalries that drive vulnerabilities to ideological and operational extremism on its peripheries (Mintzberg, 1989). Moreover, adhocracies can mistime their organizational transitions, resulting in, at best, the unnecessary loss of personnel and resource, or at worst, organizational breakdown (Mintzberg, 1989).

There are significant policy implications of the Islamic State's strategic and organizational characteristics that have been outlined here. Three are especially important. First, it is essential to assess the Islamic State's affiliates on a case-by-case basis, and nuance counterstrategy responses accordingly. There is no universal template that can be applied, and there are significant pitfalls in either overstating or understating the Islamic State's influence on local affiliates. Second, maintaining pressure on the Islamic State's transnational enterprise,

especially its communication capabilities, will exacerbate inherent organizational weaknesses. These types of pressure not only include counterterrorism operations to identify and capture liaison personnel and interrupt communication networks, but also, wherever possible, disruption of its online propaganda dissemination through takedowns and the spread of disinformation to thwart more over coordination efforts. Finally, it is during periods of transition that the Islamic State, as an adhococracy, is going to be particularly susceptible. In 2021, the movement is continuing its transition into the battle rhythms of a long-running insurgency in its heartlands of the Levant, and so it is keen to project attention onto its global affiliates. This tendency underscores the importance of simultaneously supporting allies to confront Islamic State provinces wherever they emerge while continuing to apply multidimensional pressure on the Islamic State core.

## Conclusion

The loss of territory and key leaders over the past five years has had a significant impact on the Islamic State's Central Media Diwan, but these efforts have not broken it. Contrary to predictions about the future of insurgency being decentralized, it is the sophisticated, layered and integrated bureaucracy and specialization of its different media agencies that have allowed the Central Media Diwan to maintain control over its online supporters while producing quality products, even if at a lower rate and without the governance themes that used to dominate its content. The key factor in its continued output has been the role of the central office in maximizing efficiency and quality, while protecting its key nodes, lines of transmission, and key leaders. Today, it blends clandestine practices with its public facing nodes, much like it did with its local kiosks in Mosul during the caliphate period, and transmits its messaging on official social media channels, websites and fan sites, including leadership speeches from its carefully anonymous spokesmen and leaders.<sup>31</sup> It is the adhoc nature of the group that facilitates serial experimentation, shifting resources into the technologies that allow them to continue to publish propaganda that is true to its creed and method, while exploiting local Salafi-influenced insurgencies to promote the global brand and narrative with the goal of slowly connecting its archipelagic caliphate.

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31 The current caliph was anonymous until the US government released his interrogation records from 2008, see Milton, D. (September 2020). "The al-Mawla TIRs: An analytical discussion with Cole Bunzel, Haroro Ingram, Gina Ligon, and Craig Whiteside. CTC Sentinel, 13(9), pp. 14-23. As for the external network, a recent example of the clandestine nature and links was the arrest of Benjamin Alan Carpenter of Knoxville, Tennessee, who ran the Ahlut-Tawhid website for the Islamic State Media Department, a fansite that translated Islamic State media into English on behalf of the group; see The U.S. Attorney's Office of Eastern Tennessee. (5 April 2021). "Knoxville Man

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# Shifting Intellectual Foundations of ISIS After Tamkin

**Maher Farghali**

In its first inception, the Islamic State organization (ISIS) did not have a specific ideological form, or more precisely, an intellectual unity, relying instead on al-Qaeda's methodology and the outputs of Levantine and Egyptian theorists. When the caliphate was declared and the door thrown open to migration, questions arose concerning tamkin (empowerment, i.e. sovereignty over a territory) that had not been a priority, such as swearing allegiance to the imam, applying hudud punishments, takfir al-'adhir (takfir of the excuser), and so on, which would lead to methodological disagreements. In this paper, we will present the intellectual foundations of the organization and their changes over time, up until the era of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi, and their degree of influence, through several key points: (1) sources contributing to ideological rifts; (2) empowerment (tamkin) and methodological shifts; (3) fragmentation and formation of wings; (4) debate and mobilization of legal scholars; and (5) post-tamkin and overcoming divisions. In this way, we will find the answer to our basic hypothesis, which is that the organization does not have a specific ideological center of gravity and has undergone intellectual changes and problems due to the various theories that have been proposed, which will affect the organization in the future, after its transition from the tamkin stage to spread and diaspora.

### (1) Sources of ideological rifts

In most of ISIS's intellectual sources, we find a set of inherited concepts – issues from which others would branch out and contribute to building a fragmented doctrine since the organization's first inception. This would ultimately result in the organization's endless ideological transformations. The most important of these concepts are the following:

- 1- **Hakimiyya:** This came specifically from transforming it from a jurisprudential to a doctrinal issue, after which theorists differed on whether it removes someone from Islam.<sup>32</sup> They debated the nature of the “ten nullifiers of Islam”, the third one of which states that whoever does not declare an unbeliever to be an unbeliever, is himself an unbeliever, which allows them to accuse their opponents of unbelief (*takfir*). However, the acute issue is one the organization inherited from the Egyptian branch of al-Qaeda, launched by Sayyed Imam al-Sharif, concerning the ruling on courtiers (al-mala').<sup>33</sup> This was picked up by Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir and directly influenced views on the apostasy of the ruler's officials and the question of whether those who are not in a position of power are infidels or not.<sup>34</sup> After that, the issue of hakimiyya included the controversy over the forces assisting the rulers and the person whose status is unknown, and whether it is permissible to judge whether he is an unbeliever or a Muslim.
- 2- **Ruling on the abode:** This is the ruling for a country where the provisions of Shari'a do not reign supreme. It generalizes the term “unbelief and idolatry” to include all the institutions and residents of such states. This was all based on the doctrinal legacies of

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32 See Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, al-Hakimiyya, al-Tahaya Media Production, 2014, p. 247.

33 The courtiers are the ruler's officials, and their type and degree – as well as the method for pronouncing *takfir* on them – differ from one group to another, according to their proximity to power.

34 Jihadi leader Hisham Abaza, direct interview with the author, Summer 2013.

Ibn Taymiyyah, the Wahhabi scholars of Najd, and the students of Sayyid Qutb, the most important of whom is Ali Abdo Ismail, who proposed to “suspend judgment on inhabitants of the abode of unbelief and non-Muslim countries until it becomes clear that they reject false gods”.<sup>35</sup> Then, his student, Shukri Mustafa, founded his group, Jama‘at al-Muslimin—called in the media *Takfir wal-Hijra*—on that ideological basis, adding provisions related to emigration from a society that was in a state of jahiliyya and the ruling on insisting on disobedience.<sup>36</sup> The organization refused to call countries a “mixed abode”, based on the theories of the Egyptian Shari‘a legislator, Hilmi Hashem, who applied rulings on the abode to their inhabitants, as he considered the abode to be either of Islam or unbelief.<sup>37</sup> Hilmi Hashem also borrowed from other organizations the *takfir* of the rituals and manifestations of democracy and secularism.<sup>38</sup>

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35 Osama Shehadeh, “The Story of Violent Deviant Groups in Khawarij Thought”, al-Rased website, 22 June 22 2017: [https://alrased.net/main/articles.aspx?selected\\_article\\_no=7834](https://alrased.net/main/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=7834).

36 Abd al-Rahman Abu al-Khair, *My Memories with Jama‘at al-Muslimin*, House of Scientific Research, 1980, p. 35.

37 Hilmi Hashem, *Abode and Abodes in the Judgment of Abodes*, p. 296, Association of Assets, Cairo, 2009.

38 See “The Message of Faith”, Salih Sariyah, from the investigation papers, Military Technical Case, unpublished, p.27.

<b>Abode</b>	Abode of Unbelief — ISIS and some al-Qaeda	Abode of War - Most of al-Qaeda	Mixed Abode Egyptian al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and some traditional Salafist groups
<b>Ruling on the inhabitants</b>	Abode of unbelief and its apostate inhabitants — suspend judgment on their inhabitants	Only officials of the ruler are apostates	Mixed abode and its people are Muslim
<b>Institutions of the abode</b>	Infidel	Institutions of courtiers are infidel	Muslim

(1) Table of differences in ruling on the abode

3- **Ruling on the recalcitrant group and armies:** The organization's legal scholars agreed from the beginning on fighting the recalcitrant group (al-ta'ifa al-mumtani'a), but what Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir proposed gave rise to issues around which there would be great controversy. These include the question of whether armies are apostates or are fighting to repel an aggressor (daf' al-sa'il),<sup>39</sup> the ruling on those who are deceived who belong to the armies of infidels, the ruling on seeking help in fighting the infidels, apostates, and deviant sects,<sup>40</sup> the ruling on supporting idolaters and helping

39 Al-Zarqawi used to judge the Iraqi army as an army of apostasy and puppets, saying, "We will fight it as the umma's war against the Tartars". See al-Zarqawi's letters, Sixth Speech, "The position of the Shari'a on the Karzai government in Iraq, 23 July 2004: <https://archive.org/details/15-1426>.

40 Abd al-Rahman al-Ali, "The Ruling on Those Belonging to the Armies of Unbelief Who Are Deceived", 1 July 2008, p. 6.

them against Muslims, the legality of killing an apostate even if he shows repentance, the ruling on the Shi'a population, the *takfir* of a specific person, the killing of apostates, and the distinction between civilians and the military.<sup>41</sup>

**4- *Takfir of the Shi'a as a whole:*** The rift and methodological differences over this issue became clear in Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's counsel to al-Zarqawi.<sup>42</sup> The former grasped the critical point that did not see the blood of the Shi'i sect as a whole as permissible, as he drew a distinction between the scholars of misguided sects and their common, ignorant adherents.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, al-Zarqawi believed them to be apostates.<sup>44</sup> Al-Zarqawi's position was different from Ayman al-Zawahiri's, who concluded that the term *rawafid* (rejectionists, i.e. Shi'a) should not be used. Although the Imami Shi'a beliefs were considered apostasy once proof against a specific person<sup>45</sup> is established, al-Zawahiri argued that whoever is ignorant and believes these corrupt principles based on hadith he thought were sound (*sahih*), and the truth did not reach him, or if he is a common, ignorant person, then he is excused for his ignorance. "Why the attack on the common Shi'a? We must address them with proselytization, clarification, and instruction to guide them to the truth".<sup>46</sup> This means that the current leader of al-Qaeda has declared the Twelver Shi'a imams and their common adherents to be infidels only as a general ruling.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

42 The Jordanian, Issam Barqawi, one of the greatest theorists, wrote two books in prison, *My Companions in Prison* and *Millat Ibrahim (The Denomination and Creed of Ibrahim)*, and other books that contributed to shaping the awareness of Salafi-jihadism in the world.

43 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Al Jazeera interview, 12 July 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORT0MS4wrXA>.

44 Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Thirty-ninth Speech, "Have you heard the story of the Rafidah?" 1 June 2006, <https://archive.org/details/15-1426>.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Maryam Bint Zaydoun, "A Reading of al-Zawahiri's Letter to al-Zarqawi", Al Jazeera Net, 10-23-2005, <https://cutt.us/GXnLe>.

Individual *takfir* does not apply to the sect as a whole.<sup>47</sup> This is the opposite of ISIS, which applies *takfir* to them as a whole, as al-Adnani demanded in his statement, “Sorry, Emir of al-Qaeda”, when he clearly said, “We invite you to correct your approach to the *takfir* of the rawafid”.<sup>48</sup>

The previous four issues were the original sources of significant methodological differences that would later occur between the legal theorists, who differed in these doctrinal discussions and influenced the adherents of the organization.<sup>49</sup> Abu Qatada al-Filistini wrote “Ju’nat al-Mutayyibin” in response to a book that appeared at the end of the 1990’s, Exposing Doubts about the Fighters Under the Banner of Those Who Offend the Foundation of the Religion, whose author considers the Taliban an infidel movement and prohibits fighting in its ranks. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s book, Illustrious Points: Observations on the Book al-Jami’ also appeared, in which he addressed the jurisprudential arguments of Sayyed Imam in his book, The Compendium of the Pursuit of Divine Knowledge. Egyptian Jihad Group also modified much of Sayyed Imam’s book and republished it under the title, Guide to the Path of Righteousness in the Milestones of Jihad and Belief. The doctrinal issues over which these theorists differed is almost the same as those over which the Islamic State’s legal scholars have renewed the debate.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently, the issues branched off and became more complex within the Islamic State at

47 See “Brothers of the rawafid wailing again!”, al-Naba newsletter editorial, No. 271, <https://shineofislam.com/24578/>.

48 See audio transcription of speech by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “Sorry, Emir of al-Qaeda”, Shine of Islam website, <https://shineofislam.com/16889/>.

49 At the Khalden training camp in the province of Khost, Afghanistan, supervised by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi the Shari’a official, Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, was studying his book, Issues in the Jurisprudence of Jihad, especially “the criterion for ruling on the rulings occurring in the abode”, and the unbelief and apostasy of those who belong to the armies of the infidels. See “From the Secrets of History”, Jaljalat Salafi Forum, Tuesday, July 1, 2008. <https://gglgt.yoo7.com/t18-topic>.

50 Jerryan Shanassi, “Conflict and Division within Islamic State”, Intellectual Anthology, 2/25/1398, <https://makhaterltakfir.com/fa/Mainstreaming/View/2681>.

the beginning of the era of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, during which time it was preoccupied with issues such as the permissibility of fighting the Awakening councils and the ruling in their regard, and the ruling on Syrian factions that did not pledge allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>51</sup>

From the main issues other sub-issues branched off that would become the subject of wide debate, including the generalization of the term “unbelief and idolatry” to include all institutions and inhabitants of the abode, whether *takfir* is a principle of the religion, and if it is permissible to be ignorant of the principle of monotheism.

## (2) Tamkin and methodological shifts

Empowerment in a specific territory and the declaration of the caliphate in the era of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi advanced concepts characterized by extremism and an expanded use of *takfir*, the most important of which are:

- 1- **Allegiance to the empowered imam:** Namely, the installation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph and the obligation of pledging allegiance to him. In the work “Extending hands in the obligation of pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi”, Turki Binali said all the conditions of the Imamate were fulfilled in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and he had no deficiencies either in the obligatory or the desirable conditions.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Abu al-Hasan al-Azdi wrote in “The Obligations of Joining ISIS” of the obligation of pledging allegiance to it.<sup>53</sup>
- 2- **Unbelief by alignment:** Rulings of apostasy were expanded to include factions allied with the Free Syrian Army, for example, but on an individual basis and not just in general; applying the description of the eighth nullifier of Islam to the Awakening

51 Abu Yazar’s debate with al-Adnani, Anti-Extremism website, 6 June 2015, <https://cutt.us/0jZcJ>.

52 Turki Binali, “Extending Hands in the obligation of pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi”, p. 10.

53 Abu al-Hasan al-Azdi, “The Obligations of Joining ISIS”, al-Muasada Media Foundation, Shumoukh Islam Network, p. 25.

councils (supporting and aiding idolaters against the Muslims); labeling specific individuals as infidels by describing democracy workers with the fourth nullifier (those who prefer the rule of false gods to the rule of Islam); and a loathing to broaden excuses to include ignorance of the principle of religion,<sup>54</sup> and the related ruling on social intercourse with supporters of democracy. This raised controversy and wide discussions with other factions in Syria,<sup>55</sup> which prompted extensive responses from the Research and Studies Office, one of the Islamic State's institutions.<sup>56</sup>

- 3- Judgment of man-made laws in the countries of unbelief:** Whoever seeks judgment according to man-made laws is an unbeliever, even if they are under compulsion. "The organization called on Abu al-Mundhir al-Harbi to repent because he believed that it was permissible to refer to the Iraqi courts in Baghdad to recover the rights of those who were compelled".<sup>57</sup>
- 4- Application of hudud punishments in liberated areas:** "Any ruling on the abode is by predominance and the rulings that take place in it, and as long as they apply hudud, their areas are an Islamic state".<sup>58</sup> "It is an obligation to rule within the state according to Shari'a in domestic systems and policies because it is an Islamic construct awakening from the reality of the pre-Islamic era of ignorance".<sup>59</sup>

54 Dabiq magazine, Issue Six, Rabi' al Awwal, 1436 AH, p. 21.

55 Abu Yazan's debate with al-Adnani, Anti-Extremism website, 6 June 2015, <https://cutt.us/0jZcJ>.

56 See "The Meaning of Loyalty and Disavowal", Volume One, Research and Studies Office.

57 Methodological Oversight Committee, session with Abi al-Mundhir al-Harbi, al-Nathir al-Arian TV, 03/22/2016, <https://t.me/hanefanmoslem13/107>.

58 See Ithaf al-Barara on applying hudud punishments in the liberated areas, Shumoukh Islam Publications, <http://justpaste.it/ere0>.

59 Othman Abdul Rahman al-Tamimi, Media of the People on the Birth of the State of Islam, Ministry of Shari'a Bodies, al-Furqan Foundation, p. 45.

**5- *Takfir of the excuser:*** This involves the ruling regarding those who hesitate to pronounce *takfir* and put forward an excuse for issues of monotheism and idolatry. It involves an infinite regress (*tasalsul*) in *takfir*, i.e. “those who do not declare that the infidel is an infidel”, which is known in the literature of the jihadist movement as the third nullifier (*takfir* by infinite regress). According to this view, “He who does not deem it to be apostasy except if it is linked to the heart is one who postpones judgment (*murji*’), while whoever deems it to be apostasy but excuses him by an impediment, is a prevaricating Sunni. Then whoever deems it to be apostasy and sees no impediment, but then stops short of *takfir*, is an infidel. Other questions include: what constitutes rejection of false gods; correcting the faith of the imitator who received his Islam not by demonstration and deduction but by imitation (*taqlid*); the unbelief of those who go to the abode of unbelief; and those who are excused by ignorance, and who do not commit idolatry, nor fall into it”.<sup>60</sup> Examination of the general public in matters of doctrine led to the ensuing massacre of about 3,000 people due to methodological differences over the issue of excusing ignorance and the *takfir* of the excuser.<sup>61</sup> According to a correction by Turki Binali about the statement of the Delegated Committee, the state makes the issue of *takfir* of idolaters one of the manifest principles of religion.

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60 See Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, “Text transcript explaining the ruling that ‘whoever does not declare an infidel to be an infidel is an infidel,’” <https://archive.org/details/omar2017>.

61 “Letter of my testimony on the case of the repentants”, Abu Jandal al-Haili, Foundation for Scientific Heritage, <https://cutt.us/xuVor>.

<b>Excuse</b>	Establishment of conditions and lack of impediments in general	No excuse in the principles of religion and monotheism	Absolutely no excuse allowed
<b>Excuser</b>	The excuser is not an infidel	Disagreement within the organization	The excuser is an infidel
<b>Infinite regress of <i>takfir</i></b>	Infinite regress not allowed	Infinite regress allowed	Infinite regress required

(2) Table explaining differences in rulings on excuse

**6- Priority of fighting apostates:** The issue of fighting the apostate has been raised as being more important than fighting one who is originally an infidel.<sup>62</sup> The fatwas extend to those who do not judge the armies as infidels; those who postpone judgment are considered outside the people of the Sunna.<sup>63</sup> The legal scholars also discussed the issue of seeking the assistance of the apostate, whether the assistance of infidels against Muslims or the assistance of infidels against infidels, “because there are differences between seeking their help when Islam and its rulings prevail, and seeking their help when unbelief and its rulings prevail”.<sup>64</sup> The issue of the permissibility of seeking help from oppressors against oppressors was raised and whether it is a form of unbelief if it is done amid the prevalence of unbelief. The issue developed to a ruling on working

62 A statement by the former media spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, entitled, “Now the fighting has come”, al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production, 35th minute, “The one who ordered us to fight the original infidel ordered us to fight the apostate, indeed fighting the apostate is foremost”.

63 This was mentioned in Dabiq in the testimony of one of its members that one of the errors of postponing judgment (*irja'*) in some combat schools was what some of its leadership had issued in the past regarding certain apostate rulers, especially the Al Saud family, and their soldiers, and refraining from fighting them despite their apostasy. See Dabiq magazine, Issue Six, Rabi' al-Awwal, 1436 AH, p. 40.

64 “Exposition on Seeking Assistance”, Shumoukh Islam Library, p. 15, <https://cutt.us/tDcME>.

in the organs of al-Baghdadi's state, where "Binali and al-Qahtani differed regarding its use, with the latter of the opinion that it is not permissible to leave them to innovators".<sup>65</sup>

**7- *Takfir* of officials of the idolaters:** Legal scholars held that it does not fall under the category of rejection of false gods due to the absence of a clear prescriptive text. Others thought that the ruling of *takfir* is based on reasons,<sup>66</sup> not on types. On this basis, Abu Bakr al-Qahtani issued his fatwa on "the rule for those who do not declare an infidel to be an infidel", and that infinite regress is not permissible in the *takfir* of the common people. This was rejected by legal scholars of the Furqan wing and the Delegated Committee.<sup>67</sup> The Research Office also sent a letter to the Delegated Committee. The leadership sensed danger and embarrassment and decided to resolve the controversy by forming the Methodological Oversight Committee to solve these problems.

**8- Killing for the public interest:** The practice of killing for the public interest and as discretionary punishment (*ta'zir*) was expanded. This prompted opponents to publicly criticize the matter, including Abu Abd al-Barr, who said, "Whoever broaches these two matters should be knowledgeable about them in terms of proving the case first, then investigating its validity, ruling according to the information, and considering the interests, time, and manner of applying the ruling".<sup>68</sup>

65 Abu Issa al-Masry, "Statements of Its People, Scientific Heritage Library, p. 13, <https://cutt.us/k00zy>.

66 Letter from the Delegated Committee to the administration of the ISIS provinces regarding the ruling on those who hesitate to practice *takfir*; electronic copy, December 2015, Statement 175 issued by the Central Office for the follow-up of Shari'a dawawin, June 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/ommaty1401/posts/972294816218743>.

67 Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, "Explanation of the Ruling on 'Whoever Does Not Declare an Infidel to Be an Infidel,'" August 2017, p. 54, <https://cutt.us/cN76p>.

68 "Confidential Advice Sent to Princes of State", September 2019, p. 18.

### (3) Fragmentation and formation of wings

Regarding the aforementioned foundations and issues that divided the organization into currents, Abu Issa al-Masri says, “The arena witnessed violent ideological strife between several currents, followed by a debate between seekers of knowledge and media extremists who accuse Islamic scholars of unbelief in the presence of al-Hajj Abdullah.<sup>69</sup> Their extremist ideas include *takfir* of the following groups: anyone who bears arms against the regime, even if he is neither democratic, nor secular, nor helping against Muslims, just because he is not with the Islamic State; those who hold a passport or carry an identity card in the countries of the false gods; officials in general without specificity; those who ask for intercession from a martyr, describing as an idol a martyr from whom you ask for intercession; a group of living and dead, free and captive Muslim scholars; a group of former jihad leaders; people outside the narrow scope of the Islamic State in general, or hesitation about people outside this line; and other corrupt extremist beliefs adopted by some in the Islamic State”.<sup>70</sup>

The following rival wings formed:

- A. **Abu Ja’afar al-Hattab wing:** A member of the Legal Committee,<sup>71</sup> and sometimes called al-Hazimi,<sup>72</sup> he put forth a ruling on whoever hesitates to practice *takfir* against idolaters,<sup>73</sup> stating that the ruling on their *takfir* is one of the principles of the religion and not one of its requirements. He also pronounced *takfir* on those living

69 Abu Issa al-Masry, Islamic State Methodology Sanam al-Ajwa, Scientific Heritage Foundation, 19 February 2019, pp. 1-10, <https://cutt.us/0oshl>.

70 Ibid.

71 A Tunisian legal scholar, one of the leaders of Ansar al-Sharia, he was publicly executed for refusing to retract the infinite regression *takfir* of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, according to the third nullifier of Islam.

72 Ahmad bin Ali al-Hazimi, from Saudi Arabia, has a great influence on Ansar al-Sharia, and it moved through him to Abu Ja’afar al-Hattab.

73 Advocating for the Captive Brothers in the Hellish State of the Unbelievers, al-Rased website, 08/28/2014, [http://www.alrased.net/main/articles.aspx?selected\\_article\\_no=6767](http://www.alrased.net/main/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=6767).

in the abodes of unbelief. At that time, this current was eradicated, its theorists were executed, and the rest of its elements were imprisoned and recanted. This led to an internal problem, which prompted al-Hattab's second man, Abu Alaa al-Afri, to isolate himself due to the proximity of some of the legal scholars to him.<sup>74</sup> From the current of al-Hattab al-Hazimi's wing, about 700 Tunisians and people from North African countries were executed,<sup>75</sup> for fear of a fissure in the organization and because some adherents of this current were planning to overthrow al-Baghdadi himself.<sup>76</sup>

- B. Abu Muhammad al-Furqan wing, and the takfir of the excuser:** His real name was Wael Hussein, an official of the Central Media Department. In al-Naba newsletter and the publications of the al-Hayat Foundation, he raised issues less severe than those of the Abu Ja'afar al-Hattab wing (i.e., on the issue of hesitating to rule on the inhabitants of the abode of unbelief and the lack of infinite regress in *takfir*, he advocated to examine and clarify), but he adopted positions similar to theirs, such as no excuse is allowed for ignorance of issues of monotheism and idolatry or issues of religion that are necessarily known, and *takfir* is one of the manifest principles of the religion.<sup>77</sup> All this required the legal scholars working in the Office of Research and Ifta, headed by Abu Bakr al-Qahtani and Turki Binali, to respond to it in successive publications.
- C. Binali and al-Qahtani wing:** This wing includes the followers of the legal scholar, Turki Binali,<sup>78</sup> and with him, Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, and Abu

74 Message from Security and the Security Apparatus, Basirah website, 2017, <https://alabasirah.com/node/664>

75 Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi, Stop the Hands From Pledging Allegiance To al-Baghdadi, p. 44.

76 Khabab al-Jazrawi, "A comment on the killing of Abu Bakr al-Qahtani", <http://cutt.us.com/bwalvp>.

77 Statement issued by the Central Office for the Follow-up of Shari'a Dawanin, No. 175, al-Naba newsletter, No. 76, 05/29/2016.

78 He was a member of the Office of Research and Ifta, before heading the Research and Studies Office and the Scientific Council.

Yaqoub al-Maqqdisi. Their ideas are summarized by the following principles: 1) excusing ignorance is permissible in matters of monotheism and idolatry and lesser matters; 2) the rule for inhabitants of the lapsed abodes of unbelief (*al-kufr al-tari'*) is that they are Muslim; and 3) *takfir* is not a principle of the religion.<sup>79</sup>

<b>Currents and Ideology</b>	<b>Al-Hazimi (Abu Ja'afar al-Hattab)</b>	<b>Office of Research (Binali)</b>	<b>Al-Furqan (Abu Muhammad al-Furqan)</b>
<b>Main Figures</b>	Abu Ja'afar al-Hattab, Abu Musab al-Tunisi, Abu Usayd al-Maghrabi, Abu al-Hawra al-Jaza'iri, Abu Khalid al-Sharqi, Abu Abdullah al-Maghrabi	Turki Binali, Abu Bakr al-Qahtani, Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Abu Yaqoub al-Maqqdisi, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Zarqawi, Abu Abd al-Bar al-Salihi, Abu Hafs al-Hamdani	Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, Abu Maysara al-Shami (supervisor of the Languages Dept. in the Media Dept.), Abu Zaid al-Iraqi (aka Ismail al-Ithawi, former deputy of al-Baghdadi), Shu'bah al-Masry, Abu Hafs al-Wadani, Abu Ahmad al-Faransi, Abu Maram al-Jaza'iri
<b>Excuse</b>	No excuse for ignorance of issues of monotheism	Excuse for ignorance and interpretation in matters of monotheism	No excuse for ignorance in matters of monotheism and idolatry, or issues of religion that are necessarily known

<sup>79</sup> He was a member of the Office of Research and Ifta, before heading the Research and Studies Office and the Scientific Council. Al-Qahtani presented his doctrinal views in a letter he sent to al-Baghdadi in response to the statements of the al-Furqan current, see Turki Binali, "Conditions and Impediments for Takfir", 01/11/2017, [https://archive.org/details/Torki\\_bannali](https://archive.org/details/Torki_bannali).

<b>Takfir</b>	<i>Takfir</i> a principle of Shari'a, takfir of one who denies a fact of the religion that is necessarily known, infinite regression of takfir	<i>Takfir</i> is not foundational, takfir of whoever denies a known fact of the religion, infinite regression is permissible by establishing proof	<i>Takfir</i> is one of the manifest principles of the religion, and there is no infinite regression in takfir, but rather examining and clarifying
<b>Abode and the State</b>	Abode of unbelief and its inhabitants are infidels	Abode of unbelief and the rule for its inhabitants is that they are Muslim; they can be accused of unbelief once proof is established, and it is permissible to kill them	Ruling on the inhabitants of the lapsed abode of unbelief is to suspend judgment on whether they are unbelievers or Muslim until their condition becomes clear
<b>Alignment</b>	<i>Takfir</i> of those who align with infidels and Syrian factions	<i>Takfir</i> of those who are aligned after establishing proof, and alignment is permissible for reasons of necessity	Examine and clarify

(3) Table of intellectual positions of ISIS intellectual currents<sup>80</sup>

80 Previous study by the researcher, "ISIS from Empowerment to Diaspora", Trends Center for Studies, 2020, <https://cutt.us/VwO4S>.

#### (4) Back-and-forth debate and mobilization of legal scholars

The debate began to intensify and escalate among the three wings within the corridors of the organization, in rapid and successive steps and stages.

- 1- **Publication of the articles, “Symbols or Idols”:** A series from the media wing, one of which included paragraphs that could be interpreted as accusing al-Baghdadi himself of unbelief.<sup>81</sup>
- 2- **Statement from the Central Office for Follow-up of Shari’a Dawanin:** An attempt by the Delegated Committee to mend the rift, through a statement on 05/17/2017, taking its title from the Quranic verse “that he who would perish might perish by clear proof, and he who would live might live by clear proof”. The statement confirmed that the organization does not consider the inhabitants of the lapsed abodes of unbelief to be Muslim, it does not adopt jurisprudential arguments that invalidate the third nullifier of Islam, and does not hesitate to practice *takfir* against those who vote on the pretext of their ignorance of the truth of elections.<sup>82</sup>
- 3- **Dissolution of the Delegated Committee:** This committee was dissolved after the statement of the Central Office, and al-Baghdadi reconstituted it from the Binali-Qahtani current on 09/15/2017. Abu Muhammad al-Masry was tasked with developing a clear and unified ideology for the organization.
- 4- **Issuance of the audio series, “This was not our methodology and will not be”:** These releases were launched by the legal scholar, Abu Muhammad al-Masry, and were broadcast on the official

81 “Symbols or Idols”, al-Naba newsletter, No. 85, 06/15/2017, <https://archive.org/details/rumoz2mawthan/AnNaba115>.

82 Delegated Committee, circular entitled: “That He Who Would Perish Might Perish by Clear Proof, and He Who Would Live Might Live by Clear Proof”, 17 May 2017, quoted on the Islamic Movements portal, <https://www.islamist-movements.com/40510>.

al-Bayan Radio. The “Scientific Series on Clarifying Methodological Issues” was released in nine episodes and recorded,<sup>83</sup> after being submitted to the Caliph, who approved it and ordered it to be recorded. It was decided to broadcast these episodes explaining the issues, which included “an introduction to the refutation of the canceled innovated statement, an explanation of the issue of the principle of the religion, the issue of *takfir* of idolaters, a response to two doubts that arose among the extremists, levels of *takfir* of idolaters, the ruling on one who practices *takfir* against a Muslim unduly, the recalcitrant sect, and the issue of rulings on abodes”.<sup>84</sup>

- 5- **Dissolution of the Delegated Committee for a second time:** Hajj Abdullah<sup>85</sup> refused to continue broadcasting the episodes, under the pretext of knowing the reactions to the first of them. A few days later the Delegated Committee was dissolved again, and the cadres of the Binali current were arrested.<sup>86</sup> Hajj Abdullah restored the extremists to their positions, eradicated and swept under the carpet the methodological episodes explaining the dispute, and worked to marginalize them and prevent their re-broadcast on al-Bayan Radio.<sup>87</sup>
- 6- **Formation of the Methodological Oversight Committee:** This committee was formed after al-Furqan, Hajj Abdel Nasser, and Hajj Abdullah took control once again. Legal scholars were examined, and usually their gatherings were put to an end, either by their imprisonment or execution.<sup>88</sup>

83 Abu Muhammad al-Masry, “Scientific Series on a Statement of Methodological Issues”, September 2017, <https://cutt.us/RRAFU>.

84 Ibid.

85 Many sources suggest that he is Abdullah Qardash, al-Baghdadi’s deputy, and he is Abu Muhammad al-Rahman al-Mawli al-Sallabi, the new leader of ISIS, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi.

86 “Scientific series on methodological issues”, Scientific Heritage Foundation, 2018, [https://archive.org/details/Salsala\\_Almiya](https://archive.org/details/Salsala_Almiya).

87 Ibid.

88 Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi, “Hashimi Advice to the Emir of the Islamic State”, al-Basirah, <https://alabasirah.com/node/731>.

- 7- **The massacre of the repentant:** This was a group who wanted to excuse people for ignorance and interpretation. Others, who wanted to practice *takfir* against such people, sent a letter to this group to attend a session of the Board of Grievances, where the first group then repented. Days later, they gathered them in prisons and tortured them, after which they killed 3,000 of them at once.<sup>89</sup>
- 8- **Dissident movement:** This movement began after the al-Hattab (Hazimi) and Binali-Qahtani wings rejected the control of the Furqan wing. After the execution of the legal scholar Abu Yaqoub al-Maqdisi and the killing of Abu Muhammad al-Masri, they began planning a coup against al-Baghdadi. Many writings by them appeared, including “Answers to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s Questions”, published by the Scientific Heritage Foundation in 2019; a letter, “Criticism and Advice”, by Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Zarqawi, from the Ma’arij Foundation in 2018; a book, *The Hollow Organization*, from the Wafa Foundation in 2019; a letter, “By Welcoming Evasion, We Kill the Pious”, by Ibn Jubeir from the Wafa Foundation in 2019; another letter by Ibn Jubeir, “The Fall of the Myth”, from the Wafa Foundation in 2019; and the book, *Stop the Hands From Pledging Allegiance to al-Baghdadi*, by Abu Muhammad al-Hashimi in 2019.

### (5) Post-tamkin and overcoming divisions

When Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi took the place of al-Baghdadi, military men (“Hajjajis”) were in control of the organs of the organization, who are only concerned with ideology to the extent that it contributes to their control. The new leader released several speeches via his spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, stating that the organization was trying to overcome its ideological divisions, by speaking of hostile actions and calling for their increase.

<sup>89</sup> Abu Issa al-Masry, “Slaughter of the Repentant”, Scientific Heritage Library, [https://archive.org/details/20200211\\_20200211\\_1940](https://archive.org/details/20200211_20200211_1940).

## Fighting takes priority over ideological theories

The media apparatus did not seem to focus on the ideological aspect as much as it was eager to show its military victories, with the exception of some statements released by its branch in Yemen, such as “Standings with the Statement of the al-Qaeda Dissidents”,<sup>90</sup> or “Dialogue with Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi”, which described the deviations of al-Qaeda’s creed, how they are the group of the Muslims and the apostate al-Qaeda fought them, including apostate factions such as the Macina Liberation Front, who demanded that they surrender their weapons.<sup>91</sup>

Likewise, the organization’s leadership was primarily preoccupied with retaking control of and restructuring the organization’s organs. Thus, the official and unofficial ISIS media apparatus put forward the organization’s old general ideas, such as the differences between it and al-Qaeda. For example, it issued, “In Order to Exonerate Ourselves before Your Lord”, to highlight the methodological crisis between ISIS and al-Qaeda in Yemen.

Although the film did not offer anything new about the contentious issues between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, it shed light on a set of doctrinal differences, including the issue of loyalty and disavowal (al-wala’ wal-bara’) and the rejection of alliances that violate Shari’a, such as the pledge of allegiance to the Taliban, whose loyalists ISIS rules to be apostates.

The organization reissued, updated, and developed the old production—whether written, audio, statements, or jurisprudential arguments—to keep pace with its new strategies. Rhetoric took a parallel line, as it did not bring anything new to those ideological concepts, including doctrinal issues such as not excusing ignorance

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90 “Standings with the Statement of the al-Qaeda Dissidents”, Empowerment page, Telegram, [https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=c1453372323\\_9478585500003653913](https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=c1453372323_9478585500003653913)

91 Dialogue with Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi, al-Naba newsletter, Issue 260, Thursday, 26 Rabi al-Awwal 1442 AH.

and interpretation, ruling of apostasy on the violators and rejection of their repentance, *takfir* of Shi'a and Sufis in general, ruling of *takfir* of rulers and their officials, impermissibility of working in infidel regimes, ruling of *takfir* for holders of an ID card or card of the Syrian or Iraqi army, ruling of *takfir* for loyalists of opposing militias and factions, ruling that the abode and the state are infidel because they raise the banner of infidelity and do not apply Shari'a, and applying these rulings to the inhabitants of the abode and the state.

Rulings related to alignment: These include the impermissibility of congratulating the Copts on their feasts, the inadmissibility of saluting the flag of the infidel state, the obligation to restrict the Copts, the permissibility of theft from those of other religions and sects, deeming their women and their property to be lawful plunder, the permissibility of taking captive those of other sects, the permissibility of selling the gold and antiquities of the land of the apostate state, the impermissibility of democracy work, the prohibition and apostasy of political party activity, and the *takfir* of collaborators with the regimes and the obligation to kill them.

Rulings related to fighting: These include the obligation to fight sects such as the police and the army, the obligation to form groups to fight the regimes, the *takfir* of the ruler and the obligation to depose him by force, the permissibility of mutilating the corpses of apostates, the permissibility of burning apostate prisoners, the permissibility of killing armed members of the public, the obligation to emigrate from infidel countries and, if that is difficult, to work to sabotage them from within, the permissibility of usurping property to spend on the organization, the obligation to kill spies, and the permissibility of burning and destroying temples and churches.

## **Continuation of the methodology of the Furqan wing**

The speeches of Abu Hamza al-Qurashi emphasized these issues and previous rulings and the continuation of the old methodology of the Delegated Committee under the leadership of Hajj Abdullah, who took over the leadership of the organization after al-Baghdadi. The methodology of the Furqan wing dominates the mentality of the leadership, as in al-Qurashi's speech addressed to the apostates, "God destroyed them and the unbelievers alike", when he said, "The people of falsehood sought to distort the reputation of the Islamic State and accuse it of extremism and being Kharijites. They tried their best to limit the fighting to the Crusaders only, and they called those who refrain from fighting the Shi'a and Sunni apostates 'the noble resistance.' They did not understand that they should make every effort to destroy the great sedition (fitna) of the age represented by democracy and secularism, for it is an infidel religion, and whoever believes in it by thought, word, or deed is an unbeliever in God Almighty, and has no honor. People were warned against participating in it by voting, candidacy, or referendum on its infidel laws and constitutions. Words were followed with action by targeting the temples of this pagan religion, consisting of the polling and nominating centers. This took place gradually over the past years, starting with proselytization and clarification, and going all the way to the sword and the spear, at a time when the apostates were among the pretenders of Islam and are still allowing the idolatry of democracy".<sup>92</sup>

During the period of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi, al-Naba newsletter emerged as the most important media outlet, through which the same intellectual methodology was presented: the permissibility of killing civilians, the priority of fighting apostates, the apostasy of those fleeing to and those returning to the abodes of unbelief.<sup>93</sup>

92 Downloaded speech by Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, Forum Shamkhat, <https://pastethis.to/1uvvuejvS>.

93 See the opening statement, al-Naba newsletter, Issues 154, 188, and 240.

### **Limited differences**

During the era of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi, no doctrinal disputes emerged, except for the limited schism that took place in the Egyptian branch (Wilayat Sinai) over pledging allegiance to an unknown caliph. This was the same issue that was brought up at the beginning of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's tenure, which pushed him to appear many times.<sup>94</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is clear from the above that, before the fall of al-Baghouz, ISIS was suffering from intellectual schisms that affected its institutions and bases, and that the new leadership inherited those differences. While it condemns the choices made by the Delegated Committee in terms of doctrinal jurisprudence that curries favor with the ruler, it was forced to focus most of its efforts on returning to its first approach, i.e., the jurisprudence of "organizations revolting against apostate rulers". This approach brings cells together on specific issues, such as the duty to fight the apostates, fighting the recalcitrant sects, and so on. However, this did not prevent dissidents from claiming legitimacy, who presented what happened in detail and theorized that it was not permissible to fight with an ideologically deviant organization. This re-ignited the controversy, which led the organization's media apparatus to re-emphasize the controversial issues. This showed that the leadership, represented by al-Hashemi, is of the most extreme wing.

In conclusion, the following is clear:

- The intellectual alignment of ISIS is always prone to fission because the issues are primarily old inherited texts and an expression of a political crisis within the countries in which the organization was established, which is perpetually repeated as strategies differ.

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94 "Wilayat Sinai's split over an unknown situation", Program from the inside, 10/19/2020.

- It seemed from previous methodological differences that the organization does not have a specific ideological center of gravity, and that the legal scholars and seekers of knowledge carry a significant weight parallel to that of the military leadership, which can always be renewed in new struggles.
- The organization's marketing has suffered intellectually from many problems since those various theories were put forward, and this will affect the future recruitment and radicalization processes.
- The interrelated conflicts within the organization itself ideologically, and between it and other organizations, is the most successful thing that makes it easier to divide and penetrate the organization.
- At this moment, ISIS is facing a dilemma: its presence on the ground consists of numerous cells with different intellectual orientations. If the leadership fails to bring them together on specific issues, the cells' affiliation will become a formality, they will be divided and ultimately defeated, or they will form another framework within which they can operate, most likely the emergence of other organizations either less strict or more extreme.

# Discussion

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## **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

ISIS rose, emerged, and was able to attract large numbers and recruit groups of followers through strong media propaganda in that period. It spoke of the utopia of the Islamic State, and of religious symbols such as the caliphate and the promised land. It spoke, too, about Sunnis' grievances in Iraq and Syria. In the previous phase, it had a solid ideology, built on one clear, unified approach. But now that the state has collapsed, there are many important questions and queries we aim to discuss in this research seminar:

- What are the most prominent features of ISIS political and media propaganda?
- How does ISIS justify the current phase? And how is it dealing with it?
- Has its ability to recruit declined, or has it found new spaces to serve as an incubator for its members, as there are signs that ISIS has started to go to countries such as Afghanistan, as well as West Africa?
- Is the ideological side still solid, or has it fallen apart and disintegrated? Today, there are many leaks about disputes within ISIS, and some members have fled to Turkey, smuggling with them a large portion of documents related to ISIS and its internal discussions.

## **Marwan Shehadeh**

I will discuss the question raised by Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman: Is ISIS propaganda still as effective as it was three or four years ago? Charlie Winter's lecture included figures and graphs indicating a significant and clear decline in the activities of Islamic State media

organizations at a time when they had offices in each province, up to 35 media offices. Now, it may be limited to the main al-Furqan and Khorasan media offices, and perhaps also in West Africa and the Sahel, as well as Syria. Some of the offices and publications have also effectively receded.

Supporters no longer have as active a presence, especially due to a very important issue that Winter referred to: intelligence efforts to hack accounts. Indeed, over the past few weeks, we have seen Telegram start hacking or cancelling accounts that post anything referring to armed groups. Some offices, such as the weekly al-Naba newspaper, have maintained their publications and active presence. The Amaq Agency also publishes on a weekly basis. As for other official media accounts or institutions publishing in foreign languages—such as the al-Hayat Media Center, as well as the al-Himma Library, Ajnad, and newspapers such as Dabiq, Dar al-Islam, and Konstantiniyye—translation activities have ended for most of them. This is a sign that the defeat the group suffered on the military level has also been clearly reflected on the media level.

I refer, here, to Maher Farghali's lecture. He went back to the beginning of ISIS, and I believe, based on our observation of the organizations and close experience communicating with some supporters and advocates of jihadist groups, that if ISIS or any group suffers a defeat, it also leads to disputes at the level of the intellectual elites and scholarly authorities of the organization. It is also reflected in disputes on the fate of prisoners or detainees inside the countries, especially families and women.

Indeed, there are sharp differences over jurisprudential issues that have been present and latent within ISIS. Fear and security concerns of being physically targeted and assassinated have led many to remain silent. Abu Issa al-Masri (a former ISIS leader), in some of his recent

writings issued two weeks ago, mentioned a very serious issue. He said the ISIS security apparatus had obtained some electronic chip used by the Americans for assassinations through spies who had infiltrated the organization. They were caught, and the chips were confiscated and planted on ISIS intellectual leaders they wanted to get rid of (so that American military aircraft would target them by tracking these chips). Among these stories about the internal situation, the wife of Turki al-Binali (who was one of the most prominent intellectual figures within the organization) accuses ISIS leadership of being the ones to actually plant a chip on his car for it to be targeted by coalition forces.

Such serious testimonies demonstrate the depth of the cracks and ideological disputes between the hardline Hazimi current (which is the hardline current of jurisprudence within ISIS) and people who had reservations on, or even opposed, the issue of the excuse of ignorance or killing on suspicion.<sup>95</sup> This is a problematic issue that remains even after the failure of the political project of the Islamic State. I believe that it will generate many disputes or publications highlighting or narrating the story of these disputes. Even Abu Anas al-Sahaba (a Jordanian former leader with Jabhat al-Nusra, originally from Zarqa and most likely currently detained by the Kurds in Syria), along with Saad al-Hunaiti (also a Jordanian leader who was in the Salafi-jihadist movement, then became a leader in Jabhat al-Nusra, then pledged allegiance to ISIS and later defected from it. He then fled, was detained, and is still held by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)) talked about deep disagreements with ISIS leadership on some issues related to extremism and excesses. They also spoke about the impact of the hardline current led by Abu Muhammad al-Furqan (who was one

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95 The excuse of ignorance (al-'udhr bi-l-jahl) and killing on suspicion (al-qatl bi-l-shabbah) are among the contentious issues of jurisprudence among jihadist groups. There are groups with an expansive view of killing that do not excuse people for ignorance or kill on suspicion. There is a less extremist current within ISIS that was more hesitant and tried to stay away from this more extremist logic, especially from the so-called Hazimi current.

of the prominent hardline leaders of ISIS) at the time, and the Najdi current (a hardline Salafist current in the organization's intellectual circles) on its path.

Ideological and doctrinal disagreements plague ISIS to this moment, not only in Syria, but also in other branches. Regarding what Charlie Winter referred to about Boko Haram, ISIS leadership had reservations about the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. We saw how he (in May 2021), during a meeting to discuss leadership, the emirate, the imamate, and the unification of Boko Haram—which had seen a split between the group's militant wing and another wing that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in West Africa Province—blew himself up and killed five of the organization's leaders, himself included, because there was a decision for his arrest by the other wing.

### **Khaled Salim**

The researcher Maher Farghali spoke about four factors contributing to the process of disintegration within ISIS. My question is, from his perspective and knowledge: What ideological factors contribute to the unity of ISIS? How do they create shared factors? The importance of this question is reinforced by what Charlie Winter mentioned, regarding control of the discourse related to military activity at the expense of ideological activity. It is also reinforced by what Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman mentioned, that ISIS depends on media messaging and decentralized networks, as it is present in many countries. These organizations we call provinces control their agenda of local, political, economic, and social issues. In light of these indicators, it seems necessary to ask the previous question about the factors of unity, as opposed to the factors of disintegration and disagreement.

### **Hassan Abu Haniyeh**

We must pay attention to the formations of ISIS propaganda and ideology, as they are not separate from events. The organization's

loss of territorial control led to the transformations mentioned in Charlie Winter's session. He used the term "pre-propaganda", in the sense that ISIS fundamentally bases its propaganda on what comes before the propaganda itself. That is, there are political, economic, and social conditions in these areas in which crises and disputes occur, be they political, ideological, or ethnic. ISIS has been able to exploit these conditions by presenting itself to people as a savior and making alliances to spread and rise. This happened recently in Central Africa, with the transformation of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) into ISIS in the Congo, as well as in the Philippines, with the Moro Liberation Movement pledging allegiance. We must know, then, that ideology has material dimensions lying in disputes over spatial control. The declaration of the caliphate imposed intellectual, ideological, and doctrinal problems. The basic structure of the disputes came in the first place from the foreign fighters (muhajirin). This caused a problem that ISIS leadership later realized. The propaganda on behalf of the caliphate and the land of migration (ard al-hijra) served a function, but the old leaders realized the scale of the disaster due to those volunteers who came to the organization. The majority of them created these problems and disputes that we have seen.

The tendencies of the foreign fighters (mujahideen) coming from many countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe caused problems at their gathering point in Syria and impacted the center of the organization in Iraq. ISIS originated in Iraq as a political military organization with a clear strategic vision, from its founding by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, through Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The organization has a project with a strategic vision based on identity in opposing the Shia, and has clear stances on the subject of apostates and fighting the near enemy. The ideology is based upon the Iraqi reality in the post-occupation period. The foreign fighters who came

with their differences to Syria did not understand this, which had an effect on Iraq.

What I want to get at here is that ISIS ideology has a material aspect, in the sense that it is not based entirely on abstract theology and on their theory of divine oneness (tawhid). There is no dispute between al-Qaeda and ISIS on the essence and attributes of God (al-sifat wa-l-dhat). The dispute is related to the issue of loyalty and disavowal (al-wala' wa-l-bara'), accusing a specific individual of unbelief (takfir al-mu'ayyan), and other issues of religious jurisprudence. The disagreements between ISIS and al-Qaeda were related to the difference between the situation in Iraq and the other determinants of al-Qaeda's activity, which later helped shape the ideological perspective of each.

ISIS today, after its military defeat and the collapse of its state, has restructured the organization and retaken control of the ideological discourse in one form or another. Thus, it benefitted during the past period from being done with all the problems caused by the foreign fighters. Today, it is trying seriously to keep a handle on foreign fighters in the Central Africa province, the Congo, Khorasan, East Africa, the Sahara, and the Sahel. Indeed, the disputes—as Winter affirms—were not at the organization's center in Iraq, but rather in Raqqa. That is, the area dominated by foreign fighters that the organization was trying to deal with and who consequently created problems for it.

It remains for me to refer here to the nightmare scenario predicted by Bruce Hoffman—that is, the return of the union between al-Qaeda and ISIS that existed during the period of al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden. The theoretical commonalities and strategic issues are still present.

## Remarks

### **Maher Farghali**

I believe it can be said that ISIS is currently overcoming these methodological disagreements, after the internal security agencies took control of the organization and the restructuring process. It is also using groups to attract, hack, recruit, and fight on the ground. The organization has gone back to the working theory of “cells”, as was the case in 2010.

There is clear control by the security wing, and those who are called the “Hajjajiyun”. We are noticing a decline of all publications following the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the appointment of al-Hashimi. You will find but little media discourse, which is a repetition of the old call for jihad and fighting. I think the organization’s strategy today is a “cyber caliphate on the internet” and security groups fighting on the ground. I believe ISIS has succeeded somewhat in overcoming the differences.

## **Chapter Two**

# **The Future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq**

This chapter discusses the future of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria: the main areas upon which it founded its former state, from which it announced the establishment of the caliphate, and to which it drew thousands of young people from around the world to live and form the organization's human cadres, alongside local supporters. Accordingly, a number of important questions arise following the announcement of the collapse of the organization's state. Has it really ended, and at a minimum, will it not rise again to seize territory and threaten regional or even global security? Or are there still possibilities for it to rise, especially as the same group was hit hard in 2007 but reshaped its ideological and organizational structure and took advantage of the subsequent political conditions—especially the Sunni crisis and Arab Spring—to establish a “state” that posed a threat to various countries and regimes in the region? In the context of these questions, Dr. Mohammad al-Azamat, a retired Jordanian colonel, military expert, and researcher of extremism and terrorism, presents a forward-looking vision of the future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, especially after the killing of its leader al-Baghdadi, its defeat in its last inhabited strongholds in Syria, and its withdrawal from main city centers in Iraq. The paper also seeks to assess the strengths ISIS still has, and the danger it still poses to regional states. It assesses the reasons that make it likely either to return and continue or fade and contract in the medium and long term.

The chapter also includes discussions, comments, questions, and feedback from the researchers and experts participating in this research seminar to the conclusions and main points presented by the paper and the factors and conditions involved in determining the organization's future in the region.

# The Future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq

## Summary

Drawing on the descriptive analytical case study method and examining the most reliable sources available to arrive at conclusions and predictions based on a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the future of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, this paper attempts to anticipate the organization's future. It sets forward several possible scenarios that fall between two possibilities: the possibility of ISIS reorganizing itself and rising again, and the possibility of it contracting and vanishing. The first possibility includes the following scenarios: returning to the original (Iraqi) version of the organization; sustaining its presence in Syria and opening up to the Syrian wing; and establishing areas of influence and concentration on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Under the second possibility, that of ISIS contracting and vanishing, the paper discusses a number of possible scenarios, including: reestablishing a new organization under a different name; continuing the organization with a coup against current leaders; joining with other jihadist organizations; transforming into a clandestine organization; and finally its organizational character disappearing in Syria and Iraq in favor of its foreign branches and provinces. The paper concludes that, despite the contradiction with the organization's leanings to establish a caliphate, ISIS establishing launching pads and logistical bases in the border area between Syria and Iraq remains the most realistic scenario, especially as it has begun to return to intense guerilla warfare methods in those countries to maintain the morale of its fighters and momentum of its activities. Additionally, the scenario where the group's character in Syria and Iraq disappears in favor of its foreign branches and bases is the most likely model for ISIS vanishing in Iraq and Syria.

## Preface

The rise of the ISIS was not pure coincidence or a matter outside a historical and objective context. Rather, it extended over the course of approximately a decade on an upward trajectory of sequential events. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's declaration of the establishment of the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Mesopotamia was the actual starting point for the emergence of ISIS. The group's development continued with al-Zarqawi pledging allegiance to Osama bin Laden and Tawhid wal-Jihad's merger with al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which soon became the Islamic State of Iraq. The organization then exploited the events of the Syrian revolution to change the political reality by declaring the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The supposed Muslim caliph called on Muslims to migrate to its land in the two provinces (wilayat) of Iraq and the Levant, and to pledge allegiance to him as the legitimate representative "of Islam and Muslims". Then began the phase of expansion and infighting with multiple parties.

ISIS was born and emerged in an environment ripe, one way or another, for the growth and spread of extremist thought. The Arab region had suffered from a crisis of legitimacy and sectarian tension, as well as a coup against the Arab Spring revolutions, the return of dictatorial (police) rule in some Arab countries, the spread of sectarian wars, persecution of Sunnis, and Iranian regional intervention and control over the sovereign decisions of some Arab countries. There was also the failure and decline of the Arab modernity project in fields such as the judiciary, development, social justice, human rights, and the imprisonment and torture of preachers, etc. This was in addition to double standards in states fighting terrorism and a crisis of identity in those countries, which created and provided an appropriate haven for ISIS ideology, one that supported its existence.

In light of the announcement of the end of ISIS by the majority of regional and international actors, this paper presents a forward-looking vision of the group's future in Syria and Iraq, especially after the killing of its leader al-Baghdadi, its defeat in its last inhabited stronghold in Syria, and its withdrawal from main city centers in Iraq. The paper also seeks to assess the strengths the organization still enjoys and the danger it continues to pose to the region's states. It also examines the reasons why ISIS might be likely either to return and carry on or fade and contract in the medium and long term.

The paper adopts the descriptive analytical case study method, relying on the most reliable available sources, providing the greatest possible amount of data and facts, and analyzing them in a neutral, scientific manner in an effort to reach conclusions and predictions based on a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

### **Prospects for reorganizing and re-emerging or contracting and disappearing**

It is not easy to analyze the future of ISIS in light of the current conditions in Syria, Iraq, and the rest of the Arab region. Data on the ground changes rapidly and dramatically, making it difficult to predict the course of events and the future of the actors involved. The enduring complexity of the scene and the opposing agendas of domestic and foreign parties that influence it makes matters more difficult. The nature of ISIS itself is also a factor, characterized as it is by smart opportunism and dexterous exploitation of current events, as well as the lack of clarity of its organizational structure under new leadership and the secrecy of internal and external alliances. Accordingly, what can be done to perceive the future of ISIS in Syria and Iraq goes no further than theoretical efforts, the results of which may change because of an event not accounted for. Overall, the organization's future

can be condensed to the possibilities of expansion and extension or contraction and disappearance. Different scenarios branch off from the framework of the two possibilities. The first is that of the group reorganizing itself and rising again, whether by reviving its previous identity or weaving another, more dynamic identity. The second scenario is the disintegration of the organizational contract altogether, and its practical termination. The following paragraphs explain these possibilities:

### **First Possibility: ISIS reorganizes itself and advances once again**

The likelihood of this possibility is reinforced by the historical context of the organization's trajectory, following the emergence of the organization and its transformation from the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad to a major and active branch of al-Qaeda, and a key player on the Iraqi scene, and then its development into the Islamic State in Iraq until fighting with the US-backed Sahawat forces nearly destroyed it. To a large degree, this situation resembles the state ISIS has come to today. However, it flexibly accommodated the previous stage, disappearing into the Anbar desert and waited, redeployed, and took advantage of the political conditions created by the Arab Spring revolutions. It emerged once more with the name "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", aspiring and seeking to restore "the state of the Caliphate" by force of arms and jihad.<sup>96</sup> Many observers also agree that the military strength of ISIS remains, and that it retains a significant amount of weapons. The organization's ideology—which is important for its existence and continuity—is far from defeated. Its cells remain active in many parts of Syria and Iraq, with the possibilities of planning violent attacks in some countries outside the region. Military defeat does not mean much for the future and existence of ISIS in the short term.

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96 Abu Hanieh, Hassan and Mohammad Abu Rumman (2015). *The 'Islamic State' Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism*, Amman: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Jordan-Amman.

This possibility includes several scenarios, most notably:

### **Scenario 1: Resurrecting the jihadist network and returning once more to Iraqi roots**

One expected scenario is a return to the original version of ISIS in the sense of a return as an “Iraqi organization” with a global discourse by rebuilding its network in the land of origin (Iraq). Iraq saw the first seed of its power and its later expansion, then its collapse in the face of Sahawat resistance. After this, it relaunched towards Syria to achieve strategic gains. Despite the elimination of ISIS’s ability to control territory in Iraq, the reasons for its return to the country still remain. Its “Sunni incubator” there still suffers the same grievances that were a reason for the organization’s formation. The social networks that supported it in the past are still present today, in a more painful and impactful reality. Unless the contexts that led to the emergence of ISIS change, the possibility of its return to the Iraqi field will become a reality.

This view is reinforced by the organization’s return to the forefront of security and political events in Iraq following the double suicide bombing that struck a popular market in central Baghdad on 21 January 2021. Dozens of civilians were left dead and injured in what became known as the Tayaran Square Bombing. Its execution was overseen by the Iraqi ISIS leader Jabbar Ali Fayyad, nicknamed Abu Hassan al-Gharibawi, who served as the governor (wali) of southern Iraq and the group’s general military official for the southern Iraq sector, and was responsible for recruiting suicide bombers. The operation was a notable development in the trajectory that ISIS resumed three years after the announcement of its defeat and the end of its control of wide areas of Iraq.<sup>97</sup> The resumption of ISIS operations accompanied

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<sup>97</sup> Lebanese Center for Research and Consulting (2021). “al-Kadhimi: We Killed al-Gharibawi, Who Was Responsible for Recruiting Suicide Bombers in Iraq...”, <https://www.center-lcr.com/news/23924>.

escalating political disputes and tensions and a broad deterioration of the economic, social, and health situations that in turn led to the launch of a popular movement demanding a change of political class and to get Iranian influence out of Iraq. The renewed operations also show that ISIS is betting on taking advantage of security gaps and inaction caused by the number of security and military agencies with no coordination, as well as the declining military role in support of international coalition—especially US forces—after tensions escalated between Washington on one hand and Tehran and the militias supporting it in Iraq on the other. This bombing confirms that it is possible for ISIS activity to return, and that its Iraqi network still poses a clear threat, especially as the international community is busy fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. As the spokesman for the Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve in Baghdad said, ISIS no longer controls any territory, but the prospect of its return is “a very real possibility” if pressure on it lessens. Meanwhile, the US newspaper *The New York Times* stressed that ISIS is regaining its strength in Iraq and Syria, and reported that it is “retooling its financial networks and targeting new recruits”.<sup>98</sup> For his part, Commander of the US Central Command, General Kenneth McKenzie, said in February 2021 that ISIS “has for the time being, gone to ground but with the goals of maintaining its insurgency in Iraq and Syria and a global presence, while building and retaining a cellular structure which allows it to carry out terrorist attacks”, emphasizing that the extremist group is “not going to go away by ignoring it”.<sup>99</sup>

In practice, ISIS can realize this scenario by reshaping and reorganizing its Iraqi leadership and expertise concerned with

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98 Al-Falahi, Hatem (2021). “Escalation of ISIS Activity: Risks and Opportunities for Confrontation”, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4911>.

99 Euro News (2021). “ISIS, the Most Brutal Organization in Modern History, is Still Active and Dangerous”, <https://arabic.euronews.com/2021/03/23/daesh-ambitions-have-not-changed-even-in-the-absence-of-caliphate>.

developing its field work and tactical strategies. But standing against this scenario is that for ISIS to retreat and withdraw into itself in Iraq and among only Iraqis runs contrary to its nature and its prominent feature of the continuous desire for expansion, spreading, including different nationalities, and portraying itself to its opponents as the project of an “existing and expanding” state. Therefore, the possibility that ISIS will dissolve itself once again in the mold of traditional local clandestine organizations remains an interim possibility imposed by the organization’s circumstances more than it is a far-reaching strategy to adopt in the future.

### **Scenario 2: Maintaining its presence in Syria and sustaining its organizational relationship with the Syrian wing**

It is useful for ISIS to maintain a presence in Syria, which is experiencing a state of insecurity and a total lack of control of Syrian army forces in large areas east of the Euphrates, where the organization controls some important pockets. The Syrian cadres allegiant and loyal to ISIS are also no small few to be ignored by the organization’s leadership or cast aside at this stage. This scenario is supported by ISIS having the ability to escalate the pace of its attacks on regime forces. According to analysts, this reflects on the difficulty of completely eliminating ISIS cells active in the Syrian Badiya stretching from eastern Hama and Homs provinces in central Syria to the easternmost province of Deir e-Zor. From the fall of Baghouz, in eastern Syria, on 23 March 2019 to 19 March 2020, ISIS announced responsibility for more than 2,000 attacks in Iraq and Syria combined, and 973 attacks in Syria alone.<sup>100</sup>

The ISIS presence in Syria is concentrated in the Badiya region, which covers an area of about 80,000 square kilometers, spread

100 Zelin, Aaron Y. (2020). “A Year Since Baghuz, the Islamic State in Neither Defeated nor Resurging (Yet)”, Washington Institute, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/bd-amin-ly-baghuz-lm-yuhzm-tnzym-aldwlt-alaalamyt-wlm-yawd-alzhwr-bd>.

between the provinces of: Deir e-Zor, Raqqa, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Rif Dimashq, and Suwayda. According to observers, ISIS cell activity in the Badiya is part of a strategy that is fundamentally different from its former fighting strategy, especially in terms of fighters' movements and specific targeting methods.<sup>101</sup>

In terms of combat capabilities, Hassan Abu Hanieh points out that ISIS currently operates in Syria within small groupings scattered in separate areas, as well as cells in cities known as "sleeper cells". Abu Hanieh says that "ISIS is not in a hurry, and does not rely on reactions now. Rather, it works according to a plan in which the goals were clearly laid out by the central command". He added that, in the framework of its current comeback, ISIS has transformed from a state of centralization to decentralization, emanating from the top of the pyramid with the so-called "emir of the province", and then the "sectors, detachments, and cells". Regarding logistical and financial capacity, Abu Hanieh stresses that ISIS "has, on the financial level, according to state intelligence, about \$100 million, but I estimate it has more than \$300 million and investments under fake names". He added that "it has no significant expenses, save for fighters and some families, and before its final withdrawal from Baghouz it had left caches of weapons and money in vast areas".<sup>102</sup>

It appears that this scenario fits more with the nature of ISIS and its ambition than the previous one, especially since it was able in previous years to accurately absorb the details of the Syrian environment such as geography and social support bases. Additionally, the following scenario—which we view as more likely—depends mainly on ISIS having a foothold in Syrian territory.

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101 Audi, Diaa (2020). "A New War of Attrition: 'ISIS' Attacks Escalate in 5 Syrian Provinces", Alhurra, <https://www.alhurra.com/syria/2020/12/23>.

102 Ibid.

### **Scenario 3: Establishing areas of influence and concentration on the Syrian-Iraqi border**

This scenario draws mainly upon a reading of ISIS's geographical presence in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, since the collapse of ISIS and its loss of Raqqa city and its last pocket in the cities of Deir e-Zor province, as well as the Battle of Baghouz in March 2019, a group of ISIS fighters have taken the Raqqa and Deir e-Zor Badiya as hiding places after regime forces took control of areas west of the Euphrates River. ISIS groups have concentrated in three areas deep in the desert: the Jabal Bishri in southeastern Raqqa, al-Dafeenah area in southwest Deir e-Zor, and the desert area bounded by Palmyra and Sukhnah to the west, area 55 to the south, the T2 station to the east, and the Fayda ibn Muwayna area to the north. These areas are characterized by topography favorable for hiding, such as mountains, valleys, and extremely deep natural limestone caves, as well as the size of the area and its daily dust storms that obscure an aerial view and quickly wipe out the signs of movements. ISIS members move about by night in groups with complete freedom and run patrols while raising their flag. Ammunition and supplies are transported by vehicles in broad daylight. ISIS members usually move when they need to, posing as members of regime forces or the Badiya's civilian residents. As for its activity, it is concentrated in the Badiya area that, in all, constitutes approximately half of Syria's area. This vast area is full of caverns, mountains, caves, and quicksand—a fertile geographical environment for hiding and carrying out hit-and-run attacks. Carrying out attacks in this spot only requires a small number of forces and offensive weapons, making it difficult to fight the organization under these circumstances.<sup>103</sup>

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103 Dali, Khorshid (2021). "The Risks of ISIS Returning to the Syrian Badiya", *AlAin*, <https://al-ain.com/article/the-risks-of-isis-returning-to-the-syrian-desert>.

In Iraq, ISIS is still present in a number of pockets, including the following areas: <sup>104</sup>

- The geographical triangle that includes Anbar, Nineveh, and Saladin provinces. It includes large areas interspersed with many valleys, such as the Hauran, al-Qadhaf, and al-Abyad valleys, as well as Jazirat al-Baaj, Hatra, the Atshanah mountain range, Badush heights and Tharthar Lake and valley, extending to Rawah to the west and the al-Baaj hills to the north. The triangle is an extension of the Syrian Badiya, and this sector has approximately 800 fighters.
- The geographical triangle that includes east Saladin province, northeast Diyala province, and south Kirkuk province. It includes the Makhoul, Hamrin, and al-Gharah mountain ranges, and is interspersed with many valleys, such as the al-Karha, al-Shai, and Zaghaitoun valleys, which meet with the Abu Khanajar valley. This triangle includes the al-Katun sector of Diyala, and extends in the northeast toward the areas of Miqdadiyah, Qarah Tapa, Jalawla, and Umm al-Hintah, as well as al-Islah village—an area of orchards and dense forests, suitable for ambushes and difficult for security forces to raid—as well as Lake Diyala. ISIS considers these areas a consolidation and launching ground, and has about 400 fighters there, described as fierce and organized.
- The geographical triangle that includes southeast Nineveh province, north Saladin province, and southwest Kirkuk province. It includes the area between Makhmour and al-Shirqat, and there are about 350 fighters in this section.

A sector north and southwest of Baghdad that includes Tarmiyah, Abu Ghraib (the Baghdad Belts), with about 350 fighters.

Plotting the aforementioned ISIS positions on the map of Syria and Iraq, we find that ISIS seeks to position itself on the two countries'

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104 Al-Falahi, "Escalation".

flanks, within a border strip encompassing many (relatively) vital locations. These locations provide it with many safe havens and protected sites, as well as easy access to Iraqi and Syrian city centers, and re-immersion in communities that are still largely frustrated by the worsening policies of their political systems. This area also allows the organization to avoid open confrontations with Syrian and Iraqi Forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Its presence in these strategically poor locations enables ISIS to divert the attention of international forces away from it, while maintaining the presence and cohesion of its remaining fighters and cadres, and establishing logistical bases that provide many advantages (consolidation and launching) it seeks. It also imposes a decisive reality on a wide border area that can generate financial revenue through the cross-border smuggling trade in illicit materials. On the other hand, the history of terrorist organizations, rebel movements, and organized criminal gangs confirms that fluid border areas between multiple countries extend the life of these formations and provide them with many of the accommodations that were a reason for their continued survival.

Another factor making this scenario more realistic is the “course of counter-terrorism operations”, that points to ISIS being cornered and forced to move its entire military and human mass to the Badiya of Syria and Iraq. This could lead to an opposite result, due to gathering the organization together once more and uniting it in a single area along the two countries’ borders. It would thus gain a larger vital area and margin of movement, enabling it to launch organized attacks on targets in Syria and Iraq, not just indiscriminate lone-wolf attacks.<sup>105</sup>

Perhaps this scenario runs contrary to the group’s orientation towards establishing a large caliphate, ruling the residents, and controlling the land. However, it is still—in our estimation—the most

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105 Bin Milad, Basma (2019). “New Studies Confirm ISIS’s Return to the Arena in Syria and Iraq”, Arabi21, <https://arabi21.com/story/>.

realistic scenario. ISIS's current reality forces it to sacrifice many of its ambitions in exchange for reorganizing itself, holding fast, continuing to manage its affiliated provinces that are scattered outside the Middle East in Africa and Asia, and maintaining its presence as a major player and competitor in the field of terrorist organizations.

### **Second Possibility: ISIS contracts and is terminated**

At the outset of presenting this option, it should be pointed out that it has a low probability of occurring in practice. The emergence of ISIS was the result of a radical transformation in the structure of the terrorist organization, after it was able to present itself and promote its existence as a model for the imagined and hidden caliphate, as well as the supposed representative of a Sunni Islam threatened by numerous regimes and sects, through intensive and unusually professional propaganda. Therefore, the threat ISIS embodies does not come from it being an extremist organization, but rather from it representing an ideology that seeks, in a practical way, to restore the marginalized Sunni identity in Iraq and Syria in particular. It is accepted at a time in which setbacks and difficulties abound, the latest of which are the brutal Israeli incursions into the Gaza Strip and the attempt to unify all of Jerusalem under Israeli administration. On the other hand, it is very difficult to change the ISIS mentality ingrained in the third generation of the group's members, the "cubs of the caliphate", and the children of ISIS dead and detainees. The first generation of the organization was the first generation of al-Qaeda, and the second consists of those who transferred al-Qaeda's ideology and strategy from Afghanistan to outside of it. Therefore, the possibility of this generation disengaging from the ideology of the caliphate is close to impossible, intellectually and logically. ISIS losing its territory does not mean the end of its community, which incubates extremism, especially with children seeking revenge for their parents and bereaved women who lost their

children and husbands. Consequently, “ISIS thought” will remain in its cells and ideas, as will the support of those who sympathize with the cause of a crushed identity, despite its loss in the field.

Overall, the option of the organization’s contraction and termination revolves around several scenarios, most notably:

### **Scenario 1: Re-establishing a new organization under another name**

This scenario’s success requires the backing of the popular support base in Iraq and Syria, but two factors make that more difficult to achieve: First, the suffering of the community from the organization’s brutality, as well as the pain left by its absolute control that is stored in the Syrian and Iraqi memory. This will constitute a barrier to supporting the re-establishment of the organization under its previous name or another name. Second, the very nature of ISIS, which is rejected by Syrians and Iraqis. The organization remains in the public Syrian consciousness as the biggest reason the course of the revolution deviated and the regime’s encroachment and control returned as before as a result of ISIS’s violent and extreme conflicts with the rest of the factions rebelling against the regime. And in Iraq, the notion spreads is that ISIS is responsible for the state of exclusion and marginalization of the Sunni component of society, the pace of which increased after it was criminalized by the other components, who accused it of being the first building block of ISIS and the reason for its rise.

However, the return of ISIS in new forms and under new names is still possible and cannot be ruled out, because the voice of growing grievances remains stronger than the voice of Syrian and Iraqi reason and memory, and that voice welcomes any defender.

## **Scenario 2: ISIS remains, with a coup against current leaders**

This scenario is tied to the extent to which the powerful wings within ISIS, such as the violently extremist and takfiri-leaning al-Hazemi current, are able to achieve it. That current can turn things upside-down, especially since its heads were influential in the ISIS Shura council and judiciary, and enjoy support among fighters. Or perhaps the al-Qaeda current, calling for clandestine organizational work and delaying the caliphate state project at the present time, will prevail, especially since no small portion of ISIS followers have an al-Qaeda background and witnessed the Afghanistan phase and its aftermath.

In either case, a coup against the current leaders and the emergence of diluted or intensified versions of ISIS, would cause negative repercussions for the organization that could eventually lead to accelerating a split between supporters and opponents, and it is possible that many would defect from the new version of the organization.

## **Scenario 3: Joining other jihadist organizations**

One scenario is ISIS members joining, as individuals or groupings of a limited number, with other local jihadist organizations. The strongest candidate in such a case is al-Qaeda and its branches, since it is the womb from which ISIS first emerged, and because many Iraqi, Syrian, or foreign ISIS fighters cannot go back to their former life. On one hand, they will be hunted by security prosecutions that will be able to reach them in their countries, and on the other, the rest of the organizations existing in Iraq and Syria will not allow ISIS fighters to move freely within their areas of influence, even if they have defected.

This scenario is supported by the fact that ISIS ideology did not depart from the global jihadist thought system, which all emerged

from the womb of Salafi jihadism that al-Qaeda represents. The organization emerged from al-Qaeda and split from it. ISIS adopts Salafi jihadist literature and the treatises of senior ISIS theorists, the most important of which are: the books and letters of Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, including *Issues in the Jurisprudence of Jihad*—also called *The Jurisprudence of Blood*—and the theses of Abu Bakr Naji in his book *Management of Savagery*. It was also influenced by the writings of Salafist theorists and some theorists of revival such as Maududi and Sayyid Qutb.<sup>106</sup>

#### **Scenario 4: The organizational identity of ISIS in Syria and Iraq disappears in favor of its foreign branches and provinces**

In light of indications that ISIS branches and provinces in many regions of the world are capable of independence from the central organization because of the weakness of its leaders compared with the strong influence of leaders in some offshoots, this scenario manifests in two possibilities: First, that some branches announce they are breaking ties with ISIS and rebel against it. This has already happened in some branches, which regained their independent character after threats and orders from al-Baghdadi, such as the Abubakar Shekau faction in the Boko Haram movement. Shekau refused to step down from his position as leader of the organization in favor of Abu Musab al-Barnawi.<sup>107</sup> Second, and most realistically, is the transition of ISIS leadership from Syria and Iraq to new locations within a strategy of provinces and local network-building to resurrect the caliphate's strength once more. In all cases, the organization would fade away in Iraq and Syria.

106 Hassan, Hassan (2016). "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context", Carnegie Endowment, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/06/13/ar-pub-63756>.

107 Onuoha, Freedom (2016). "Boko Haram Split: A Leadership Struggle and Influence of Islamic State Ideology", Al Jazeera Center for Studies, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2016/10/161026101055391.html>.

This scenario is made more credible in that the organization's focus on its provinces and branches would achieve a number of interim goals, among the most important of which are:

- Achieving a policy of fleeing forward, launching lines of confrontation on new fronts, and regrouping its scattered forces who fled following ISIS's defeat in Syria and Iraq. This would be done by establishing safe havens and logistical bases that are more secure than Iraq and Syria, especially as the organization is extremely flexible, enabling it to easily shift from a centralized approach to a state of decentralization. ISIS has been able to undertake organizational restructuring at the military, security, administrative, Sharia, and media levels. An organizational presence in new countries would also make it easier to carry out retaliatory strikes against some major states and their interests, which was put forward by ISIS during its announcement of the new provinces strategy.
- Impress new members to attract more foreign fighters after suggesting that ISIS can still impose its project, especially if it can exploit religious and ethnic tensions in the provinces' communities and work to unify local rebel Islamist groups and militias. From the beginning of its existence, ISIS has been keen to invest in foreign fighters, though its goals at the time were different from its current objectives. In the beginning, it needed foreign fighters in order to create attractive personalities to show the ethnic diversity of the organization, legitimize its existence, and increase its chances of attracting foreign fighters. Therefore, a move to provinces will not be difficult for the organization's leadership if it exploits its previous relationship with foreign fighters to establish the organization's bases in their countries.

### **Scenario 5: ISIS transforms into a clandestine organization**

This shift does not only mean hiding from sight and avoiding confrontations. Rather, what is meant here is the weakening value and logic of controlling the ground, assembling forces, or mobilizing societies in the organization's ideology. It means becoming a clandestine and hidden organization and network on the ground, but whose threat is continuous, real, and appears in many different forms: electronic jihad, lone wolves, guerrilla warfare, explosives, sleeper cells, and other forms of terrorism. In this case, it can be said that ISIS would not exist in Syria, Iraq, or elsewhere. In reality, its whereabouts would not matter as much as the importance of its effectiveness and dangerousness.

This option would effectively help maintain ISIS's organizational structures, ideological effectiveness, propaganda messaging, and funding sources. It would also maintain the group's military leadership while at the same time being able to retaliate against targeted countries that fought it or facilitated the war against it.

### **Summary and Findings**

The birth of ISIS was the result of a number of objective circumstances, starting with the Afghan jihad, which was the meeting place of leaders, elites, and figures of the "jihadist movements". They were encouraged by the Afghan and Arab Mujahideen's practical successes, and their ambition to replicate the Afghan experience in other environments. The environment most prepared for that was Iraq following the 2003 US invasion, which was the most important substantive requirement for the birth, expansion, and spread of ISIS. That took place against the backdrop of a security vacuum, Sunni marginalization, and an unprecedented escalation of Iran's role in determining the choices of the Iraqi people.

The failure of the Arab Spring experiment in Syria is one of the clearest examples of the creation of an environment conducive to the spread of terrorist organizations, including ISIS. From the first day of the peaceful popular movement in Syria, the Syrian regime was keen to confront it with violence, arrest, killing, and torture. The regime also pursued a policy of destroying rebel areas, bombing them with aircraft and artillery. Facing this reality, the peaceful movement turned to armed action, and ISIS found an opportunity to expand in Syrian territory. There, it was able to take control of the entirety of Raqqa province, which was the focal point of the organization in its expansion in Syria and Iraq. ISIS also succeeded in taking control of parts of Deir e-Zor and Hasakah provinces.

Reports and studies remain in agreement about the return of ISIS's military, combat, and armament capabilities. Four reports issued in 2019 by the United Nations, Pentagon, and research and analysis centers warned of the danger of the organization's continuation and re-emergence in Iraq and Syria. While the studies took different approaches, they all reached the same conclusion: that ISIS is recovering and has not been defeated, because the circumstances that led to its emergence still exist today. According to the Pentagon Inspector General, who analyzed ISIS activities over the period from April to June 2019, the terrorism nebula "was resurging in Syria" and "continued to solidify its insurgency in Iraq". Around 18,000 fighters remained in both countries, including 3,000 "foreigners" organized according to the principle of independent "sleeper cells". These cells may in fact be heavily armed, given that they carried with them some of the equipment gathered during the caliphate period, from 2015 to 2018. That was not only thanks to the operations that seized weapons primarily from the Iraqi and Kurdish armies, but also thanks to independent production, which is also one of the organization's aspirations.

This paper concludes that the future of ISIS in Iraq and Syria can be interpreted in isolation from its future in the provinces and branches. In every country that has seen the rise and fall of ISIS in general, and Iraq and Syria in particular, security and stability remains fragile. However, counter-terrorism efforts in Syria and Iraq have received more international and regional attention and will than others. So the organization's fall in Syria and Iraq does not mean it will disappear in other countries. Rather, it may be that the organization's future ascendancy belongs to its Asian and African branches and states, which could achieve more significant results than what ISIS achieved in Syria and Iraq.

Within the two possibilities of expansion or disappearance of the ISIS's presence in Syria and Iraq, several possible scenarios have been presented. Perhaps the most prominent and closest to modeling the organization's present and future situation with regards to its possible survival in Syria and Iraq are those that predict it will establish areas of influence and concentration on the Syrian-Iraqi border. Regarding the possibility of ISIS's disappearance in Syria and Iraq, the scenario of its organizational character fading in favor of its branches and provinces abroad is most likely.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the end of the caliphate project in 2017, security conditions in Iraq and Syria continue to encourage a rebirth of ISIS's fighting capabilities. For that reason, its future incarnation in Syria and Iraq is likely to be as an organization rather than a state. It will pull back its forces to empty spaces with security deficits, and modify its fighting tactics, shifting its combat strategy and doctrine to an attrition approach and a guerrilla warfare logic, based on small groups spread across uninhabited areas, as well as localized sleeper cells inside cities to carry out varied and complex suicide attacks.

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## Discussion

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### **Jodor Jalit**

I wonder about the military measures taken by the Iraqi and Syrian military forces to prevent ISIS from re-emerging. What are the tactics and strategies being implemented by the Syrian and Iraqi forces to defeat the organization once and for all? And are these plans capable of eradicating ISIS permanently?

### **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

ISIS constituted a quantum leap in the development of global Salafi jihadism. It was a leap in recruitment, propaganda, and the ability to occupy large territories. Now the central organization formed during that period has gone back and holed up in limited areas.

The important point that the researcher al-Azamat mentioned is that ISIS is a compound, complex phenomenon comprised of more than one factor. There is an ideological dimension and a geostrategic dimension on the ground. This means that the fate of ISIS cannot be predicted without knowing what is happening in Iraq and Syria. The organization's strength and weakness is linked to international and regional policies on the ground. When these policies were disjointed in Iraq and Syria, ISIS rose. But when the Turkey entryway was closed and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) on the ground unified with American aircraft in the sky, when there was an international alliance, the organization was weakened. As al-Azamat mentioned, international and regional policies have receded, "Sunni grievances" have escalated, and therefore we are facing a new breakthrough for ISIS on the ground.

Based on the above, there are a number of questions that are key to understanding the indicators of the next phase:

- Today, if the political crisis in Iraq and Syria were to escalate, would that mean that ISIS would be on its way to rise, even though it has lost the Sunni support base forever? Likewise, would the Sunnis not venture again to follow ISIS after tasting the scourge of this organization, especially what happened in Anbar and Mosul?

In light of the crisis of al-Qaeda and ISIS, is it now possible for there to be a kind of unified ideology between the two groups, after HTS in Idlib defected and both groups became weak?

- Could there be an organization other than ISIS to represent Sunnis in the next phase and give voice to their opinions and issues?
- Are we talking today about a Syrian or Iraqi ISIS, that therefore is divesting itself of those coming from abroad, who have placed on it a huge ideological burden?
- ISIS drew in thousands of people from Europe and the Arab world. Today, is this phenomenon now over? Tomorrow, will another organization entice these thousands of people who want to come from abroad?
- Has the weight of the organization shifted from Iraq and Syria to Africa and Khorasan in Afghanistan?

### **Mouayad al-Windawi**

The questions that have been raised are very legitimate, as far as the Iraqi arena is concerned. We know that after 2003, after the invasion and occupation, dozens of armed resistance groups appeared that were first established to resist the invaders. We all know that these armed groups were distributed between the left and the right, between nationalists and Islamists. What happened is that in the era of al-Qaeda and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi there were not many intersections between al-Qaeda and other Iraqi armed groups, whether Islamist or Arabist in character.

When ISIS entered Mosul, there were still significant armed groups resisting the Americans and the new political regime. They had already begun resistance operations to the presence of the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and Iranian influence in Iraq. We know that ISIS eliminated all forms of this resistance. Today, the Iraqi scene confirms for every observer of history that there is a new resistance that will appear, if it has not already begun. This is one answer to one of our colleague Abu Rumman's questions.

Iraq's political movement, in both Sunni and Shia circles, says that it is possible to confront at the very least, the Iranian influence represented by groups loyal to Tehran, such as the Basij or the PMF.

The remaining technical problem, to which researchers should pay attention, is that the nature of the international coalition has not allowed for any other groups to express their resistance to the new invaders. The political system in Baghdad, and perhaps soon in Syria as well, will deploy the description of terrorism and ISIS against its opponents and adversaries. We should be careful about when and how we differentiate. So long as this international coalition is coming to fight terrorism, terrorism is the same whether represented by ISIS, al-Qaeda, or the armed groups that abuse the security and stability of Iraq: groups loyal to, financed, equipped, and run by Iran. These same groups support terrorist activities in Iraq, collaborate with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in its conflict with Turkey, and cooperate with elements belonging to armed groups in Syria. These strange phenomena must be given time for us to further understand them. They will develop and increase, so long as there is a lack of justice and equality in the rights and duties of citizens, and so long as there are regional and international interventions in the internal affairs of countries in the region, specifically the Arab countries.

Some might say that there is Iranian intervention, Turkish intervention, and perhaps another intervention. Researchers should describe these groups separately from ISIS and other associated forces. Such descriptions would help local national forces, whether in Iraq and Syria, throughout the Arab region, and even in Palestine, to express themselves in different ways. One of these ways may be to resort to using arms, so long as opponents do the same.

The death toll since the revolution of young people in Shia areas is known. These areas will witness armed organizations against their leaders who work to perpetuate corruption and subordination to regional states. This must be taken into consideration, so as not to make a mistake in sorting out right from wrong, ISIS from patriotism, terrorist from unfortunate.

### **Ali Taher al-Hamoud**

The paper addresses the possibility that armed groups other than ISIS might emerge. The author believes he should go back and talk about the stage before the liberation of ISIS-occupied areas inside Iraq. There was a real psychological separation in geographical areas in their communities, economy, and political situation: a complete separation from the Iraqi body. In Baghdad, there was rejection of this separation, which considered that they are areas suspected of links to the Baathist regime. After ISIS occupied wide areas of Iraq, the liberation operation took place. It is important to mention the role of the southern Shia through the PMF and the issuance of fatwas from religious institutions. With the official Iraqi security forces, they moved to liberate these areas. This gave a really new impression. In addition to the migration of 5 million displaced Sunnis from their areas to Shia and Kurdish areas, this process restored the psychological connection between the people, both by the liberation of areas by security forces and the PMF and in the previously mentioned displacement processes.

This was in addition to the international coalition's participation in liberation operations. In the end, ISIS did much more damage to the Sunni areas than others. All this changed the calculations of the Sunni community in these areas, as shown in more than one field study conducted. This is the first point.

The second point is that ISIS drew its strength from specific ideologies, as referred to by the researchers. One of these ideologies is anti-occupation sentiment. This ideology is no longer confined to a particular group: now the armed factions—the Shia militias—hold it. So there is no advantage to any armed group that raises such a slogan inside Iraq. Similarly, as for the spirit of Arabism that ISIS had, Iraqi youth in the country's center and south now very clearly carry this spirit of opposition to Iranian policy after the October demonstrations—as Dr. Mouayad indicated. Therefore, ideological and psychological justifications are not available in these areas for the emergence of organized groups that are just as dangerous as ISIS.

There is only one thing, according to the field studies we have conducted, that could lead to the emergence of such armed confrontations or anti-state organizations. This depends on two elements:

- The first element is the PMF presence in Sunni residential areas. Residents of provinces such as Saladin and Mosul in particular, and Anbar to a lesser extent, are extremely sensitive to this issue. They have warned that the presence of such forces could be a time bomb.
- The second element is development. We have a real economic problem, due to the scale of corruption and unbalanced planning. There are large areas that are still destroyed. Job opportunities are unavailable, there is unemployment, and other factors.

The same factors that led to the October 2019 protests are still present today in some of the central and southern areas. The same

factors and more are present in Sunni areas, and could blow up at any time. But extending to ISIS groups, it appears that the official Iraqi position, security forces, and political situation is dealing with Sunni leaders in a different way. The present researcher does not see a justification for such groups to re-emerge.

### **Hassan Abu Haniyeh**

There is always a problem with predictability, especially with regard to terrorism and organizations. It is also known that there is a consensus among experts that, over the 20 years since 9/11, predictions have failed. The defeat of global jihadism was always being announced. Meanwhile, we are seeing a huge rise. There is no comparing al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after 9/11 to where al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are at now. It was an elite organization—al-Qaeda—that existed under the auspices of the Taliban’s Islamic emirate. It carried out foreign attacks, and was then scattered. But we know how the story later turned out.

Global jihadism is now widespread, distributed among many schools of thought. One is led by al-Qaeda, one by ISIS, and there are many local jihadist schools, including the Taliban, HTS, and other movements. Thus, and here I agree with my friend Mohammad Abu Rumman, the problem is always there from the start. We have written many books and articles about the causes, conditions, and social, political, and economic circumstances that led to the emergence of this organization. In the end, these organizations need an ideology. This ideology is based on material realities linked to political, social, and economic grievances. There is a financial dimension (funding) and there is a leadership dimension. All of these remain available to jihadist organizations, and the stakes are always changing. We saw the leap ISIS made in 2014, easily taking control of wide areas in Iraq and Syria. But local regimes failed to fight back, even on the

security and military level. US-led foreign assistance was a crucial factor. We see that there are strategic tendencies in the US and Europe towards competition, meaning that priorities have changed. Biden and his predecessors speak about the end of the forever wars. After 9/11, the issue of open-ended wars was raised, the so-called endless wars, including the war on terrorism, so they will continue. Blinken has also spoken in Congress about the era of ending the forever wars. Biden floated this idea and consequently announced his withdrawal from Afghanistan. This withdrawal has been described as disastrous within the US, because in the end the Taliban will return, and the other organizations with it.

The 2021 National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy say that international conflicts and efforts to compete with China and Russia are the current priority, followed by confronting the economic and health fallout of the pandemic. Terrorism comes third. With US withdrawal, it will cease to play the decisive role it did that helped roll back ISIS – thus leaving an opening for ISIS to re-emerge.

Things are particularly disastrous in Iraq. Given its position as ISIS's home turf, as the guests mentioned, the situation is now worse. When General David Petraeus was developing a counter-insurgency strategy and was able to recruit the so-called Sahawat, both factions and tribes, one of the main pretexts for their formation was for a role to be given to the Sunnis in the political system and against Iran.

Now, after all that has happened, Iran is extending its influence and the militias called “the loyal ones” (loyal to the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, wilayat al-faqih) are the largest and most active section of the PMF. Iran is expanding its presence, in one way or another, and its disastrous practices are noticeable inside Iraq to the extent that there are uprisings by the Shia against the incursion of the militias and absence of the state. Most importantly, we are saying that the

Sunni constituency has learned. But how will they learn if 1.5 million remain displaced in areas that have suffered catastrophe, according to international reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as more than 100,000 so-called ISIS families and 40,000 in prisons? There are no real reconstruction or reintegration programs. Moreover, the Sunni component of society has been destroyed. Even before, there were some strong Sunni structures and parties. Today, these parties have declined. Since the beginning, it has been known that ISIS is a reflection of the Sunni crisis that has unfolded since the American occupation. This crisis worsened amid the decline in oil revenues, the issue of corruption, economic problems, the strategic situation, and regional interference. The source of ISIS's strength is not its own subjective capabilities, but rather its objective capabilities—that there is an objective circumstance that has created the conditions for it, enabling it to attract, recruit and return in force. These conditions are increasing in Syria in particular. And, given the organization's activity in Africa, we will find many different circumstances with the same ideological, political, economic, and social grievances and problems. But the main dilemma is that these regimes are incompetent and deeply corrupt. All conditions, then, favor the return of ISIS. All experts say that all that has been achieved against ISIS and global jihadism is a tactical success, not a strategic victory. This is the key to understanding these groups because they, in the end, before any propaganda, they subsist on entrenched issues in these societies—especially Arab society—that suffer from the absence of justice and democracy, authoritarianism, and sustained failure. These societies have always relied on foreign powers, especially the US, in confronting these organizations. When, as we are seeing now, strategic and geopolitical priorities change, I believe that ISIS will naturally find a good place for itself in the region

**Yousef Ibrahim**

I am not speaking here as a researcher, but as someone who has worked in Iraq. I would like to focus on the Iraqi support base. This issue is deeper than the idea of injustice. I believe that the current Iranian interference in Sunni areas, parallel to the Shia interference, and even also tribal affairs in Sunni areas, plays a very large role in the issue of loyalties and advantages. For that reason, I expect that the Sunni support base in Iraq needs in-depth study in itself, to reach a conclusion about whether ISIS and similar organizations have a role in the future or not.

**Maher Farghali**

We must remember the issue of the prisoners in camps such as al-Hol camp, as well as the children and women of ISIS who are still being held in detention sites and camps. We must remember the impact of the horrors of the period of war and ISIS influence over these people, as well as their return if they are released, and the impact of that on the extent of the organization's capacity. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, the speaker mentioned the issue of ISIS branches and their increasing size. Indeed, what impact does shifting some things in certain areas of Libya have on ISIS at the current moment?

We must study that, because this will impact the future of ISIS, especially with returnees carrying the same ideas from flashpoints such as Iraq and Syria. What is the impact of that later on?

## Remarks

### Mohammad al-Azamat

As for the Argentinian researcher Jodor's question about efforts to combat terrorism by the Iraqi and Syrian armies, certainly at present the conditions of these armies do not allow for absolute coordination between them.

In my opinion, it is most likely that, taking the scenario of ISIS presence and positions in the border area between Syria and Iraq as an example, it is possible that both armies could carry out military operations. This is especially true of the Iraqi army and its supporting militias. But as for the Syrian army, the possibility remains small. It is currently occupied with the more strategic areas in northern Syria, Idlib, the border with Turkey, and so on. The real issue is that if we go one step into the future, if the situation were to improve in Iraq or Syria, the defeat of ISIS would depend not only on the strength and ability of the Iraqi and Syrian armies, but on absolute and professional coordination. If ISIS fighters are present in Iraqi territory are put under military pressure, it is easy for them to cross into Syrian territory, and vice versa. In order for both armies to eliminate the last pockets of ISIS in these border areas, there must be professional security and military coordination. These are large and vast areas that provide cover and concealment, as well as many conditions that help with hit-and-run wars. They are more suitable for ISIS than for regular armies.

As for the statements made by the Iraqi researchers, Dr. Mouayad and Dr. Ali Taher al-Hamoud, we understood from them that the possibility remains for a new version of organizations to appear, especially Sunni organizations, to resist the current situation. The enemies are many in Iraq and Syria. We are not talking about an American invasion now, meaning there are other political powers and forces that can be a potential enemy and oppress Sunnis.

In response to Dr. Abu Rumman's statement, and his hypothesis that it is impossible for the Sunni component to establish movements similar to ISIS, I return here to the historical context. According to the analyses of Abu Rumman and Abu Haniyeh, ISIS reached the point of being wiped out by the Sunni Sahawat forces supported by the Sunni tribes. Following the al-Mutayyibin alliance and the Shura Council, it almost vanished once and for all. I am not saying that they rose again by the strength of their ideology and understanding of the geopolitical situation. Rather, it was al-Maliki's policies dealing with the Sahawat following the victory over these jihadist groups in Iraq's Sunni triangle, and his refusal to incorporate them officially into the Iraqi armed forces. He turned his back on them, one way or another, and prevented them from having any presence. Immediately, the fighters—who ISIS called the “repentant ones” —shifted allegiance from the Sahawat fighting ISIS to ISIS itself. In this way, it emerged larger and more numerous. In fact, I agree with you that it is necessary to understand the economic, social, and geopolitical context in the Sunni regions of Syria and Iraq in order to understand how serious and realistic is the possibility that ISIS itself or other versions of it re-emerge.

### **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

There is an important assumption related to the specific situation of ISIS in Iraq—Syria can be talked about later—and the question is about the relationship with the Sunni support base. Dr. Ali Taher al-Hamoud said that the Sunni support base no longer exists, and that the psychological gaps that existed between the Sunni and Shia components no longer exist. That the ideological justifications that ISIS defends the Sunni no longer apply. Therefore, Dr. Ali's expectations are that the organization's future prospects are limited with the Sunni base.

But Dr. Mouayad said yes, the Sunni base is no longer available to ISIS, but the political conditions have not changed. Therefore, the Sunni base could be available to another organization other than ISIS, and that other organizations could capitalize on the so-called “Sunni grievance”. Hassan Abu Haniyeh believes that the Sunni base is still a possibility for ISIS in the next phase. He raised important points, among which was that the Sunni community has been broken in Iraq. There are thousands of displaced people and detainees, and many grievances. This in itself is therefore enough to create a Sunni support base for ISIS. Even if this base consists of the marginalized, ISIS can usually address the marginalized. It knows well how to resonate with them.

I believe that what Dr. Mohammad al-Azamat mentioned, a period of weakness for ISIS in 2007 and 2008 and its later return, will not be repeated. This is because the Sunni community gave ISIS another chance. We saw how in the Arab Spring the Sunni community made room for ISIS, and many Sunnis even worked to facilitate and pave the way for ISIS. But I believe that the ideology of ISIS contains the seeds of its own destruction. The Sunni community cannot again take the risk of dealing with this organization or give it the same benefit of a doubt. It is possible for Sunnis to give the organization the same strength, and for it to feed on the crisis of the Sunni community, yes. But to find a Sunni base in the sense that it found in the previous phase—I do not believe that Sunnis would do that. Not unless they reach a nihilistic stage, and there is no hope for them in the future, and so they say “we have nothing but ISIS to confront Iranian influence”.

I say again that these scenarios, or this assumption, is primarily related to the political situation. If the scenario expected by Hassan Abu Haniyeh takes place, if Iranian influence strongly increases in the coming period and we reach a stage similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon

holding all the reins of its affairs and local influence alongside regional influence, then only military action would be left for the other side. But so long as there is a political process, so long as there are attempts, I believe that Sunnis—if they still have hope for the future—will not again risk themselves with ISIS.

The situation in Syria is different. In Syria, the issue is not ISIS. It is strong east of the Euphrates because there is no Syrian regime there, because there is a strategic vacuum. The strong party in Syria today is HTS, which broke off from al-Qaeda and which is linked to Idlib and geostrategic calculations. Therefore, what I want to say is that the circumstances within each country always create and determine the extent of any organization's strength and weakness. In Iraq, they impede ISIS and the nature of its Iraqi leadership. In Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra or HTS, as a result of local and regional circumstances, has been forced to separate from al-Qaeda and become independent. But today, it is based on the situation of Idlib, which is subject to regional and international calculations. I believe the Guardians of Religion organization, which represents al-Qaeda in Syria, is weak. It has no hope in the future, in light of the local determinants. Alongside Hassan, I completed a book about the rise and fall of al-Qaeda in the Arab Levant. In it, we focused on Guardians of Religion. I just wanted to refer to these observations.



## **Chapter Three**

**A Battlefield Assessment  
of ISIS After the Caliphate.  
From Planting Flags of  
Conquest to Waging a  
Forever Insurgency**



# **Part One: Regrouping: Resilient Desert Warriors Reconstitute Their Forces**

“They love fighting battles in the desert and they will go back to the old ways”.

---Syrian activist from the desert province of Deir es Zor speaking of the resilient ISIS fighters.

## **Redoubts in the Wastelands**

The vastness of the Badiyat al-Sham (Syrian Desert) and Hamrin Mountains of Iraq

For all the fact that the American, Iranian, Russian, Syrian and Iraqi leaders who led their countries to war against the terrorists engaged in triumphalism about ISIS’s purported demise, the Pentagon estimated in 2019 that the surprisingly resilient terrorist group still had as many as 30,000 diehard followers in “Syraq” and had reverted to its roots as a deadly guerilla insurgency.<sup>108</sup> Those numbers may have been exaggerated, but there were indisputably tens of thousands of committed post-Caliphate ISIS fighters operating in the Syraq deserts who harbored deep hatreds combined with a deep dedication to a cause they saw as far from lost.

As the Caliphate collapsed in slow-motion, ISIS’s leaders systematically made contingency plans to dispatch fighters into remote areas, hide weapons caches, disperse as much as \$400 million in funds, and prepare to reconstitute ISIS as a guerilla force. In other

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108 “Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress. Overseas Contingency Operations”. [mediadefense.gov](https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/07/2001951441/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR3_JUN2018_508.PDF). April 1, 2018–June 30, 2018. [https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/07/2001951441/-1/-1/1/FY2018\\_LIG\\_OCO\\_OIR3\\_JUN2018\\_508.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/07/2001951441/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR3_JUN2018_508.PDF)

words, they methodically transitioned from ruling a state of millions back to waging asymmetric guerilla warfare of the sort they had waged ever since the 2003 US overthrow of the Sunni-dominated Iraqi Baathist regime. In September 2018, a Pentagon spokesman described a “stubborn enemy’s” declaration of their continued appetite to fight and warned “let me be clear: ISIS is not yet defeated. While they’re in the final throes of their evil ambitions, they continue”.<sup>109</sup> In May of 2019, a British general in the anti-ISIS Coalition grimly captured the nature of ISIS’s new war attrition stating:

It has been reorganizing itself into a network of cells and intent on striking key leaders, village elders, and military personnel to undermine the security and stability in Iraq and Syria. Daesh [ISIS] fighters are still ambushing security patrols, detonating [improvised explosive devices], and conducting kidnappings. Despite its territorial setbacks, Daesh is still having successes, and its ideology still inspires people around the world.<sup>110</sup>

An alarming “World Wide Threat Assessment” by the 16 US intelligence agencies released in January 2019 stated, “ISIS still commands thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria, and it maintains eight branches, more than a dozen networks, and thousands of dispersed supporters around the world, despite significant leadership and territorial losses”.<sup>111</sup> The UN agreed with the Pentagon’s estimate of 30,000 remaining ISIS fighters in the core lands of Iraq and Syria and found that ISIS’s “franchises” in Afghanistan, Libya, and the Sinai also had 4,000, 3,000 and 1,000 hardcore fighters respectively.

The Afghan ISIS wilayet remained particularly lethal and carried out

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109 “Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve Press Briefing By Col. Ryan via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq”. U.S. Department of Defense. September 2, 2018.

110 Thousands of ISIS fighters remain undefeated in underground cells, coalition general admit”. Washington Examiner. May 15, 2019.

111 “World Wide Threat of the US Intelligence Community”. DNI.gov. January 29, 2019. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>

a wave of massive suicide bombings in Kabul and eastern Afghanistan from 2018-20, often against Shiia Hazara Mongols. I spent time in the vastness of the Hazaras' homeland in the remote Hindu Kush highlands region known as the Hazarajat and a Hazara author friend of mine named Javed Rezayee described the horror of ISIS's most sickening bombing attack. This was the senseless slaughter of 80 of his people at wedding in August 2019 that we compared to the infamous "Red Wedding" slaughter in an episode of the popular television series Game of Thrones in a joint article. Rezayee would state:

The homicide bomber set off his bomb in the middle of a crowd in front of the band. The slaughter was as remorseless as it was senseless. There weren't soldiers, they were two happy kids and their families who dreamed of a future together, who just happened to be Shiias instead of Sunnis. For that they were sentenced to death. The mass graves of those killed in this bloody abomination, the images of the bride's slain sister being buried in her bloodied traditional wedding costume, and the wailing of parents, friends, family members and well wishers burying so many innocents sickened my heart. Those who did this are not men, men have souls...These ISIS creatures have no souls, they are demons.<sup>112</sup>

There were hopes that a 2015-2019 offensive in Afghanistan's remote mountainous Nangarhar Province would defeat this murderous affiliate, that the Afghan de facto vice president, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, described to me as "far worse than the Taliban, because they are beyond the pale and cannot be negotiated with". But, despite the first deployment of America's largest non-nuclear bomb, the massive MOAB (Massive Ordinance Air Blast or more colloquially "Mother of all Bombs") on an ISIS redoubt in the eastern mountains, the group survived. General Austin Miller, the head of the Afghan

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112 "A Real Red Wedding Massacre Puts Lie to Trump's Claim That he "Obliterated" ISIS". History News Network. December 15, 2019.

campaign cautioned, “It was instructive in Iraq and Syria — when you take away big terrain from them, they move into smaller cells and they pop up in strange places”.<sup>113</sup> Despite setbacks, like the loss of hundreds of its fighters in the remote mountains of eastern Afghanistan by 2019 or mass surrenders of Uzbek ISIS members in the northern Afghan deserts, neither the core ISIS group in the Middle East, nor its affiliates deadly affiliates in the Sahel (countries south of the Sahara), Sahara, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Sinai, Mindanao Philippines, or Libya showed any sign of ending their post-caliphate guerilla terror campaigns.

شَقَرُوا عَنْ سِوَاعِدِكُمْ وَابْدُؤُوا الْحِصَادَ  
-بَارِكَ اللَّهُ بِحِصَادِكُمْ-

جنود الخلافة يحرقون مزارع المرتدين في العراق والشام



Image of burning crops in Iraq appearing in ISIS's al Naba newsletter

Most worryingly, in the land of its forging, destruction, and regrouping, ISIS set up fallback bases in the mountains of northeastern Iraq by 2019. In the northern, Sunni-dominated Iraqi provinces of Nineveh, Diyala, Saladin, and Kirkuk, their unbroken fighters began to recruit new Sunni followers who resented the victorious Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia

militias who repressed them. In this war-devastated, economically impoverished region, ISIS members also carried out widespread sleeper cell terror attacks. Their insurgent activities in northern Iraq included the systematic killing of pro-government mukhtars (elders), setting off massive car bombs, ambushing Shia militias, and dressing up as government troops at fake checkpoints and executing government employees or suspected sympathizers who stopped at them. In the summer of 2019, ISIS fighters also took to burning the

<sup>113</sup> Interview New America Foundation. Washington DC. November 13, 2018. “ISIS is Losing its Territory. The Means Little to its Victims”. New York Times. December 1, 2019.

crops of their enemies in northern Iraq. As hundreds of acres of wheat went up in flames that burned for days, they gloated in their online magazine al-Naba stating, «It seems that it will be a hot summer that will burn the pockets of the apostates as well as their hearts as they burned the Muslims and their homes in the past years”.<sup>114</sup>

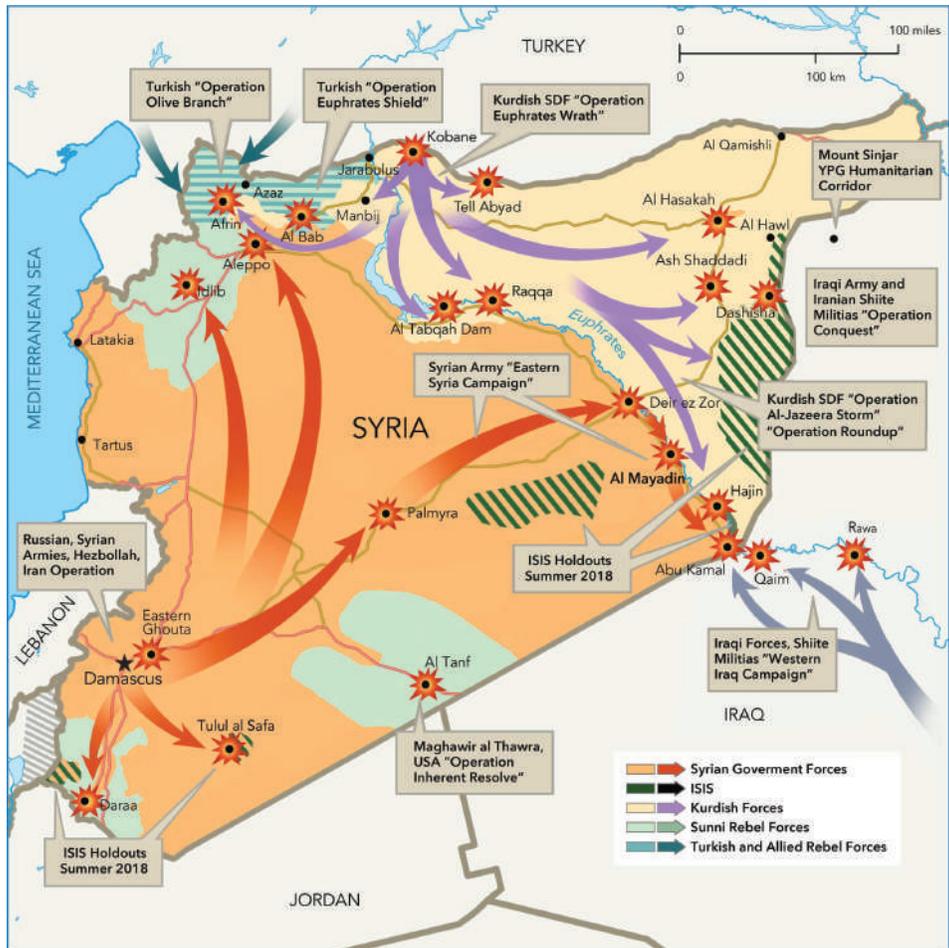
In Syria, the resilient ISIS fighters engaged in such insurgent activities as wiping out pro-Assad regime Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps convoys, massacring pro-government villagers belonging to the Druze minority, attacking Syrian outposts, ambushing Syrian Arab Army and Iranian allied troops, suicide bombing Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) fighters and killing Kurdish Asayish (Intelligence) operatives with IEDs. ISIS also saw Trump’s tremor-inducing October 6th, 2019 approval of a Turkish invasion of their Syrian Kurdish arch enemies’ lands in the North Syrian Democratic Federation as a Godsend.

ISIS fighters took advantage of the mayhem surrounding the Turkish invasion by Turkey’s Arab and Turkmen jihadist proxy forces, that included former ISIS members, to carry out deadly terror attacks.<sup>115</sup> Three days prior to Turkey’s misnamed fall 2019 “Operation Peace Spring” invasion of the Kurds’ multi-ethnic, fragile enclave in northern Syria, Trump had precipitously ordered America’s “light footprint” force of Special forces to withdraw from their string of north Syrian bases and airfields.

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114 “Deliberate Crop Burning by ISIS Remnants in Iraq and Syria Compounds Misery”. CBS News. May 30, 2019.

115 “Is Turkey Fueling a New Jihad in Northeast Syria?” Homeland Security. November 11, 2019.



2018 © JEAN-FRANCOIS ALLAUX & BRIAN GLYN WILLIAMS / MAPPINGISIS.COM

This international and bi-partisan-condemned decision brought chaos to lands once protected by local Syrian Kurdish democratic forces who had worked with the now departing Americans to defeat ISIS and guard an estimated 12,000 ISIS fighters and the 70,000 more ISIS supporters held in ad hoc prisoner of war camps. Staunch pro-Trump Republican senator Lindsey Graham fretted that Trump's precipitous abandonment of America's strategic bases in northern Syria and its stalwart Syrian Kurdish allies would breathe new life into

the far from beaten ISIS insurgency stating:

This impulsive decision by the president has undone all the gains we've made, thrown the region into further chaos; Iran is licking its chops, and if I'm an ISIS fighter, I've got a second lease on life...To those who think ISIS has been defeated, you will soon see.<sup>116</sup>

The Pentagon Lead Inspector General's Report on Operation Inherent Resolve released a month later made it clear that Republicans' fears that ISIS would regroup in post-US withdrawal Syria were not misplaced. According to this stark report, Trump's October 2019 chaos-inducing troop withdrawal order breathed new life into ISIS. This Pentagon alarming report used stark language warning:

The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reported to the DoD OIG that, according to open sources, ISIS exploited the Turkish incursion and subsequent drawdown of U.S. troops to reconstitute capabilities and resources within Syria and strengthen its ability to plan attacks abroad. With SDF and Coalition operations against ISIS in Syria diminished, U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic agencies warned that ISIS was likely to exploit the reduction in counterterrorism pressure to reconstitute its operations in Syria. The DIA said that a reduction in counterterrorism pressure "will provide the group with time and space to expand its ability to conduct transnational attacks targeting the West".<sup>117</sup>

Having learned from the mistake of making themselves targets for relentless bombing by Russian, Syrian, Iraqi and US-led Coalition aircraft by planting black flags, trying to hold fixed positions and defend the turf of a physical state, ISIS's remaining fighters reconstituted

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116 "Key Republicans, Dems blast Trump's surprise withdrawal from Syria". Defense News. October 7, 2019.

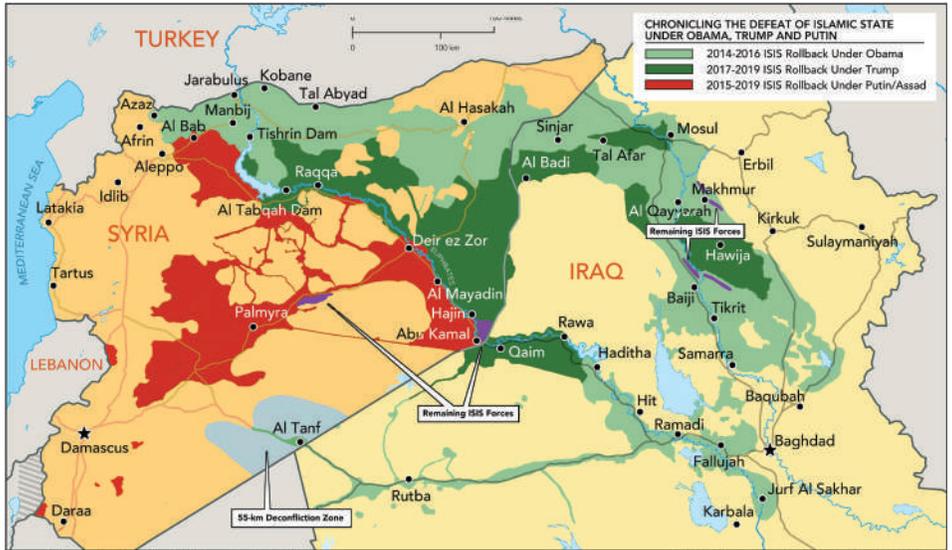
117 "Operation Inherent Resolve. Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress" July 1, 2019 to October 23, 2019. Found at: [https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/19/2002213188/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019\\_LEADIG\\_OIR\\_REPORT.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/19/2002213188/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF)

their forces as a shadow insurgency in the vacuum of post-Trump withdrawal northern Syria. Under intense Pentagon and Republican pressure, Trump later reversed himself and allowed a small “anchor force” of 500 US troops to return to a far more limited part of Syria to (in his words) “guard the oil”. This much reduced force worked quietly with the betrayed Kurds in a much smaller area than before to suppress ISIS, but its mission had been vastly curtailed to the delight of ISIS.

By the time Trump allowed a smaller US force back into Syria to “guard the oil” at the end of 2019, ISIS had resurged in the lands the US had abandoned further north in the country and in the areas south of the Euphrates River ostensibly liberated from ISIS by Russia and the Syrian Army. A January 2020 report by the UN reported that “freed of the responsibility of defending territory a transitioned ISIS focused its energies on attacking Syrian government forces, instead of trying to govern vast populations”.<sup>118</sup>

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118 “Letter dated 20 January 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council”. January 20, 2020. <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>



Conditions were no better in Iraq. ISIS's strongest bastions in neighboring Iraq were found in the remote, rugged highlands to the southeast of Mosul in the Qara Chokh, Hamrin, and Makhmour Mountains. (see map above for these mountains southeast of Mosul). There, they established a fallback "Mountain State" in a limbo no-man's land between quarreling Iraqi Army/Iraqi Shia militias and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. From this mountain fastness, ISIS launched terror attacks, killed government sympathizers, mortared Iraqi Army bases, and planted land mines as the spring 2020 COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic forced US troops to stay on their bases and halt joint operations with local forces. ISIS also ambushed Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias, raided "traitors" houses to execute their pro-government inhabitants, and patiently made plans to resurge in the countryside as President Trump forced the Pentagon to withdraw troops from the region he dismissed as being nothing but a realm of "sand and death."<sup>119</sup> While the Iraqi government launched a campaign

119 "Donald Trump Calls Syria 'Sand and Death,' Says 'We're Not Talking About Vast Wealth'" Newsweek. January 2, 2019.

against ISIS remnants in northern Iraq in July 2019 dubbed Operation Will of Victory, no one in the region believed that this operation would lead to a resounding or permanent victory.

### **ISIS's Terrorism Tendrils Continue to Be Felt Abroad Too, Despite the 2019 Collapse of the Caliphate**

ISIS's followers were galvanized by the escape of hundreds of Islamic State members from SDF Kurdish-guarded camps in northeastern Syria following the fall 2019 US retreat from the country and the chaos surrounding the subsequent Turkish jihadist invasion. In fact, many foreign ISIS elements never really gave up their jihad, despite the implosion of the core state in Syria and Iraq from 2015-19. Even as ISIS fought to defend its collapsing state in 2018 and 19, it inspired the overseas killings of American and European tourists in lands as far flung as the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan.

Among the worst cases of post Caliphate overseas terrorism took place in July 2018 ISIS when supporters in western Tajikistan plowed their car into a group of seven globetrotting American and European cyclists on a mountain road. The attackers killed three of them before doing a U-Turn and driving back to stab and shoot the injured survivors. In December 2018, a French jihadist also went on a stabbing rampage at a Christmas market in France and stabbed five people to death after pledging his allegiance to ISIS. In Morocco, in December 2018, two Scandinavian women campers in their twenties were filmed having their throats savagely slit and being decapitated by three gloating ISIS supporters. The killers called their unarmed young women victims "Crusaders" and declared the attacks revenge for ISIS defeats in Syria. In July 2019 the three ISIS-inspired murderers were sentenced to death in Morocco.<sup>120</sup>

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120 "Morocco hikers: Three get death penalty for Scandinavian tourist murders", BBC, July 18, 2019.

But post-Caliphate ISIS's bloodiest overseas attack occurred in Sri Lanka on Easter day in 2019. On that day, an unfamiliar local ISIS "start up" affiliate led by a local billionaire's radicalized son savagely attacked Christians during worship services across the island nation. The "self starter" terrorists targeted guests at the height of breakfast in luxurious beachfront hotels in the capital of Colombo and at several churches with suicide bombings. The first suicide blast took place in the Shrine of St. Anthony, a historic Catholic church in the capital where more than 50 people were killed. A second blast took place in St. Sebastian's Church where 100 people were killed. When the slaughter was over, a remarkable 253 people were killed and over 500 injured by the terrorists who were previously photographed in front of ISIS's notorious Eagle banner declaring their baya to ISIS.

ISIS's online Amaq news agency gloated over the killings by the Sri Lankan self-starter jihadis with a bloody poster featuring the pope, Trump, and Buddha which read "we will make you cry of blood enemies of religion, and the first of the clouds shall fall upon the rivers of unclean blood".<sup>121</sup> It was ISIS's deadliest overseas terror attack to date and the fact that it took place after the fall of the physical caliphate sparked fears that ISIS would be enacting a global declaration of what it called a "Campaign of Vengeance for the Blessed Province of Sham [Greater Syria]".

While the number and scale of ISIS global terror attacks plummeted in 2018 and 2019, what can best be described as "ISIS-ism" remained lethal. The Raqqa, Syria-based online ISIS propaganda machine that once "cyber-coached" lone wolves to carry out attacks as simple as "get a car and use it to drive into people" had been largely silenced.<sup>122</sup> The notorious north Syrian town of Manbij, a springboard for ISIS terrorist plots abroad, has also been captured by the Syrian Kurds at the behest

121 "Rivers of Unclean Blood". The Sun. April 25, 2019.

122 "Why a Dramatic Dip in ISIS Terrorism is Scant Comfort". New York Times. September 12, 2018.

of the Pentagon. But ISIS, even after the loss of its terror-inducing state, remained the greatest global terrorist threat with thousands of adherents who were both passive and active worldwide.<sup>123</sup>

An example of the frustrating resilience of ISIS's post-Caliphate global reach was the November 25, 2019 Europol (European Police) cyber blitz that took down thousands of ISIS websites on Twitter and Facebook and communications on the encrypted messaging app Telegram. This widely touted online counter-jihad victory led a prosecutor from the agency to proclaim, «For the time being, for as far as we know, IS[IS] is not present on the internet anymore and we will see how fast, if ever, they will regain service».<sup>124</sup> But it quickly became apparent that the ISIS cyber-jihadis had simply migrated en masse from Telegram to a Russian app known as Tam Tam. In the very week that Europol announced, «ISIS is not on the internet anymore», ISIS's online service Nasher was able to use Tam Tam to claim another trademark D.I.Y. attack. On this occasion, ISIS cyber-jihadis claimed an attack by a terrorist with a fake bomb on his body and knife duct taped to his hand who stabbed two people to death on the London Bridge, before being subdued by civilians armed with a fire extinguisher and Narwhal tusk taken from a museum wall.

In 2020 the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found that ISIS “fuouaris” (a typical romanticized Medieval term for warriors used by Islamic State members) launched a coordinated effort to “amass digital territory” and targeted US President Trump’s Facebook page with fake African-American accounts. Another ISIS follower put images of the 11 September 2001 attack on the US Department of Defense and Air

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123 “Seventh report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat”. U.N. Docs.org August 16, 2018. “Why a ‘Dramatic Dip’ in ISIS Attacks in the West Is Scant Comfort”. New York Times. September 12, 2018.

124 “Islamic State ‘Not Present On The Internet Anymore’ Following European Operation”. National Public Radio. November 25, 2019.

Force Academy pages, along with hateful messages.

The fact that the “Hidden Caliph” al-Baghdadi still spoke to his devoted followers around the world from the shadows with video and audio messages, despite the fall of the Caliphate’s last parcel of land at Baghouz al-Fawqani, seemed to be proof for ISIS diehards around the globe that “God’s Shadow on Earth” and his movement still had divine protection.

### **Baghdadi the Shadow Caliph Initially Continues to Inspire his “Knights” After the Fall of the Caliphate**

With the world’s most wanted man avoiding the global manhunt to catch him, even as his lieutenants were killed or captured in the thousands, one point remained clear: Baghdadi’s dedicated “Forever Warriors” both online and in war zones took inspiration from his words of hope and did not define their movement strictly by the towns or provinces they lost or controlled. They followed his orders and simply reverted to shadow warriors who continued to think in transgenerational, millennial, apocalyptic terms and believed they were fighting an endless, borderless war of terroristic attrition to enforce God’s law on earth and bring about the end of times. Unlike the “fickle” Americans, whom al-Baghdadi’s followers felt were not committed to staying in the region to fight (as evidenced in their minds by Trump’s October 2019 abrupt decision to withdraw the small, but highly effective, units of US “force multipliers” from Syria), the ISIS fighters fanatically believed in a fortitude-inspiring hadith (saying) of the Prophet. This much-cited hadith prophesized a Muslim regrouping after setbacks and then launching of a cataclysmic counterattack on Jerusalem that would usher in the end of times. According to this hadith, that the ISIS self-proclaimed fursan (knights) continued to take heart from:

A victorious band of warriors from my followers shall continue to fight for the truth. Despite being deserted and abandoned, they will be at the gates of Jerusalem and its surroundings, they will be at the gates of Damascus and its surroundings.<sup>125</sup>

Tracking ISIS Loss of Cities and Territories Under Obama and Trump



Clearly al-Baghdadi's diehard followers took hope in such hadiths and the Shadow Caliph's words of defiance. They defined their defeat as a test of the faith, not a final victory for their enemies. In August 2018, al-Baghdadi reached out to his followers via audiotape calling for fortitude. Speaking in the pious language his followers identified with, he proclaimed, "The land of Allah is wide and the tides of war change. For the believer mujahideen [holy warrior],

the scale of victory or defeat is not tied to a city or town being stolen or subject to those who have aerial superiority, or intercontinental missiles or smart bombs".<sup>126</sup> Following this message, al-Baghdadi---who had outlived almost all of his generals, governors, ministers and friends and was rumored to have been killed in a coup attempt by his disgruntled followers, wounded in an American airstrike, or even killed in a Russian airstrike---disappeared into the desert.

125 "ISIS's retreat accelerates, but reports of its demise are exaggerated". CNN. September 7, 2017.

126 "ISIS Makes a Comeback---as Trump Opts to Stay in Syria". New Yorker. August 30, 2018.

But then, on April 29, 2019, the defiant Caliph-in-hiding reemerged and boldly issued his first videotaped recording since he was filmed in the historic declaration of the caliphate in Mosul back in the summer of 2014. In the electrifying new videotape, the heavily bearded ISIS leader---who had clearly aged since his last triumphant filmed appearance wearing an Abbasid-style black cloak in the famed Nouri al-Zengi mosque---gloated in the sickening ISIS slaughter of over 250 Christians in Sri Lanka in churches and hotels on Easter Day 2019 saying:

Your brothers in Sri Lanka have healed the hearts of the monotheists [ISIS members] with their suicide bombings, which shook the beds of the crusaders during Easter to avenge your brothers in Baghouz.<sup>127</sup>

Baghdadi then told a roomful of followers who were all seated on the floor with him with their legs-crossed somewhere in Syria, “Our battle today is one of attrition and stretching the enemy. They should know that jihad is ongoing until the day of judgment”.<sup>128</sup> In his subsequent audio-recorded statement released on September 16, 2019, al-Baghdadi urged his followers to attack the lightly-guarded ad hoc Kurdish camps holding 70,000 of his followers (including 12,000 fighters of whom 2,000 were foreigners) in northeastern Syria imploring, “The prisons, the prisons, soldiers of the caliphate. Do your utmost to rescue your brothers and sisters and break down the walls that imprison them”. Al-Baghdadi’s continued calls for defiance and action inspired his followers who believed he had guardian angels (even as one frustrated Kurdish commander told me it was more likely he had “guardian devils” protecting him). But even as he moved furtively through the Syrian Desert, America and its local allies launched a manhunt on scale not seen since the hunt for Bin Laden to

127 “ISIL chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appears in propaganda video”. al-Jazeera. April 29, 2019.

128 “ISIS leader outlines path forward for his group post-caliphate”. Stars and Stripes. May 1, 2019.

kill the messianic leader who continued to inspire his followers. The world's most wanted man had been last spotted fleeing from western Iraq into the Syria in a yellow taxicab following the chaotic collapse of ISIS's last remaining bastions in the west Iraqi towns of Qaim and Rawa on the border with Syria in the fall of 2017. From there, he had disappeared into the vastness of the Syrian Desert and was rumored to be in the last pocket of ISIS territory located in northeast near the town of Haijin. It will be recalled he went by the kunyas of the "Ghost", or the "Invisible Sheikh" and was known to practice elaborate security measures. These included having those who came to meet him blindfolded and driven for hours before meeting him in such hard to track venues as moving trucks transporting vegetables. So paranoid was the world's most wanted man, it was said he kept a suicide vest on or near him at all times so he would not be captured alive as he moved from place to place several times a week. He was vitally aware that many, if not most, of his top commanders, administrators, governors, and clerics had been killed off in HVT (High Value Target) air strikes and commando raids that had often been guided by the NSA, DIA, CIA or military "SIGINT" (signals intelligence), usually by the tracking of cellphones and internet. For this reason, he did not allow cell phones to be used in his presence and communicated only by courier. Finding Baghdadi in the maelstrom of violence and warfare sweeping Syria since the US abandoned its CIA intelligence gathering posts following Trump's October 2019 troop withdrawal order was like finding a needle in the desert. But it was to be the reliable Syrian Kurds who would help the CIA find that needle in a place that few expected it to be hiding.

## US Delta Forces and Rangers Launch Operation Kayla Mueller

The hard to locate Islamic State leader proved impossible to find, that is until America's local allies arrested an ISIS member in 2019. This source told them that he had heard rumors that the shadow caliph was hiding in a place no one expected to find him, far from ISIS's former stronghold (which was in the eastern Syrian desert) on the other side of the country in the province of Idlib. Located in northwestern Syria, Idlib was the last remaining pocket of territory still controlled by a coalition of anti-Syrian Assad regime Sunni Arab rebels. Among the jihadist fighting forces in this alliance were Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Huras al-Din, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliates which were bitter enemies of ISIS. But, as it transpired, ISIS operatives had allegedly bribed their al-Qaeda enemies to protect their leader and al-Baghdadi remained in hiding near the Turkish border outside the town of Barisha in a so-called 'safe zone' protected by the pro-Sunni rebel Islamist Turks.

To confirm that it was al-Baghdadi, in the fall of 2019 a member of Kurdish Asayish intelligence managed to steal a pair of underwear of the man they suspected was the ISIS leader from the remote compound he was living in. DNA from the underwear was subsequently matched by the CIA to a DNA sample taken when he was prisoner at US camp in Iraq during the 2003-11 Iraq War. This remarkable, "fleeting and actionable intel" confirmed that the so-called "Shadow of God on Earth" was indeed in the suspect compound...at least for the time being.<sup>129</sup> There were real fears that the elusive Caliph might try escaping into Turkey, or that he could go into hiding again as chaos swept post-October 2019 US retreat northern Syria. As US troops hastily withdrew from the region and abandoned their bases to the gloating Russian adversaries in mid-October under Trump's orders, the CIA and Kurdish Asayish scrambled to kill the elusive ISIS leader

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129 "Pentagon releases first images from raid that killed ISIS leader". CNN. October 31, 2019.

before he disappeared in the post-US Syrian withdrawal mayhem. Thus was borne a risky, long range, heliborne Special Forces capture-kill raid that would see approximately 100 elite Delta Forces and Army Rangers fly in a squadron of vulnerable SOAR (Special Operations Air Regiment) Chinook transport helicopters and protective Apache Longbow helicopter gunships across a volatile region in northern Syria from U.S. bases in Iraq. The north Syrian region they were traversing had become newly hostile following the abrupt Trump-ordered US retreat from Syria just three weeks earlier. The triumphant Russians had subsequently captured the abandoned American military bases and their hostile forces were armed with advanced S 400 anti-aircraft missile systems.

But, on this occasion, these weapons were not deployed by Russian forces that had attacked American troops in Syria in the past. On their dangerous journey, the vulnerable Chinook transport helicopters received only small arms gunfire from the ground, but this was suppressed and the squadron arrived at its target with no helicopters downed (as had tragically occurred in the 1980 Delta Forces raid to free the American hostages being held by the Iranians in the failed Operation Eagle Claw). As Americans back home watched the 2019 World Series in baseball, the SOAR squadron swooped down on the suspected compound in northeastern Syria and the Special Forces assaulted it using the cover of darkness and night vision goggles. The US commandos announced in Arabic that all those inside the compound had to surrender and eleven children were subsequently escorted from the site unharmed. But four women and two men who were wearing suicide vests refused to surrender and were killed. Six of al-Baghdadi's guards also died in the firefight as the US Special Forces breached the walls of the compound with explosives.



U.S. special operations forces move toward the compound occupied by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (image courtesy of the U.S. Department of Defense)

The target of the raid, al-Baghdadi, however, escaped dragging two children with him. It soon became apparent he had hidden in a tunnel burrowed beneath the compound, a typical ISIS *modus operandi*, using his own children as human shields. General Frank McKenzie claimed he fired back from below but, as a trained American Special Forces dog named Conan and a military robot tracked him to the end of the dead-end tunnel, al-Baghdadi was finally cornered in the dark underground. After years of living in the shadows, ISIS's messianic leader was trapped in a dark tunnel by American "Crusaders".

In the end, trapped below ground with nowhere left to flee, the man who had grandly proclaimed from the minbar in Mosul that it was the obligation of all Muslims to follow him as their caliph, blew himself up with a suicide vest. To get to Baghdadi's charred remains, the Special Forces had to carefully dig through caved-in debris. They then frantically conducted an on-site DNA test and, within 15 minutes of his death, positively identified ISIS's messianic leader's body. The Special Forces sent a triumphant message which read "Jackpot!" the signal that Baghdadi was "E KIA" (Enemy Killed in Action).

Fittingly, the operation was later announced to have been dubbed Operation Kayla Mueller to honor courageous 26-year-old American ‘Doctors Without Frontiers’ aid worker who had traveled to Syria to assist its people during the humanitarian crisis caused by the Syrian civil war. This brave, independent American woman, who represented everything about the West and its liberated femininity that the Islamist misogynists hated and despised, was, however, kidnapped by ISIS in 2013. Tragically she was then triumphantly brought as a gift to their caliph. Al-Baghdadi, a serial rapist who considered Kayla to be a trophy, then threatened to behead her if she did not do what he ordered. He then ordered her to convert to Islam, “married” her (which in reality meant he repeatedly raped her, and tortured her, including having her fingernails pulled out). Not content with abusing her, in the end al-Baghdadi killed Kayla to avenge Obama’s bombing campaign, although ISIS tried blaming her death on a Jordanian airstrike in a typical tactic designed to sow doubt among their enemies.<sup>130</sup>

In addition to offering some solace for her parents, the success of October 2019’s Operation Kayla Mueller offered a strong rebuttal to Russian GRU (military intelligence, the same unit that successfully hacked the 2016 US presidential elections). The GRU had launched a vast, widely successful disinformation campaign that was designed to sow doubt and discord regarding America’s ties with ISIS. The main objective of this propaganda campaign was to demonstrate that, far from being an enemy of ISIS, America was its creator, friend and benefactor. I described this as a typical example of Soviet style “dezinformatsiya” (disinformation) in an interview for Radio Free Europe on their Russian fact checking site Polygraph. According to this Russian GRU disinformation propaganda, that was believed by many, “ISIS was created by the United States to solve geopolitical problems in the Middle East, [but] now they see it’s not working there and are

130 “Kayla Mueller murdered by IS, says Yazidi former sex slave”. BBC. September 9, 2015.

preparing to move ISIS to Central Asia”.<sup>131</sup> The Russians also falsely claimed to have killed Baghdadi on two occasions and clearly, had they killed him first, this would have strengthened their false narrative that was believed by millions that they, and not the Americans, were the true enemy of ISIS. As it was, the credit for killing the ISIS leader went to Trump, who was quick to proclaim his role in the raid, not Putin. A triumphant Trump would announce, “Last night was a great night for the United States and for the world. A brutal killer, one who has caused so much hardship and death has violently been eliminated”. He would later ad lib and extraneously claim that the man who raped Kayla Mueller had died in the tunnel “whimpering and crying and screaming all the way”. The president mocked the slain ISIS leader and claimed “he died like a dog. He died like a coward”. The military did not support the president’s claim and only said there was no audio of his death. They did not have the same granularity of details of how the man who had ruled over millions from the shadows died (of the sort that we had in the killing of bin Laden). All we know is that Baghdadi died cornered in the dark, after years of being hunted, by killing himself, an act considered a mortal sin in Islam. To compound matters in the eyes of most of the world’s Muslims, who were aghast at the horrors of the so-called “Caliph”, he murdered two children with him in his final act of hateful fanaticism. This was also a sin in the holy Koran which explicitly states, “if you murder an innocent, it is as if you killed all mankind”. As with much of the darkness perpetuated by ISIS, al-Baghdadi’s death was considered an abomination by mainstream Muslims.

Like his equally fanatic followers, who were hunted down and killed in the dark tunnels beneath ISIS’s last piece of turf in Baghouz al-Fawqani six months earlier, the self-proclaimed Commander of the

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131 “Russian Experts: U.S. Supports Islamic State in Afghanistan, Destabilizes the Region”. Polygraph. August 21, 2017.

Faithful, Prince of the Believers, and Steward of God died a desperate, subterranean, fiery death after being hounded below ground by his “infidel” enemies. This was hardly the sort of glorious fate he and his followers foresaw for themselves when they triumphantly raised the black war standard of the legendary Medieval Abbasid dynasty above the Zengi al-Nouri mosque in Mosul just five years earlier and proclaimed the resurrection of glorious Medieval Caliphate of Baghdad.



(Left) President Donald Trump and his team monitoring developments during the Baghdadi raid (Official White House photo by Shealah Craighead). (Right) A declassified image of Conan, the dog that helped capture and kill ISIS leader al Baghdadi (Image courtesy of U.S. Department of Defense).

## **Unbroken and Uncowed. ISIS Fighters Defiant, Despite the Loss of Their Leader**

But, within days of his death, ISIS announced that Islamic scholar and ISIS veteran Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi had been declared the new leader of the terrorist group. The selection of al-Qurayshi spurred waves of controversy and prompted much debate both within ISIS and among experts as to whether he was of Arab or Turkmen origin. Al-Qurayshi was born in Mahlabiya, a Turkmen-majority town in Iraq, but his parents were both born in the town of al-Shura in northern Iraq, which has a predominantly Arab population. An Iraqi genealogy expert determined al-Qurayshi's claimed Arab origins as legitimate and traced his tribal history back to the Prophet, which by ISIS's standards makes him eligible for the position as Caliph. Nonetheless, the new Caliph's background remains a point of controversy and many have weaponized al-Qurayshi's origin story to undermine ISIS's organizational integrity and paint him as a false caliph.<sup>132</sup> Despite the death of al-Baghdadi and the initial controversy surrounding its new Caliph, ISIS was quick to issue a warning which stated, "We mourn you oh Commander of the Faithful. Do not rejoice America. The new chosen one will make you forget the horror you have beholden...and make the achievements of the Baghdadi days taste sweet".<sup>133</sup> Another ISIS follower warned in that "when the blood of the caliph gets shed, disaster will hit earth", a prediction ISIS followers saw fulfilled in the subsequent Coronavirus pandemic.<sup>134</sup> In February 2019, ISIS warned that it was far from beaten and would rise again as it had on several occasions after suffering defeats:

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132 "A Caliph Without a Caliphate: The Biography of ISIS's New Leader", Newlines, April 15, 2021.

133 "ISIL confirms death of leader al-Baghdadi, names new chief". al-Jazeera. November 1, 2019.

134 "Pandemic Narratives: Pro-Islamic State Media and the Coronavirus". West Point Counter-Terrorism Center Sentinel. June 2020. Vol. 13, issue 6

“We say to America and to its Arab and non-Arab servants: You have been trying to fight the Islamic State since it was limited to Iraq... you repeatedly declared that you finished it off and you are surprised each time to see, after all of your declarations, the continuance of its activity and the attacks of its soldiers...”

There were real fears that ISIS would take advantage of the power vacuum in northeastern Syria (created by Trump’s shocking October 2019 decision to withdraw the US “accelerant” troops from the region) and fulfill their slain leader’s final order to attack the ISIS prisons and free their compatriots. Analysts feared that the Turkish-besieged, American-abandoned Kurds of northern Syria would not be able to maintain control of the vast internment camps. There, ISIS women enforcers killed fellow captives for not wearing their abayas and continued to indoctrinate women and children in what were essentially terrorism incubators.

None of these events boded well for the people of northern Iraq or northern Syria where ISIS was resurging as the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic halted US operations with local troops and created a new permissive environment (to be discussed in subsequent chapters). Islam speaks of the existence of spiteful, smokeless beings of fire known as jinns or genies that haunt the wastelands and often torment mortal men. For those civilians living in the insurgent-plagued northern Iraq and newly destabilized, post-American northeastern Syria, the resilient ISIS ghost marauders were jihadi jinns. They continued to kill on a regular basis and rule from the shadows through fear, terror, bombings, and assassination.

With a Pentagon-estimated remaining force of thousands of fighters, ISIS’s mountain, desert, and urban jinn-terrorizers have successfully transitioned from planting black flags of conquest and dominating millions of people to becoming desert ghosts once again.

They are now waging a shadow war of attrition that they define as *nikayah*---a Taliban-style, grinding campaign designed to wear down their less determined enemies from across the globe and their local foes who have been thrown into disarray by the US withdrawal from northern Syria, Iranian-US tensions, and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>135</sup> Like the boast of the equally determined Taliban holy warriors (whose insurgents appear to have outlasted the war weary Americans and now control almost half of Afghanistan) who defiantly proclaimed, “the Americans have the watches, but we have the time”, the resilient ISIS desert terrorists boast they will fight on. Their “knights” are determined to continue their jihad, despite having suffered a setback similar to that of the Prophet Mohammad when he lost holy Mecca in 622 A.D.

As the ISIS “patient ones” dreamed of Islamic utopia collapsed around its devotees, its chief spokesman captured the determination of many of his followers to fight on despite setbacks. Lashing out in fury using language similar to the resilient Taliban he warned:

Do you think, O America, that victory is achieved by the killing of one commander or more? It is then a false victory ... victory is when the enemy is defeated. Do you think, O America, that defeat is the loss of a city or a land? Were we defeated when we lost cities in Iraq and were left in the desert without a city or a territory? Will we be defeated and you will be victorious if you took Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa or all the cities, and we returned where we were in the first stage?...No, defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight.<sup>136</sup>

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135 “Insurgents Again: The Islamic State’s Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond”. West Point Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel. December 2017. Volume 10, Issue 11.

136 “ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani Calls on Supporters to Carry Out Terror Attacks in Europe, U.S”. Middle East Media Research Institute. May 20, 2016.



## **Part Two: Bannermen of the Forever Jihad. ISIS 2.0 Reverts to an Insurgency**

“Do you think what we’ll be finished? Never! We will remain until the end of time! This battle is not going to end in Raqqa or Mosul, it will end in your lands”.

---Yusuf. A 10-year-old indoctrinated American Muslim boy speaking directly to President Donald Trump on an ISIS propaganda video from Kurdish-besieged Raqqa, Syria.

### **The Continuing Threat of Post Caliphate ISIS.**

#### **The Rugged Mountain Lairs of ISIS South of Mosul. 2019-21**

For all of its territorial loses, and despite the triumphant boasts of President Donald Trump that he (and he alone) “wiped out” and even “absolutely obliterated” ISIS, the resilient terror group – which demonstrated a phoenix-like ability to reconstitute itself from a mere 700 surviving fighters at the time of Obama’s withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in December of 2011 – was at the time of his boastful declaration of victory far from being obliterated.<sup>137</sup> As the defeated survivors of the collapse of the Dawla systematically retreated to planned fallback lairs in the untameable Syrian Desert, the expanses of Iraq’s Anbar region, and the rugged mountains in remote northern Iraq and re-calibrated to insurgency mode, the dream of the re-establishment of Sunni rule and a holy state with roots in the Middle Ages remained.

137 “A Presidential Epic Fail: Watch Trump Try to Explain His Syria Policy”. Haaretz (Israel). April 25, 2018. “Editorial: Wrong About ISIS”. Weekly Standard. September 26, 2018. “Putin says ISIS Suffers ‘Complete Defeat’ in Eastern Syria”. Associated Press. December 6, 2017.

There was, and is a still is, a vast, fanatical, and lethal insurgent network operating in Iraq and Syria's Sunni lands whose followers think not in day-to-day terms, but in millennial terms. For them, this is a generational struggle with a different timescale than that of most revolutionary groups. There is an eschatological religious aspect to their struggle that makes their struggle a forever jihad that calls for an endless war for the faith. Few Westerners, who come from secular countries that have long ago separated Church and state and tampered down sectarian hatred since 1648, comprehend this dimension of trans-generational Sunni jihadism and hatred for Shiias that spawned ISIS and keeps the fires of holy war burning in the hearts of true believers.

The combustible material in the form of easily manipulated Sunni grievances still exists. This dry jihadi kindling in Iraq consists of hated Iranian Shia influence, lack of jobs or rebuilding in a war-devastated region of bombed out towns, newly dominant Iranian-backed militias like the Popular Mobilization Forces, and despised American influence. The Iraqi Security Forces have 250,000 members, of whom many have been trained by the Coalition, but an August 2019 report by the Pentagon found that, in addition to failing to address the root causes of Sunni terrorism, Iraq "lacks hold forces capable of maintaining security in areas cleared of ISIS".<sup>138</sup>

All it would take for the smoldering embers of Sunni jihad to be fanned into flames, as they were from 2012-14, would be for a new Zarqawi or Baghdadi to stoke the smoldering embers of anti-Shiia resentment and relaunch ISIS or its next iteration, essentially IFJ, Islamic Forever Jihad. The genie that the Neo-Cons unwittingly released with their mad "regime change" schemes in 2003 has not been permanently forced back into the bottle by the loss of ISIS's jihad empire any more than it

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138 "Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2019 – June 30, 2019.

was after the successes of the 2007 Petraeus troop surge. The genie of jihad has merely been exiled, for the time being, from its seat of power at the Zengi al-Nouri Mosque in Mosul and the Paradise Square in Raqqa to the back alleys of the bombed-out towns of the Sunni north of Iraq and the vastness of the Syrian-Iraqi desert.

ISIS has clearly mutated back to its original insurgency mode. Its resilient historical jahaocracy re-enactors take inspiration from the Koran and hadiths of the Prophet Mohammad. Its followers seek the fulfillment of prophecy and even accept that their “holy” movement will come close to extinction, before returning to power. The uncowed diehards take heart in these words of the Prophet that «A victorious band of warriors from my followers shall continue to fight for the truth, despite being deserted and abandoned, they will be at the gates of Jerusalem and its surroundings, and they will be at the gates of Damascus and its surroundings”.

Islam speaks of the existence of spiteful, smokeless beings of fire known as jinns that haunt the wastelands and often torment mortal men. For those civilians living in insurgent-plagued northern Iraq and newly destabilized, post-American northeastern Syria who still suffer from the genies of sectarian warfare that were unleashed by the fateful US overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s secular, Baathist, Sunni-dominated regime in 2003’s Operation Iraqi Freedom, the resilient ISIS ghost marauders are jihadi jinns. They continue to kill on a regular basis and rule from the shadows and wastelands through fear, terror, bombings, and assassination. Like the boast of the equally determined Taliban holy warriors (who outlasted the US and NATO in their twenty year insurgency) that “the Americans have the watches, but we have the time”, the resilient ISIS desert terrorists vow to fight on. They have proclaimed they will continue the struggle, despite having suffered a setback to similar to that of the Prophet Mohammad when he lost holy Mecca in 622 A.D.

Trump's counter-strategic and widely condemned (by Republicans and Democrats) October 6th 2019 decision to abandon the Pentagon's counter-terrorism bases, CIA intel gathering posts, and hard-fighting anti-ISIS Syrian Kurdish proxy warriors to the invading Turkish jihadists and hastily withdraw the highly effective small force of American "force multipliers" from Syria was seen as divine intervention by the ISIS diehards. ISIS mocked Trump for his mercurial decision to reverse himself and withdraw the small, but much appreciated, US forces who punched above their weight by leveraging the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. The terrorists gloated and proclaimed of the seemingly indecisive Trump: "Don't you see how you became the laughingstock of the nations, and an old and crazy man controls your fate, whose opinion changes between morning and evening?"<sup>139</sup> Buoyed by Trump's betrayal of their arch enemies, the secular Syrian Kurds, the hate-filled mission of Caliph al-Baghdadi, the Prince of Believers and Shadow of God on Earth, was continued by the new "Prince of Jihad", Caliph Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi.

Meanwhile in Afghanistan, newly elected president Joe Biden pushed back Trump's troop withdrawal deadline from May 1, 2021 to September 11, 2021, but ultimately ordered all US forces out of the country by that symbolic date. This was celebrated as a jihadi victory not only by the resilient Taliban, who ground the Americans and their NATO allies down to stalemate, but ISIS fighters. The Taliban, who kept control of much of Afghanistan's countryside, despite suffering horrific losses to superior American firepower, were dogged in their resistance and summed up their rationale for continuing the costly fight for two decades using terms that were as alien to secular or Christian Westerners as they were natural to these holy warriors "Jihad is an act of worship. Worship is something that, however much

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139 "ISIS Names New Leader and Confirms al-Baghdadi's Death", New York Times, October 31, 2019.

of it you do, you don't get tired".<sup>140</sup> This was certainly a sentiment that the even more radical ISIS Khorasan fighters of Afghanistan shared.

To compound matters, in January 2020, the Trump administration upset the modus vivendi understanding with Iran, whose Iraqi militia proxy forces fought alongside American proxies in Iraq to defeat the common ISIS enemy. It did so by ordering the drone killing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Commander General Qasem Soleimani, who was a tacit US ally in the war on ISIS, in a drone strike outside Baghdad Airport (although it should be noted Soleimani was responsible for organizing and orchestrating countless operations aimed at undermining US interests). An infuriated Shia-dominated Iraqi parliament ordered US troops out of the country to punish America for unilaterally killing a respected Iranian ally in the war on ISIS. Joint US-Iraqi operations were (to the delight of ISIS) canceled for months as Iranian militias threatened US forces in Iraq. And, just when tentative operations against ISIS began again (the American troops were not expelled in the end) in April 2020, after months of Iranian Shia militia proxy attacks on locked down US bases, the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic brought much of the gradual resumption of military cooperation to a grinding halt again.

### **“Allah’s Smallest Footsoldier” Buoys ISIS During the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020**

In early June 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests roiled America, an Islamic State follower gloated and posted the hashtag «#AmericaBurning”. Another posted a message that read “You are waking up this morning to news of the destruction of America, the dismantling of its States, and civil war”.<sup>141</sup> Another Islamic State website proclaimed “Destruction, fragmentation. America is burning”,

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140 “Afghanistan. We Have Won the War, America Has Lost”. BBC. April 15, 2021.

141 “ISIS Gloats About U.S. Pandemic and Protests”. The Daily Beast. June 24, 2020.

while an ISIS supporter posted photos in the same forum of the riots writing “O Allah, burn them like they burned the lands of the Muslims”. ISIS supporters were clearly rejoicing at tensions from both peaceful protests and occasional violence in U.S. streets in the wake of an African American named George Floyd’s May 25th 2020 death in police custody which caused widespread tension.

Islamic State followers were also excited at the prospect of a massive Western death toll from the Coronavirus, which they defined as “Allah’s smallest footsoldier”. They saw divine intervention in U.S. military pullbacks in Iraq related to the coronavirus---such as the March 2020 announcement from the Pentagon that it would stop sending troops to Iraq for at least two months. In addition to these preventative measures, the U.S. pulled some 1,200 of its 5,000 troops out of Iraq, withdrew many more from six frontline operating bases (including Mosul, al-Qaim, Qayyarah, Kirkuk and Taqaddum) to fewer bases, and ordered the troops remaining in the country to stay on their bases. These moves ended most joint missions with local Iraqi and Kurdish troops and brought a halt to much of the vital air cover local forces received. <sup>142</sup>

In Iraq, the Islamic State reacted to these moves by stepping up attacks during the summer of 2020. In bold night ambushes and even day mortar attacks, they targeted pro-government Shiia militia members and Iraqi as well as Kurdish troops who now had less U.S. close support or ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) to help protect themselves. British and U.S. air strikes still targeted the group’s fortified cave hideouts in northern Iraq, which Iraq’s military also continued to attack, albeit with fewer troops due to Coronavirus base lock-downs.

In government-controlled parts of Syria, emboldened Islamic State forces attacked Assad r troops with land mines, heavy weapons and

car bombings, killing more than 401 members of pro-regime forces in the short time span of March 24 and April 9, 2020.<sup>143</sup> In northern Syria, Kurdish SDF forces held captive as many as 12,000 Islamic State fighters and 70,000 of their family members, mostly women and children, in vast, cramped, unhygienic internment camps. There was no possibility for social distancing and little running water in these grim camps. The ISIS prisoners lived in terror of the pandemic breaking out among them and began rioting in efforts to escape the camps as word of the virus spread in the camps. In May 2020, Islamic State prisoners briefly rose up and took control of a prison holding as many as 5,000 captives before they were suppressed by Kurdish guards. Islamic State leaders not only called for their fighters to attack the lightly guarded camps to free the prisoners, but also expressed concern about the disease spreading among their own forces. For all the opportunities the pandemic seemingly offered the Islamic State, the group was also worried about how the virus affected them. They issued guidelines similar to that of the US Center for Disease Control for their fighters.

Islamic State also ordered its followers not to travel to Europe, where the virus outbreak was far worse than in the Middle East. But they suggested that its followers who were already in Europe exploit the chaos. They called for «new strikes ... similar to the strikes of Paris, London, Brussels and other places» in recent years. The Islamic State even suggested that killing «infidels» could be a way for followers to protect themselves from the virus, stating “They should also remember that obedience to God -- the most beloved form of which is jihad -- turns away the torment and wrath of God”.<sup>144</sup> In light of the above, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security bullet released in late

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143 Ibid

144 Brian Glyn Williams. “Islamic State calls for followers to spread coronavirus, exploit pandemic and protests”. The Conversation. June 23, 2020.

March 2020 warned that the Islamic State's newsletter had called for attacks on U.S. and European health care targets that were strained by the pandemic.

Those calls seem to have elicited responses. On March 11, 2020 German authorities arrested four Tajik members of an Islamic State cell who were allegedly planning an attack on American military facilities with explosives. In April in Romans-sur-Isere, France a lone wolf went on a stabbing spree and killed two and critically wounded two others before he was arrested while he was kneeling on a sidewalk praying in the Arabic language. In June 2020 another lone wolf went on a stabbing rampage on groups of people enjoying a warm evening in a park in Reading, England, killing three. A survivor captured the horror of a trademark self-starter ISIS attack "one lone person walked through, suddenly shouted some unintelligible words and went around a large group of around 10, trying to stab them. He stabbed three of them severely in the neck and under the arms, and then turned and started running towards me, and we turned and started running".<sup>145</sup>

These attacks in France, Germany and Britain and the disrupted plot in Germany did not, however, signal a resurgence in Islamic State activity in the West of the sort seen in 2015-16. Having lost its tran-national state, ISIS's messaging seemed to have lost much of its galvanizing appeal and luster. The group's bold aspirations were no longer matched by its followers' willingness to become «martyrs» for a cause that many less committed followers living far from the caliphate began to see as lost. This was, in part, because the group's core state, which served as an inspiration, had been destroyed and delegitimized in the eyes of many former followers abroad.

Our research shows that widespread ISIS calls for attacks on the FIFA World Cup soccer finals in Russia in 2018 and against Fourth of

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145 "Three killed, 3 seriously wounded in UK stabbing rampage declared terrorist attack". Reading.com. June 21, 2020.

July festivities in the U.S. in 2019 were never acted on. While Islamic State remained unmatched in its ability to carry out jihadi mayhem in its natal lands in the Middle East (and in affiliates around the world, from Africa to the Philippines) the terrorists' gloating at Western Coronavirus deaths and racial tensions in America did not necessarily translate to a real threat to the US homeland or Europe from 2018 to 2021.

But there was still a nightmare scenario that haunted biological terrorism experts. In late June 2020 an Islamic State group online publication in India called for its supporters to spread the coronavirus, saying "every brother and sister, even children, can contribute to Allah's cause by becoming the carriers of this disease and striking the colonies of the disbelievers".<sup>146</sup> The group claimed that devout Muslims would not be sickened, because "no disease can harm even a hair of a believer". Fortunately, these potentially catastrophic calls for bio-jihad spreading of "Allah's smallest soldier" were not acted upon.

### **ISIS Retains Followers and its Sense of Mission in its Core Lands and Global Affiliates**

By 2020 the West saw a reduction in attacks with only one major Islamic State attack taking place in Europe that year (in addition to the two above-mentioned stabbing incidents in France and Britain). In November 2020, an Albanian Muslim who had previously tried to join ISIS in Syria used a rifle, pistol, and a machete to wreak havoc in Vienna, Austria. In a recap of the attacks in Paris and Brussels, the attacker, who swore allegiance to the new Caliph al-Quraysh in a video, stalked Viennese in several locations killing four and injuring 23 before he was shot to death by police.

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<sup>146</sup> "ISIS 'Lockdown' Magazine Urges Using Kids to Spread COVID-19, Attacks with Scissors". Homeland Security Today. June 23, 2020

Meanwhile, in its core “Syrac’ lands, even after the physical caliphate lay in ruins and Trump declared the jihadists defeated, ISIS’s terror campaign persisted. Al-Jazeera noted in January 2021 that, despite Trump’s grandiose declarations of defeat over ISIS, the group never really went away stating “[ISIS] had a relatively seamless transition into an insurgency and even though it was pushed out from the urban areas into the rural areas, it continued to operate and stage attacks on security forces and checkpoints in remote areas”.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, just one day after Joe Biden was sworn in as President of the United States, ISIS carried out its deadliest attack in Baghdad in over four years. On January 21, 2021, the Islamic State claimed credit for a twin suicide bombing that ripped through a crowded market in Baghdad’s Bab al-Sharqi commercial area. The devastating attack reportedly killed 32 people, wounded 110 others and sent a chilling reminder that ISIS did not need a territorial caliphate to wreak havoc.<sup>148</sup>

After the bombing, Iraq’s Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein pleaded for continued US support in response to Trump’s orders for troop withdrawals from Iraq emphasizing that the ISIS threat remained significant. According to Hussein, “Having spoken with military and security officials, I came to know that we are still lacking training, experts, weapons. We also need to share intelligence...Why I am saying this? Simply because ISIL operatives, or certain ISIL rings, are still active and on the move in Iraq”.<sup>149</sup>

But ISIS fighters were not the only ones on the move in Iraq. Less than a week after the deadly explosion, on January 27, 2021 Iraq’s renowned Golden Division conducted a bold raid on Islamic State positions situated approximately 10 miles west of Kirkuk province in northeastern Iraq. The target of the raid – which was bolstered by US-

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147 “ISIS takes responsibility for deadly Baghdad suicide bombings”, al-Jazeera, January 22, 2021.

148 “ISIS takes responsibility for deadly Baghdad suicide bombings”, al-Jazeera, January 22, 2021.

149 “ISIL takes responsibility for deadly Baghdad suicide bombings”, al-Jazeera, January 22, 2021.

led Coalition air, intelligence, and surveillance support – was Abu Yasir al-Issawi, the Islamic State’s deputy commander and ISIS chief in Iraq, and approximately 10 other Islamic State diehards believed to be by his side. The joint operation was a success and an American airstrike killed the ISIS commander and nine other fighters. Al-Issawi was believed to have coordinated ISIS’s operations in Iraq and answered directly to ISIS’s new caliph, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi took to Twitter to celebrate the success of this joint operation, tweeting “I gave my word to pursue Daesh terrorists, we gave them a thundering response...Our heroic armed forces have eliminated Daesh commander Abu Yaser al-Issawi as part of an intelligence-led operation”.<sup>150</sup> A coalition spokesman would state “The Coalition will continue to remove key leaders from the battlefield and degrade the terrorist organization. Terrorists-you will never live in peace- you will be pursued to the ends of the earth”.<sup>151</sup> As Biden took over the war to “degrade” ISIS from Trump, the US-led Coalition did not let up and kept the pressure on the remaining terrorists in Iraq. In early February 2021, the British Royal Air Force deployed two Typhoon FGR4s to strike an ISIS cell’s mountain hideout near Baiji, a city 130 miles north of Baghdad, with laser-guided bombs.<sup>152</sup> While the specifics of the operation are unclear, what is known is that two caves believed to have served as an ISIS base in the area were bombed.

Meanwhile, across the border in Syria, the US unfortunately had less leverage or ability to fight ISIS due to Trump’s counter-strategic abandonment of the Pentagon’s loyal Kurdish allies and its own bases in late 2019. And in northeast Syria’s Hasakah province, the

150 “Top ISIS Commander Killed by American Airstrike in Iraq”, Special Operations Forces Report (SOFREP), January 29, 2021.

151 “Top ISIS leader in Iraq killed in US airstrike”, The Hill, January 29, 2021

152 “RAF jets wipe out Isis terror cells in laser-guided bomb raid north of Baghdad”, The Sunday Times, February 1, 2021

SDF guarded the families of ISIS fighters in the sprawling al-Howl detention camp which remained an abyss of human despair. So strong was ISIS's presence in the camp that it became known as the "Al-Howl Emirate". According to Syria Direct, ISIS penetrated the security cordon imposed on the camp by paying enormous bribes to members of the Asayish [Kurdish police] forces, who in return delivered money to the organization's female cells operating inside the camp. This source further reported that "ISIS women in the camp have a lot of financial ability, which allows them to pay bribes to let them contact the outside, and also buy weapons to carry out the operations".<sup>153</sup> Such operations normally consisted of assassinations of fellow prisoners in the camp who were deemed to be disloyal to the caliphate and included ISIS's trademark beheadings.

### **ISIS Remains in its Core Lands and Emerges Triumphant in New Locations in 2021**

In America, after the January 6th 2021 storming of the Capitol by a mob that included white supremacist extremists from such militia groups as the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, the FBI began to focus more on right wing domestic terrorism threats than the fading threat of international terror threats. But, even as the terror threat from ISIS jihadists to the American homeland seemed to be diminished and the US presence in Iraq was counter-strategically drawn down by Trump (against the advice of his generals) to a mere 2,500 troops by January 15, 2021, the joint American-Iraqi war on ISIS continued. The Pentagon announced at that time:

"We will continue to have a counterterrorism platform in Iraq to support partner forces with air power and intelligence. Most operations in Iraq were already being conducted by our Iraqi

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153 "'Al-Hol emirate': How ISIS turns the prison-like camp into a stronghold", Syria Direct, February 1, 2021.

partners, enabled by U.S. and Coalition forces. We can continue to provide this support to our Iraqi partners at the reduced U.S. force level.”<sup>154</sup>

Thus the war that began in August of 2014 under Obama and his vice president Joe Biden (who famously promised to “follow ISIS to the gates of hell”) continued with Biden as Commander in Chief. While Biden’s focus was clearly on rebuilding the nation’s pandemic-devastated economy and defeating Coronavirus, he signaled that the new president was still focused on Iraq and Syria when he launched a February 2021 airstrike on an Iranian-backed Shia militia in Syria that was responsible for an attack on US contractors in Erbil, Kurdistan.

There was also an interesting development in March 2021 when an unexpected guest arrived at Baghdad International Airport to deliver a much-needed message of hope and healing to this wartorn nation that would have been unimaginable just a few years earlier – Pope Francis. Far from planting the black flag of jihad over the Vatican, as ISIS had boldly promised to do, in the end it was the white flags of the pontiff that symbolically fluttered in Mosul, the former capital of the Iraqi half of the caliphate. Francis began his historic three-day visit with a speech delivered from the Great Hall of Iraq’s Presidential Palace in which he proclaimed, “I come as a pilgrim of peace”, and said “May the clash of arms be silenced. May their spread be curbed here and everywhere. May partisan interests cease”.<sup>155</sup>

Later on his trip, the Pope arrived with great fanfare to the Our Lady of Salvation in Baghdad, a Chaldean church, where he addressed leaders of various local Christian denominations from a population that had dwindled from 1.2 million back in 2003 to 300,000 due to slaughter, jihadi terrorism and religious cleansing. The Pope’s visit

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154 “U.S. Completes Troop-Level Drawdown in Afghanistan, Iraq”. Defense.gov. January 15, 2021.

155 “I Come As A Pilgrim’: Pope Francis Begins Historic Visit To Iraq”, NPR, March 5, 2021

to this church was hugely symbolic as back in 2010 it was the site a murderous assault by ISIS's predecessor the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). On October 31, 2010, ISI terrorists stormed into the church during Sunday evening mass and mercilessly slaughtered 58 worshippers and wounded approximately 80 others.<sup>156</sup> On the third and final day of Francis' risk-filled tour of Iraq, he arrived in Mosul where seven years earlier Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had declared in the Zengi al-Nouri Mosque that it was the duty of Muslims to migrate to his caliphate and to wage bloody holy war on infidels.

But far from calling for retaliation, Francis led his audience in a prayer filled with calls for peace and understanding that compared drastically to Baghdadi's proclamation in 2014 that "The Muslims today have a loud, thundering statement, and possess heavy boots. They have a statement that will cause the world to hear and understand the meaning of terrorism."<sup>157</sup> Instead of calls for holy war, of the sort Pope Urban had made in the 11th century (and jihadists in many Muslim lands from Africa to the Pacific continued to make a thousand years later in the 21st century), Pope Francis prayed "Today we raise our voices in prayer to Almighty God for all the victims of war and armed conflict. Here in Mosul, the tragic consequences of war and hostility are all too evident". In a message of pluralistic acceptance and tolerance of others' faiths, of the very sort that was considered a "Western abomination" to the ISIS fanatics, Francis also stated:

"How cruel it is that this country, the cradle of civilization, should have been afflicted by so barbarous a blow, with ancient places of worship destroyed and many thousands of people – Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and others – forcibly displaced or killed. Today, however, we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable

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156 "I Come As A Pilgrim': Pope Francis Begins Historic Visit To Iraq", NPR, March 5, 2021

157 "Caliph Urges Skilled Jihadists to Join ISIS". Al-Arabiya. July 1, 2014.

than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war”.<sup>158</sup>

Referencing ISIS, after visiting a church that had been defiled by the terrorists and turned into a terror compound, Francis declared that “hope could never be silenced by the blood spilled by those who pervert the name of God to pursue paths of destruction”. The fact that ISIS was unable to attack such a hugely significant target as the Vicar of Christ, the head of the world’s Catholic community with a suicide bombing or even a sniper attack was hugely significant. The insurgents’ inability to kill the most famous figurehead of a “Crucifixer” faith that they still saw through the lenses of Medieval holy war spoke to a vastly reduced capacity for inflicting terrorism even in the Sunni heartland of the former caliphate. The very notion that the “infidel” Bishop of Rome would be able to hold mass on the soil of the Dawla (albeit with a heavy Iraqi Army and police presence) would have been inconceivable to the triumphant ISIS jihadists who blew up Christian churches and killed and enslaved local Christians just four years earlier.

But, by the spring of 2021, the real focus for ISIS had clearly shifted from its natal territory in Syraq, where its government and frontal fighting force was shattered from 2014 to 2019, to more fertile grounds in sub-Saharan Africa. There, bold ISIS-affiliated terror groups took advantage of weak security forces, porous borders, poverty, and easy access to weapons to wage increasingly bold attacks from the Chad Basin, where the ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) continued to wreak havoc, to Mozambique on the east Swahili coast. There ISIS created a new front for jihad known as Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). Northern Mozambique’s natural gas-rich province of Cabo Delgado in particular proved to be fertile ground for the expansion of the ISIS affiliate ISCAP, also known as al-Shabab (The

<sup>158</sup> “Pope Francis calls for hope over hatred amid ruins of Mosul church”, Washington Post, March 7, 2021.

Youth) or al-Sunnah wa Jamaah (People of the Community), which was formed in October 2017.

It was in the fall of 2017 that local Muslims, who had been indoctrinated by a radical cleric, attacked a local police station with machetes, hacked the police to death, and called for the enforcement of shariah law. The group declared its allegiance to the new caliph, al-Qurayshi, in 2019 and armed itself with captured mortars and RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades). While there was no central command-and-control from the ISIS leadership in Iraq, which was more focused on survival than dispatching the sort of support it had once sent to its Libyan wilayet, the Mozambican jihadists gained notoriety by adopting the caliphate's flag and, tragically, its atavistic lust for slaughter. A South African mercenary who led a unit fighting against ISCAP reported:

“These guys are different. What they do to the people they capture and kill I have never seen anywhere in Africa, and I have been in a lot of places in Africa. When you mutilate people after you kill them, you cut their bodies in half, you skin them, you cut their heads off and then you cut their limbs off...the brutality is unbelievable”.<sup>159</sup>

In August 2020, ISCAP/Shabab surprised the government by launching a bold offensive. They defeated the Mozambique Defence Armed Forces and took over the northern town of Mocimboa da Praia, which then became its self declared ISIS wilayet capital. The ISIS jihadists followed this up by capturing several islands in the Indian Ocean in September and burned hotels for international tourists on them. This increasingly aggressive group then forced over 700,000 civilians to flee its terrorism (including beheading of children) and scorched earth tactics in spring of 2021. The Biden administration designated the group a FTO (Foreign Terrorist Organization) and

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<sup>159</sup> “Mass beheadings and vast untapped wealth: Inside the mysterious Islamist insurgency sweeping Mozambique”. Yahoo News. April 2, 2021.

dispatched Green Berets to help train Mozambican Marines to fight the group that exploited local poverty and inequity related to lucrative French exploitation of gas resources worth billions. One analysis said of the ISIS group that threatened the French company Total's massive investment in Mozambique's north near the town of Palma, the largest investment in LNG in Africa:

“This is no rag-tag bunch of disorganized youths. This is a trained and determined force that has captured and held one town and is now sustaining a battle for a very strategic center. They have called into question the entire LNG (liquified natural gas) investment which was supposed to bring Mozambique major economic growth over many years”.

The ISIS Shabab fighters later succeeded in ambushing a convoy of foreign workers fleeing from Total's LNG natural gas site adjacent to Palma, destroying 10 trucks in it, and killing number of evacuees in April 2021. The group also bragged that it had killed Christians in the carefully planned assault on Palma. After ten days of looting, Mozambican troops were able to liberate Palma from the jihadists who left behind destroyed banks, businesses and government buildings.

In a sign of just how resilient global ISIS-style jihadism remained, despite the collapse of the caliphate, on March 28th 2021, the very day that a civilian flotilla of boats evacuated another group of foreign workers from the al-Shabab ISCAP assault on Palma, two jihadists, a newly wed couple, blew themselves up at the gate of a Catholic church in the Indonesian town of Makassar injuring 14 Christians celebrating Palm Sunday. Thus the ISIS mayhem continued in the far flung lands of the caliphate's wilayets even as the core group continued to fan the smoldering flames from their remote redoubts in northern Iraq.

## **The Fires of Jihad Have Been Tampered, but Not Extinguished**

It can also be assumed that ISIS lone wolves, or perhaps surviving member of the Caliphate hiding out on the mountains of northern Iraq, have taken notes on how easily a far-less murderously dedicated mob of Trump supporters was able to breach the sacred heart of America's democracy and come within feet of highest legislative body in the land of the "Great Satan". In the ISIS heartlands of the Middle East there are also still thousands of Sunni jihadists who believe in attacking foreign infidels and divine returns to power. For them the Capitol will have gained greater significance after January 6th as a symbolic target.

Among those diehards who vowed to continue the anti-Western, anti-Shiia jihad was Mohaned, a 31 year old Iraqi ISIS member captured near Mosul. He stated, «Even if [ISIS] loses Mosul and Raqqa, they will be present in other places. The caliphate will not be destroyed". While the defeat of the state destroyed the infrastructure in Raqqa and Manbij, Syria for dispatching terrorist cells to Europe and "force multipliers" to places like Libya, the seething fury stemming from America's global jihad-igniting 2003 inversion of Sunni rule and Assad regime slaughter of Sunnis in Syria ISIS lives on in the hearts of many "soldiers of the Caliphate".

Having been revived in the fateful summer of 2014 in the common imagination of the jihadists, the dream of an "enduring and ever expanding" Sunni military theocracy based on the memory of the Abbasids still burns bright in the minds of the fanatics like Mohaned. Thousands of insurgents, affiliate members across the globe, and certainly a small number of self-radicalized armchair jihadists (like the ones who attacked in Britain and France in 2020 and Austria in 2021) have had their imaginations fired by al-Baghdadi's bold quest to build a modern caliphate and calls for Muslims to wage do-it-yourself terrorism. Many of these devotees continue to believe in what the

Dawla stood for. Among them there are certain to be lone wolves (or cells like the one disrupted in Germany in the spring of 2020) who feel the farz (religious duty) to lash out at the “infidel” countries in the Dar al-Harb (The Land of War) that expunged their utopian theocracy in the Middle East.

Until the fires of rage ignited by Zarqawi and his successor al-Baghdadi are fully extinguished by addressing the underlying causes of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and Syria, the bloody flames of terrorism that were set ablaze by the Americans’ 2003 toppling of Iraq’s centuries-old Sunni rule will continue to burn. Despite the loss of its empire in the sand, it seems likely that the fire storm of what can best be called “ISISism” will continue to be stoked by self-radicalized fanatics, battle hardened “franchisers”, and desert or jungle jihadists who will fulfill Caliph al-Baghdadi’s hate-filled command, “Turn the nights of the unbelievers into days. Wreak havoc in their land...and make their blood flow as rivers”.

For a history of the rise and initial repulses of ISIS see Brian Glyn Williams’ Counter Jihad. The American Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria (University of Pennsylvania Press 2018).

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## **Military and Strategic Adaptation Mechanisms in the “Post-Caliphate” Phase**

This chapter discusses the strategic, intellectual, and military transformations that took place in ISIS during the phase after the fall of its state in Iraq and Syria, as well as the impact of that on the rest of the organization’s branches around the world. It raises the question: Will the military collapse of ISIS in its capital and homeland lead to its global end? And will it lead to the weakness of branches and local groups scattered here and there that have announced allegiance to ISIS and follow its approach? The experts, here, are also researching the mechanisms ISIS uses to adapt to the current phase. They discuss the outcomes of many global security phenomena associated with ISIS, such as lone wolves, especially in Europe, the US, and many countries of the world. They also discuss the fate of the transformations brought about by ISIS, such as online recruitment and mass migrations of youth to areas controlled by the organization and groups loyal to it.

Brian Williams, Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, discusses the organization’s development since the caliphate stage, from the killing of its leadership to the post-caliphate stage. He touches on the factors and conditions that affect the group’s effectiveness and capabilities, as well as the impact of the caliph’s killing on ISIS and its symbolic image and political and media message.

The researchers and experts then analyze, in their comments on the paper, the status of ISIS in many areas, especially in Africa, which is seeing the rise of local groups associated with the organization. They debate the conditions and reasons for its rise and fall, as well as its future prospects in its original homeland and in the areas where its followers are distributed.

## Discussion

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### **Hassan Abu Haniyeh**

I generally agree with what Professor Brian put forward in his paper, and add that ISIS has shifted from a state of centralization to decentralization. It relinquished spatial or geographic control, not of its own will of course, but rather after the presence of coalition forces with the participation of more than 80 countries, as well as local forces—in partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on the Syrian side, and with Iraqi forces, Peshmerga, and other branches in Iraq. There are also many alliances in Africa, such as the G5 Sahel, the alliance around Lake Chad, and the presence of other forces in the latest ISIS province in Mozambique. Certainly, ISIS has shifted from wars for spatial control to wars of attrition and gangs. It was a strategy announced even before the organization's 2017 fall by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as al-Adnani—the so-called desert war. It is another return to developing the desert, as ISIS did initially during the first period of American occupation (2006-2010), when it isolated itself in the Anbar desert and created significant infrastructure there. ISIS was aware in early 2017, and conducted the desert war. Consequently, we saw a challenge to SDF and Iraqi security forces that raised the question: Where did the ISIS weapons go? The answer is that the organization moved huge amounts of weapons. So, looking at its tactics, we conclude that it has relied on economy in the use of military force since the fall of the last pocket in Baghouz in March 2019. It has also economized the use of monetary funds, and maintains its strategic stockpile in vast areas it built underground over the course of years. ISIS invested the funds that were available to it in the billions and worked to conceal them.

We know that these areas are vast. We are talking, in Iraq and Syria for example, about extensive areas in the Anbar desert and the Syrian Badia. In 2014, ISIS called this shared space the Euphrates Province, combining the eastern Iraqi side with the Syrian side in al-Bukamal. These are very large areas, covering large parts of Iraq and Syria, and it is not easy to pursue ISIS with traditional forces. Highly professional counter-insurgency forces are needed that are not available in either Iraq or Syria. We also know that efforts have been carried out by the international coalition, specifically the US, which possesses the intelligence capacity and drones that are not available to local armies. We saw show operations by Iraqi forces to film, but there are no results on the ground in reality. ISIS has shifted from a caliphate to an organization, a cohesive bureaucratic organization. We know that once al-Baghdadi was killed a structure was appointed and restored directly by its leaders, notably Ibrahim al-Hashimi, Abdullah Gargash, and Said al-Mawla (a veteran security expert with long experience in the organization). Even when al-Baghdadi was still around, al-Mawla was the most dangerous man in the organization, and the elimination of al-Baghdadi may have opened up other spaces from a strategic perspective.

Since 2014-2015, ISIS has invested in other areas – in Khorasan Province for example. We are now witnessing an American withdrawal operation in September. Moreover, the US Chief of Staff directly stated that there are no assurances about the return of the Taliban after American withdrawal. This is certainly not unusual, as it is well-known. This means the return once more of ISIS-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), based in Nangahar in southeast Afghanistan, and which has operations in several provinces. It will be more comfortable, since the Taliban's priority will be clashing with the Afghan government, which will leave open large areas for ISIS. For example, looking at the map

Brian is talking about in Africa, we have seen how since 2015 ISIS established provinces in the Sahara and Sahel led by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, and how it extended in these four countries, from Chad to Mali to Niger to Burkina Faso.

We know the turmoil there in Boko Haram, in the northwest of the ISIS West Africa Province, and that ISIS was able to eliminate even the opponent who pledged allegiance, Abubakar Shekau. It thus became the only group in the area around Lake Chad. The local forces working for the African Union in the international coalition and in the Sahara and the Sahel, as well as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, are unable to combat the organization. The most recently established ISIS province is Central Africa Province, which includes the Congo and Mozambique. We saw two months ago how ISIS carried out an attack and took control of the Palma region in northern Mozambique, and how it was able to establish alliances with local movements. So the map of the organization's spread is extending. It still has branches in Southeast Asia, as well as Sinai Province.

ISIS has become truly intercontinental. It now has more kinetic ability. When it had territorial control over land, it was besieged and suffering from problems in administration, governance, and population. Now, it is unencumbered. I believe there is no going back. Most importantly, this situation is poised at the intersection of geopolitics and terrorism, in the sense that counter-terrorism is not the priority of countries there now. It is perhaps in third place. And the US is withdrawing towards Asia and the Pacific, which will give the organization freer range of action. So, ISIS is not being cautious in Iraq out of weakness, but is rather waiting to understand the nature of the conflict between the Shia militias, and to see what the result of US withdrawal will be. It is fully aware that these forces will withdraw, and that there will be a vacuum. As we have seen, when ISIS wants to

carry out attacks for show, it does so easily, as we saw with its attack in an attempt on Lake Chad over the course of months, and the loss of hundreds of soldiers. Then ISIS regained control as well in the north and in the central Sahara and the Sahel. I think that what this proves is that the forces in these countries are suffering from problems of a political, ideological, social, and economic nature. They do not have the capability without the presence of French, European, or American forces in Africa. Their situation becomes very fragile.

We know the status of these fragile areas, and the motives there are not always ideological. Estimating the effective strength of ISIS is a difficult task for researchers. So far, the media has distorted the picture. After all these years, most people cannot imagine how six military divisions collapsed in Mosul, as well as the security forces and Peshmerga forces. Nor can they imagine how ISIS, with 300 fighters, extended control over all these vast areas, and were heading towards Erbil and Baghdad until the intervention of American forces in September 2014 and subsequent launch of Operation Inherent Resolve in November.

So, what does this mean? It is a tragic situation. These countries are fragile at the military and security level, despite all claims to the contrary. They are strong when they can turn to police forces—meaning suppressing the demonstrators in Freedom Square in Baghdad—but are unable to confront ISIS tactics of terror and violence. ISIS is waiting for the right moment, no more and no less. It is awaiting the outcome of this whole process. In the case of Egypt, for example, there has been something that is puzzling researchers: even though ISIS has just a simple organization in Sinai, why is it that one of the strongest armies in the Middle East has been unable to eliminate them there?

Even the Israelis who were on the Cairo Security Council of the National Research Center were perplexed. Later, they realized that

these forces are not trained and ready for such tactics. The reality here is the bitter fact that these dictatorial states are militarily fragile but domestically strong in terms of the police. I believe, therefore, that ISIS's easy, rapid expansion in Africa or other fragile areas was not only due to the organization's strength, but was also due to the weakness and fragility of the local regimes at the military and security levels.

Brian also mentioned that ISIS was allying with local movements, whether Boko Haram, the Democratic Alliance, or Ahlu Sunnah, all of which are local groups. ISIS does something simple: it transfers its strategic and tactical expertise to these movements. These groups had been operating primitively before pledging allegiance to ISIS, which has military expertise and experts.

It is important to point out here that, throughout its history, the ISIS military council was led by former Iraqi army officers, starting with Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi and not ending with Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and now Gulmurod Khalimov, as well as senior military personnel such as Muhammad al-Jaburi and others. Therefore, it has the expertise to pass on to these movements which were working in a very primitive way and could do nothing, while they are now establishing a system and military formations with a clear strategy.

### **Abbas Saleh**

I agree with what was stated in Professor Williams' paper to a very large extent. I am trying to adapt the concepts set out in the paper and apply them to what is happening in Africa. Indeed, ISIS has significantly expanded, as we now know. To a large extent, the ISIS caliphate involves occupying territory, but in Africa it has shifted to the virtual world mentioned in the first session, as it tries to maintain its propaganda apparatus and thus reach local communities in Africa. Propaganda promoting the organization is produced in the local language. We also know that the organization is spreading in Muslim

East Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and northern Mozambique. Narratives are addressed in Swahili that address the urban coast, which includes more than one country in East Africa, as well as West Africa and the Greater Sahel. Materials are produced in the local language, such as Hausa and the like.

Let me go back quickly and confirm what Abu Haniyeh said, that ISIS is indeed expanding in Africa, but that it has expanded through local partnerships. ISIS in the Greater Sahel region found local jihadist organizations. It found that these organizations suffer from problems related to marginalization, lack of development, and attrition. With local grievances, ISIS was able to harness these local resources to build relationships with local organizations.

ISIS has also appeared in the Greater Sahel region, the Lake Chad region, and East Africa. It has built upon historical memory. In the Lake Chad region, there are historical caliphates. There was the Sokoto Caliphate of Hausa language speakers, which collapsed at the hands of the British, as well as the Masina Caliphate in present-day central Mali, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

In Brian's paper, he described the vacuums left by the loose borders of nation-states in that region. We know ISIS has expanded in Syria and Iraq by exploiting the Badia and the like, but in the Sahel, it has capitalized on the national borders and was able to establish transnational networks to a large extent. ISIS is also now operating in the Greater Sahara, in the area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. International reports have indicated that ISIS and jihadists vying for influence and control in the Greater Sahel region crossed from the other two states on the coast in the west of the Gulf of Guinea region and the Ivory Coast. We therefore believe that although ISIS still belongs to its historical region—the region of its birth in Iraq and Syria—it is significantly expanding in Africa.

I add here to what was said by researcher Maher Farghali. I believe that ISIS, or the provinces subordinate to ISIS in this region in Africa, are almost completely absent from these discussions. I attribute this to two reasons, even though ISIS in Africa is generally expanding on more than one axis and in more than one province.

The first reason is the absence of jurisprudential authorities, in the sense that ISIS in Syria and Iraq, which lasted for more than three years, was largely dominated by Arab groups, leaders, and jurisprudential figures. There are no leaders or jurisprudential authorities who are known and familiar to us among these groups, and they are completely absent in the African provinces.

The second reason is that most of the provinces that are affiliated with ISIS, or African organizations that have pledged allegiance to ISIS, are recent provinces fighting with the organization. But there are experiences, or historical memories, that have underpinned caliphates in this region, such as the Sokoto and Masina Caliphates. ISIS fighters from these provinces are trying to connect with the organization to benefit from its resources, capabilities, and infrastructure, as well as to restore the historical memory of these societies.

### **Husein al-Sarayreh**

The Islamic State was initially limited to Iraq and the Levant. This idea now exists in Africa and in regions where there is a lack of security. So we must ask the following questions: Is the spread virtual first? Or are the factors the same everywhere? Or are we talking about anywhere we do not find a clear and strict policy towards these groups, where they emerge and proliferate?

### **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

In recent studies of radicalization trends in Jordan following the collapse of ISIS in Iraq and Syria through the Jordanian State Security Court cases and their details, there has been a change in the previous

trends. Previously, most Jordanian fighters were going to Iraq and Syria: thousands are known to have joined ISIS there. But in cases from 2018 to 2021, most of those who tried to go join extremist organizations were going to Khorasan Province – that is, to Afghanistan.

What I want to get at here is that: If ISIS loses one place, it shifts its weight to another. We notice now that it is in Africa because of the political, economic, and security conditions as well as internal crises that help ISIS find a foothold. It is true that it largely lost Libya, but is now present in the African Sahara, East Africa, and Central Africa, with a presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well.

The other important issue is that when ISIS was formed and moved from the Iraqi to the global situation in the conflict over global jihadism, we were faced with more than one level. The first level or perspective lies in the division of jihadist groups between ISIS and al-Qaeda. There is now a competition between ISIS and al-Qaeda, after ISIS collapsed and shifted to decentralization, as the researchers mentioned.

To what extent will ISIS be able to maintain its global profile after being plunged into the sectarian issue in Iraq? One hypothesis is that ISIS shifted from the real caliphate to the virtual caliphate, meaning that it is no longer a caliphate present on the ground, even though it holds onto that name. It has tried to maintain the caliphate in the virtual world so that its global nature remains as an alternative to the organization's or the caliphate's retreat on the ground.

The other important point is that, at a certain stage, ISIS became a global virus, a global message like lone wolves spread across the world, in Australia, in Europe, in North Africa. Everywhere, ISIS was able to turn into a message. With a mobile device—the iPhone—anyone could join ISIS. This was a paradigm shift in jihadist recruitment methods. Historically, al-Qaeda had been an elite organization. Anyone wanting to join needed to pass through a stage of preparation, selection,

choosing, and sifting. But ISIS is a horizontal organization. This is the shift, the dangerous leap that took place after ISIS. It allowed everyone to become part of its global mission. Al-Qaeda globalized its organization when it shifted the ideology of conflict from fighting the Arab regimes to fighting America. But ISIS globalized jihad when it changed the recruitment and propaganda methods. There is the idea of merging the near and far enemy. Note what Abbas mentioned, that at the same time ISIS used a global language or message, it used local languages. It addresses people in French, Kurdish, and English.

This globalized organization today is the global message that has come into being. The question is: does it still exist as a global message? Will it be received? For example, today it has declined since 2018, and there are no lone wolves or operations in the previous sense. But if ISIS emerges with strength in Africa, will it be with the same strength as in Iraq and Syria? Would the lone wolves phenomenon return as it was? Would the state ISIS formed return? Was it a fleeting historical moment that has ended? Or is it developing, entering a new phase? These are the questions that we as specialized researchers need to answer.

In my view, ISIS has entered a phase there is no going back from. That is, it can return, the lone wolves can return, but the previous phase will not return.

### **Maher Farghali**

There are many intense discussions within ISIS, most notably Abu Walid al-Sahrawi's dialogue in al-Naba about the discussions that took place in Mali, the Sahel, and the Sahara region with al-Qaeda affiliates. There was also the latest publication by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the leader of ISIS in West Africa, in which he discusses the killing of Abubakar Shekau for extremism or fanaticism—from the point of view of the publication—leveling many accusations against him of

killing ordinary Muslims and others. These discussions are present within ISIS. In the case of Abubakar Shekau's killing, this came in a competitive phase, or in the context of conflicts and disagreements over leadership. But these discussions were based on intellectual foundations.

### **Marwan Shehadeh**

ISIS has not finished. It is waiting for an opportunity. The subjective and objective circumstances that helped ISIS to expand, extend, and grow its capabilities and strength are still latent and present, as well as the political failure of the Iraqi and Syrian states, among other factors. Despite the existence of the Sunni constituency, as the researchers from Iraq mentioned, it is no longer functional. This constituency has become weak, and does not have the capacity and effectiveness to bring about change or even defend itself. Therefore, I understand that the leaders of the Islamic State, ISIS, may realize that they do not rely much on the so-called Sunni base. Experience has taught them that it is weak, unable to defend itself. Because of its weakness, it cannot clash with Shia militias, but rather tries to win their favor, or at least avoid suffering harm at their hands.

As for the Sahel and Africa, I learned about the reality during my field visits to the Mauritanian and Malian Sahel region in Africa with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). I wrote a book about the stance of armed Islamist groups towards international organizations, given the need I perceived and the vacuum of knowledge and practice in this subject. The book, entitled *Messengers Under the Hail of Bullets*, was translated by MSF and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) into English, French, and Persian. Overall, there are active developments and forces in Africa. It is true that al-Qaeda does not strictly or literally exist. However, there is a new group, part of whose components are al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM),

and Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in West Africa, as well as the Masina Liberation Front, al-Mourabitoun, and other Ansar Dine groups. These groups have formed what is known as the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin. This group is led by Iyad Ghaly, with the head of the Masina Liberation Front as deputy. This new formation was perhaps formed to confront the expansion and extension of ISIS and its branches in West Africa and the Sahel, because leaders headed by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi are among those who carry jihadist thought and some are tied to global and local leaders. They started to realize fully that if they remained fragmented, under many names, and not unified, that they would dissolve and fade away as happened in Iraq and Syria, where al-Qaeda was weakened and potentially disappeared in the form of the Guardians of Religion organization. So they established this grouping, or merger.

I believe that these groups now have a strong presence in Mali, with pockets of the Islamic State in Niger, Lake Chad, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and a greater presence in Mali particularly. This situation has created a competition in reality, because the space is vast and the organizations have acceptance in the African support base made up of different ethnicities. These include the Berbers, whom Iyad Ghaly represents, and the Fulani, an ethnicity represented by Amadou, the leader of the Masina Liberation Front, as well as the Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad group. In other words, there is a component of the ethnic fabric in the Sahel that has close ties with the tribes scattered in Mali.

Disputes have occurred since the beginning of the formation of the West Africa Province between the ISIS-recognized leadership of Boko Haram and the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. The latter was described as insane by the jihadists, and therefore, ISIS decided during the time of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to remove him due to his fanaticism and focus on bloodshed. Here, the so-called Nigerian Questions emerged, in which

Abu Malek Nashwan, a Sharia Council official at one time, responded to issues related to the targeting of civilians and schools, as well as on the basis of carrying government documents. Do you give a truce and safe conduct? Among other questions of abductions and operations that have been problematic for members of ISIS, Nashwan tried to resolve these issues and link them to Sharia restrictions, so as not to expand their use. What happened in Africa is that Abubakar Shekau continued in his rebellion against the Islamic State and against the sons of Abu Yusuf, the founder of Ahl al-Sunna li-Dawa wal-Jihad, the group known as Boko Haram, which means “Western education is forbidden”. Abu Musab al-Barnawi, one of Abu Yusuf’s sons, also wrote a book, *Cutting out the Tumor of the Khawarij of Shekau by the Allegiance Pledge of the People of Nobility*, responding to the questioning of the legitimacy of the sons of the founder of Boko Haram. In general, Abubakar Shekau was killed because of these disagreements and reasons.

In Africa, by the way, despite the deep disagreement between the global Salafi-jihadist view of al-Qaeda and its extensions and affiliates represented by Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin and the ISIS branches in Africa, they have so far not clashed with one another despite the disinformation and accusations of nonbelief, unlike what happened in Iraq and Syria.

### **Jodor Jalit**

There is an ISIS presence in Latin America. If we only look at the geographical spread of the organization on this continent in terms of its physical presence, we are missing an important aspect: security. Right-wing political powers in Argentina have always used that aspect to prioritize the fight against the presence of ISIS, using it to develop new security policies. The most important question is what if the so-called lone wolves carry out terrorist attacks, as previously happened against the Israeli embassy and Israeli Jewish Association in 1992 and

1994, respectively? This has created concerns among Latin American countries, most notably Brazil, Chile, and Peru, about the possibility of ISIS terrorist operations. For example, the Deputy Secretary of the Minister of Security in Argentina argued that the organization was actually training its fighters on Argentinian soil in 2016. Another important incident occurred when one Twitter user threatened the Argentinian president, sending posts as a member of ISIS. The US-based nonprofit organization Judicial Watch also points to the presence of ISIS (it has a precedent) in Mexico and the real threat it poses there. This calls for the positions of all organizations there to be unified and to denounce the presence of ISIS.

Right-wing organizations there are against Arabs and Islam in the first place. They have employed this in their political speeches. It is true that ISIS has become a global presence because of the means of communication easily available to it in the virtual world, as Abu Rumman mentioned. But this fact has been used by the far right in Latin America as a security threat in those countries, in line with US foreign policy.

### **Hassan Abu Haniyeh**

Al-Qaeda's classification as an elite organization is not only at the leadership level, but also at the individual level. However, ISIS is elitist at the leadership level. Nobody can make it into ISIS leadership, no matter how far he advances. That is because there are more closed internal circles of leadership. When it comes to recruitment, ISIS is an organization of common people. Nevertheless, members do not even enter the media, research, or scientific bodies, nor the narrow security circle within the organization.

The other issue is the support base. There is a clear confusion of misunderstanding on the subjects of the popular support base. Here, we are talking about the many circumstances, conditions, causes,

and grievances arising in a context that becomes an environment for drawing people in. Because ISIS is, in the end, a military organization, it attracts a limited group: young people. It is not concerned about older age groups. It fundamentally addresses youth aged 16 to 24. Like any successful company, it wants to know who it is reaching. These young people have a different perception. Just because there's a popular base for the organization does not mean that the organization is accepted among people in general. In fact, there is no acceptance of ISIS ideas at this level anywhere!

The idea is that there is a misunderstanding. This is what happened after the Arab Spring. Bin Laden tried to use the populist cause through the tactics or concepts of Ansar al-Sharia. But in fact, al-Qaeda wants to reach people with its beliefs. It has utopian visions and wants to push people hard into jihad for the Ummah. It wants people to be convinced of this and to undertake jihad according to its perspective, and then establish Islamic rule, or a state or a caliphate.

On the other hand, ISIS does not identify with peoples, because it is a military security organization. So it raises the issue of sectarianism, in the sense that there is a sect (which is still a sect of my Ummah), the mere existence of this sect that possesses might and strength and that might want to impose its rule. This is not the case with the utopian al-Qaeda, which wants to impose global jihad. This is the secret of ISIS success in suppressing various local movements, as in Africa, Southeast Asia, or anywhere. It allies with groups with goals of control, not fighting to inflict damage on the enemy (nikaya). So, the approach is different this time.

In the first phase of ISIS, in the period of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, it adopted the stance of combining the near enemy—local governments—and the fight against the US. It pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, and it grew closer to it; the gap was bridged. But in subsequent stages, it

strayed from the al-Qaeda line, drawing jihadist movements towards its ideology. The irony is that al-Qaeda later, after the Arab Spring revolutions and counterrevolutions, was the one that moved towards ISIS and started to take control of territories it had a large presence in. This happened in Mukalla, in Yemen, and northern Mali. So al-Qaeda grew closer to the ISIS approach, not the other way around.

In general, ISIS seems more pragmatic, and has a clearer strategic vision than al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda still appeals to utopia, and wants to carry out nikaya attacks. But there are notable shifts in al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks. It does not want to carry out such attacks at all in the future, and wants to focus on local affairs. This makes the future of ISIS more dangerous, and makes the organization a possible candidate for the rest of the movements to join with in the future. Its approach to achieving its goals is more efficient than al-Qaeda, which is confused between its ideological rhetoric and the reality of its retreat.

### **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

There are concepts and keywords through which we realize how ISIS has been able to recruit large numbers of young people. The objective conditions remain, but the results may change. ISIS did not create the conditions, and the result of those conditions is the result of reality. Responding to reality is an answer to reality.

The absence of democracy in the Arab world, the political stalemate, and feelings of frustration, disappointment, and marginalization among the youth: all this has led them to search for an alternative. Note how Abu Haniyeh mentioned that ISIS spread, became famous, and broke out after the counterrevolution in the Arab world, after the Syrian situation collapsed, after the army in Egypt intervened. It was clear that ISIS was investing well in these climates and conditions. The ISIS spokesman made more than one speech at that stage reflecting what we are talking about. He was telling the youth: Go on, look at

what democracy has led to. We have a project more important than democracy, more solid, more powerful.

I met with some young people in Jordan who were with ISIS during my research. I asked one the question: You are a cultured young man with a Ph.D., at a good economic level. What enticed you into the ISIS project? What drove you to accept this organization's behavior? The young man answered: The feeling that it—ISIS—has a clear and simple plan, without complication. It lays out the problem starkly and provides the answer.

What can we conclude from this young man's response is that ISIS has answers. If you were to discuss with Hassan Abu Haniyeh or Dr. Mohammad Azamat or Marwan Shehadeh, they would give you 3,000 answers. ISIS gives you one answer. It gives you one vision. It is necessary to project that onto the cruel conditions and feelings of oppression and marginalization among the youth. ISIS presents them with an answer. It is a sharp answer, yes. But it is easy and simple. That explains a lot. ISIS is the result of injustice, or capitalizes on and exploits injustice. It exploits the contexts, exploits the existing conditions, and benefits from them. It is true that ISIS fell, was overthrown. But the conditions that produced ISIS still exist in most Arab countries.

I am currently working on a study of Jordan after the ISIS collapse, and the impact of that collapse on the jihadist current in Jordan. In this study, we test the hypothesis that says ISIS lured young people with its slogan "the Islamic State is enduring and expanding". But the state ended, did not endure, and did not expand. It was logically assumed that the organization's ability to recruit would decline, that the youth's admiration for it would decline, and that the propaganda would decline. So is this what will actually happen?

It is complicated. But it is evident that ISIS is still able to draw in young people. In the State Security Court in Jordan today, for example,

there are dozens of cases related to people influenced by ISIS. Now that the routes to Iraq and Syria have been closed, there are those who try to reach Afghanistan and other countries. This means the issue is not connected with the organization so much as the relationship of local societies with one another. It is connected to the individual's relationship to the state, the individual's sense of belonging, and the extent to which there are areas and spaces for youth and communities to express themselves peacefully. So long as these paths are closed, the youth will seek out other paths.

There are two key phrases to understanding ISIS. The first is mentioned in our book *The Islamic State Organization*, and that is that ISIS is the legitimate son of the Arab authoritarian regime. It is a natural product of this system. Policies such as these do not produce moderation, but extremism. The second key phrase is that of the well-known French researcher Olivier Roy, that there is an Islamization of radicalism. This means that the conditions that produce feelings of anger, marginalization, and radical tension exist, but that these jihadist groups have given them an Islamic ideology! This brings us to a conclusion reached by the Lebanese journalist Hazem al-Amin: Look for the sociological before the ideological. Search for the sociological and social conditions before looking for the ideological conditions.



## **Chapter Four**

# **The Human Legacy of ISIS: Returnees, Detainees and Rehabilitation Programs**



# Al-Hol Camp: Tracking Data and Projecting Solutions (Policy Paper)



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(June 2021)

## **Preface:**

Al-Hol camp poses a complex problem for dealing with the families and remaining ideological adherents of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in terms of their reintegration into society. The Iraqi government previously dealt with groupings of ISIS families inside Iraq during the period between the liberation of ISIS-occupied areas in 2017 and the end of 2020. Those groups underwent a long review process, including complete isolation from society and a long security investigation by multiple agencies. Then, the accused were referred to the judiciary while the rest were integrated into displacement camps and returned to their areas. Accordingly, none of the groupings that included ISIS families remain in Iraq at present.

It is clear that the ISIS families that remained in Iraq mostly included individuals who felt less risk to themselves, while the implicated ideological families fled outside the borders. Al-Hol camp was one of the largest of those gatherings. The method of dealing with this case may provide important lessons for dealing with other similar situations, in Syria for example.

### **Location and Founding Conditions (Review and Introduction):**

Al-Hol is a town located in eastern al-Hasakah Governorate in northeastern Syria. The administrative center of al-Hol district, it consists of 22 municipal units with a population of 50,000 according to the 2016 census.<sup>160</sup>

The town lies about 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of al-Hasakah city, on the southern bank of Atallah Valley, where there is a spring called Ain al-Hol. Located south of the town, the spring still has water while the valley has dried up. Among the neighboring villages is Sheikh Ma'ad village, which contains the tomb of Sheikh Ma'ad, lies to the north, on the other side of the valley.<sup>161</sup>

A crossroads is located north of the town, connecting the center of the governorate with the Iraqi border. The northeastern road leads to Tell Hamis and the Rabia border crossing, and the southeastern road runs toward Mount Sinjar, passing through the town's southeastern side, up to the Umm Jereis station border crossing. The town is also surrounded by military bases formerly used by the Syrian army.

In early 1991, during the first Gulf War, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established a camp for Iraqi refugees near the town of al-Hol in the eastern al-Hasakah countryside in coordination with the Syrian government. The camp was closed

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160 Central Bureau of Statistics, "Population Bulletin: al-Hol District", Kachaf, June 6, 2020, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.kachaf.com/wiki.php?n=5edb0a1f5809e830e87b5f4d>.

161 "Al-Hol Camp", Wikipedia, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki>.

after a number of years when it was no longer needed, then reopened in 2002 and continued until its closing in 2010.<sup>162</sup>

However, the People's Protection Units (YPG) takeover of al-Hol on 13 November 2015 prompted the United Nations (UN) to re-equip the camp to receive displaced Syrians and Iraqi refugees fleeing the Mosul battles. Since then, the camp has been guarded by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Internal Security Forces (Asayish), as well as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) intelligence. According to the security procedures in place, local women are forbidden from exiting or entering the camp without written permission from the camp administration and the company of the Asayish. Foreigners are not allowed to leave the camp except in emergency cases or with the aim of handing them over to their countries.<sup>163</sup>

Al-Hol camp is made up of six sections, each of which consists of a number of sectors. Displaced Syrians with no ISIS ties are in one section and Iraqi refugees in another. Syrian families linked to ISIS are in their own section, while the families of non-Syrian ISIS members (foreigners and Arabs) are in two sections: one for Europeans and one for other nationalities.<sup>164</sup>

The families of Iraqis affiliated with ISIS are distributed in the first, second, third, and seventh sectors, while the families of Syrians are in the fifth, sixth, and eighth sectors. The fourth sector has a mixture of Syrian and Iraqi families. The camp administration gathers foreign women and their children in their own section.<sup>165</sup>

162 For more, see: "al-Hol Camp, the Last Refuge for ISIS Members and Women", BBC Arabic, February 21, 2019, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://bbc.in/2RF9HWq>

163 "Syrian Democratic Forces Take Control of al-Hol Town", RT Online, November 13, 2015, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://arabic.rt.com/news/800272>.

164 Orabi Abdul-Hayy Orabi, "al-Hol Camp: Between Mismanagement and the Dangers of Extremism", Jusoor Center for Studies, September 1, 2020, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://jusoor.co/details>.

165 Ibid.

Iraqi refugees in al-Hol camp have been repeatedly subjected to violence and killing, highlighting the danger of extremist terrorist groups present in the camp and their impact on its residents. It also indicates that some Iraqi refugees oppose the attitudes, ideas, and methods of those terrorist groups, which puts their lives in danger.<sup>166</sup>

The current paper seeks to investigate the circumstances and conditions of the camp's residents, especially Iraqis, and to examine the challenges and risks of their return to Iraq. It intends to explore what projects, programs, and activities can guarantee their psychological, social, and ideological rehabilitation and integration. It also aims to produce a series of policy recommendations that can bridge the gap and be taken as a roadmap to resolve issues.

### **Al-Hol Camp (Data and Information):**

After the end of the Battle of Baghouz and the elimination of the terrorist ISIS organization, the men were transported to prisons and detention centers while the women and children under the age of 10 were moved to the al-Hol camp and Roj camp in al-Hasakah city. Children over the age of 12 were taken to the juvenile prison in the village of Tal Marouf, which belongs administratively to Qamishli city in Syria's far northeast. Al-Hol camp set up a special section for foreign women and their children from Western and Arab countries. At the time, there were around 10,734 individuals in the section, 3,177 of whom were women, while the rest were children under the age of 15.

Russia tops the list, with 2,010 women and children, alongside the Netherlands (50), Germany (160), Uzbekistan (458), Kazakhstan (640), Georgia (22), Azerbaijan (22), Tajikistan (404), Turkmenistan (640), and Ukraine (134). As for the number of Arab migrant women and their children, excluding Iraq, Morocco tops the list with 582

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<sup>166</sup> For more, see: "Iraqi Government: al-Hol Camp is a Breeding Ground for Terrorist Groups", RT Online, January 26, 2021, accessed 3/26/2021, [https://arabic.rt.com/middle\\_east/1196090](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1196090).

women and children, alongside: Egypt (377), Tunisia (251), Algeria (98), Somalia (56), Lebanon (29), Sudan (24), Libya (11), Palestine (8), Yemen (8), and 9 from other countries.<sup>167</sup>

The camp also contains, according to a report issued by Human Rights Watch, more than 30,000 Iraqis. The vast majority are female-headed households, often with many children. Some of them fled ISIS when it took control of parts of Iraq, and others lived under ISIS control in Syria until the battle to retake Baghouz, the last ISIS pocket in Syria, in early 2019.<sup>168</sup>

Another, seemingly more precise, classification of the camp's population indicates that the camp contains no fewer than 62,498 people. Among them are 8,286 Iraqi families (30,694 people) and 6,270 Syrian families (22,626 people), while the rest are approximately 2,677 families of European, Asian, African, and other nationalities (9,178 people).<sup>169</sup>

Al-Hol camp covers an area of approximately 2.41 square kilometers, with a total population of 62-69,000 displaced people and refugees, 92% of whom are women and children. The camp includes 13 educational facilities and 21 health facilities. The percentage of children ages 6-11 receiving an education is around 29%, while the percentage of children ages 12-17 receiving an education is around 18%.

The average family income is \$42 USD. Some 1.5% of residents have disabilities, 2.2% have chronic illnesses, and 20% of women are pregnant and nursing. There is one toilet for every 21 people.

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167 "Al-Hol Camp: Numbers, Statistics, and ISIS Members", Asharq al-Awsat, Issue 15091, March 23, 2020.

168 "Al-Hol Camp Angers the Mosul Street, Prompting Politicians to Make Decisions to Prevent a Crisis", Kirkuk Now, August 1, 2019, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://kirkuknow.com/ar/news/59861>.

169 "Amid International Silence, A Catastrophic Situation in al-Hol and Continuous Insecurity", Al Arabiya, January 8, 2021, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2021/01/08>.

Some 49% of the population have faced obstacles accessing healthcare, while 56% of families support themselves from work, savings, or selling items. About 58% of residents have faced housing-related problems, such as loss of security, lack of privacy, and poor-quality tents.



### The Camp's Security Situation:

Al-Hol camp poses a crisis that most of the world's countries are seeking to ignore in order to avoid the return of their citizens who joined or are suspected of belonging to ISIS. Crime is steadily increasing in the camp, which is described as the most dangerous camp in the world, a "time bomb" that includes hundreds of extremist women—wives of ISIS members—and their children. Thus, chaos and lawlessness are widespread.

There have been repeated incidents of stabbings, assassinations, and killings by extremist women who have formed the so-called “hisbah” in the camp, aiming to advocate and defend ISIS thought, monitor the implementation of religious duties, and hold accountable families or individuals who refuse to adhere to the duties or who depart from ISIS teachings. This group has also deliberately established educational workshops distributed across the camp’s sectors on different days of the week with the aim of instructing children in the principles of jihadist thought, especially the subject of loyalty and disavowal (al-wala wal-bara), which is the starting point toward violent extremism. They also adopt various methods to intimidate those who violate their instructions, such as burning the offenders’ tents, and in some cases even killing the targeted person. Additionally, escape and smuggling operations frequently take place in the camp, in tandem with significant neglect of the camp by its administration in light of the absence of practical and international solutions. This threatens to exacerbate the security situation once more, to the benefit of ISIS.

An extensive report published by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) following developments within the camp throughout 2020 indicated that the camp is experiencing catastrophic humanitarian conditions. SOHR documented the death of 209 people since the beginning of 2020, among them 95 children under the age of 18, as a result of poor health and living conditions, medicine and food shortages, and a severe healthcare shortage as a result of the inaction or inadequacy of international organizations, on top of assassinations and killings. With that, the number of those who have died in al-Hol camp from the beginning of 2019 to the present comes to about 694 people, including 521 children under 18. Children who died held various nationalities.<sup>170</sup>

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170 Ibid.

Chaos and insecurity continue through the escalation and continuation of killings by ISIS branches from different nationalities present in the camp. Al-Hol has seen 33 assassinations by various means and methods, involving some 21 male Iraq refugees, most of whom were collaborating with the Asayish, six women (one Russian, two Iraqis, and three Syrians), and six Syrian men, including a guard for a relief organization operating within the camp.<sup>171</sup>

The camp's administration is preparing to remove all Syrians in batches during the coming period, but about 16,000 of them are from areas controlled by the Syrian regime. This presents a major obstacle to their removal, as negotiations with the UN are underway to provide assurances that they will not be exposed to or pursued by the security services, especially as the vast majority of them are families of ISIS members.

A large number of those who recently left al-Hol camp for their areas have gone to camps within SDF territory in al-Hasakah. There are a number of reasons for this, but foremost is the fear of reprisals from the people of their areas, because they were the families of ISIS members. Additionally, many of them have had their homes destroyed in previous military operations.

On the other hand, and in the same context, since the beginning of 2020 the camp has seen around 30 escapes and attempted escapes by the Syrian and non-Syrian families of ISIS members. Most of the escapes were done in coordination between the families and guards and workers within the camp, while others were able to escape after bribing officials and guards.

Various sources have also reported incidents in which the Asayish opened fire directly upon camp residents. On 21 March 2019, for example, five displaced people were killed, including two children, by

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171 Ibid.

Asayish bullets fired to disperse a demonstration that came out in the camp in protest of the deteriorating humanitarian, health, and service situation. Some residents' testimonies also point to widespread harassment of women, who are subjected to daily harassment by Asayish forces, in addition to the exploitation of children in order to get them to provide information about their family and relatives.<sup>172</sup>

The security authorities recently discovered a network to forge identification documents for detainees in the camp to smuggle them out of it. Counterfeiting equipment, including stamps, laser color printers, and multiple models of documents from different nationalities were seized, and a detailed report posted on YouTube showed members of the network after their arrest. The incident clearly points to the means and methods by which detainees slip out and escape the camp, and to the possibility of them threatening the communities in which they will be located once more.<sup>173</sup>

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172 Orabi, "al-Hol Camp", 6.

173 For more, see the report: "Identification Document Forgery Network for Foreigners in al-Hol Camp Arrested", YouTube, October 20, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVr\\_zVCFbR8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVr_zVCFbR8).

### **Dangers of the Camp (Key Observations)<sup>174</sup>:**

1. Al-Hol camp is the most important incubator for the children of ISIS elements and its future leaders. It also brings together the broadest gathering of those impacted by ISIS thought in a single place, which did not happen even at the height of the group's power.
2. The camp contains approximately 40,000 children, who make up nearly two-thirds of those living in the camp. Most of them have lost their father or are orphans, and most were born or raised in ISIS-controlled areas and were subjected, to varying degrees, to its thought and policies before entering the camp. There, they have received intensive doses of this ideology, in circumstances that cannot be provided to the organization anywhere else in the world.
3. Escapes from the camp by ISIS-linked elements are periodically recorded. These operations take place as a result of rampant corruption within the security system responsible for guarding and administering the camp, as members of this system smuggle the camp's residents in exchange for money.
4. The camp's residents present a political and legal problem for the countries to which they belong, approximately 60 states. Allowing their return would imply transferring security risks to these countries, and entering into legal labyrinths to deal with children who do not have any identification documents, as well as other issues.
5. It appears that, in the foreseeable future, the most likely situation is that the camp will remain as it is. This option provides a solution to the crisis of the countries to which foreigners living in the camp belong. It also represents a much-needed card for the Kurdish AANES to play, as its continued administration of the camp has

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174 Orabi, "al-Hol Camp", 4.

become an international issue considering it is the “guard of the most dangerous camp in the world”. The Syrian regime also desires to play this role, which would help it to rehabilitate itself internationally, benefitting from its long experience in detaining Western undesirables and receiving detainees on behalf of these states. The regime would look to take control of the camp if the Kurdish administration were to collapse, as the result of American withdrawal, for example, or as part of an agreement with it.

6. As the current conditions in the camp continue, and extremist groups within it continue to spread their ideas among children and youth, the camp presents an imminent danger that grows more acute day after day. Any security change in the area, such as the collapse of the AANES as the result of a sudden American withdrawal, could lead to thousands of people affiliated with, sympathetic to, or influenced by ISIS ideology getting out. This could be a turning point for the organization, as was the moment hundreds of detainees escaped or were smuggled from Abu Ghraib prison in 2013.
7. Alongside camp residents affiliated with or sympathetic to ISIS, there are thousands of Syrians and Iraqis who have no guilt, but were in the wrong place at the wrong time. For them to remain in these conditions constitutes another punishment, after they were already punished by living under ISIS rule. The deprivation of their freedom without being presented with a fair trial also constitutes a violation of the minimum rules of fundamental rights guaranteed by the International Bill of Human Rights.

## International and local opinions and attitudes weave the threads of al-Hol residents' fate:

**Mustafa Bali**, the director of the AANES Media Center and SDF spokesperson, said the camp's administration could become unable to control the residents. The camp—as he put it—is an ISIS city. Nearly 70,000 people cannot be controlled, and there are only enough guards to repel external attacks. Bali indicated that “the situation is growing more dangerous”, especially with the camp turning into “an ISIS academy”.<sup>175</sup>

On 14 November 2019, during a meeting in Washington of the foreign ministers of countries participating in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to discuss next steps against the organization, the United States called on participating states to receive their ISIS-affiliated citizens who are present in Syria. In the same regard, US Special Envoy for Syria **James Jeffrey** stated that there are differences among coalition member states over the repatriation of their citizens among ISIS fighters held in Syria and Iraq.<sup>176</sup>

On the other hand, and in the same context, French Foreign Minister **Jean-Yves Le Drian** presented Baghdad with a plan to search for an international mechanism to prosecute ISIS members. Among the plan's clauses was that Iraq would keep European ISIS members in general, and French in particular, either by his proposal of “building detention centers and heavily guarded camps to move 10,000 members of the organization there with their families”, or by his suggestion of “establishing a mechanism to grant some ISIS-affiliated families Iraqi citizenship, as the marriage of many of the European members to

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175 “SDF Warns of Deteriorating Situation in al-Hol Camp in Northern Syria and the Return of ISIS”, Sputnik Arabic, September 30, 2019, accessed 5/1/2021, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arabworld/20190930>.

176 Orabi Abdul-Hayy Orabi, “ISIS after al-Baghdadi: The Organization Leads a Battle of ‘We Are Here’...A Reading of Strategies and Outcomes”, *ZatMasr*, January 6, 2020, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://zatmasr.com>.

Iraqi women who have given birth to their children is sufficient to grant their children and husbands Iraqi citizenship". However, this was not met with support from the Iraqi government, which swiftly rejected the French offers on 20 October 2019 through a statement from the Foreign Ministry saying "Iraq is concerned with receiving the terrorists and their families who carry Iraqi citizenship, and they will be tried in Iraqi courts in accordance with the laws in force. Baghdad is not concerned with receiving foreign members of the organization, and it falls to their countries to be responsible for them".

Iraqi National Security Advisor **Qasim al-Araji** later stressed to the US ambassador in Baghdad, **Matthew Toller**, the importance of developing solutions for the al-Hol border camp, which contains terrorists of multiple nationalities. He pointed out that there are more than 20,000 children in the camp, who could become future members of ISIS.<sup>177</sup>

At present, the Iraqi government's plan to resolve the crisis of the Syrian al-Hol camp faces significant complications due to the ongoing refusal from communities to the displace people's return, amid demands that other solutions to the international crisis be found. With the arrival of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in office last May, he directed that the camp crisis be solved, and an appropriate formula found to end its growing threat in Iraq, in cooperation with the Syrian Government and SDF, as well as international support from Washington, the UN, Great Britain, and other States.

To reach a satisfactory solution, security experts and analysts presented three scenarios to solve the al-Hol camp crisis, as its risk has worsened, turning it into a hotbed for producing extremists.

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<sup>177</sup> National Security Advisor: al-Hol Border Camp is a Time Bomb", Sputnik Arabic, May 18, 2021, accessed May 15, 2021, [https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab\\_world/20210318](https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arab_world/20210318).

Iraqi affairs expert Ramadan Albadran has put forward a proposal consisting of six axes that should be applied before camp residents' return to Iraq. He believes that "the plan must start from psychological, social, criminal, legal, economic, and political factors. After that begins the journey of transporting them into Iraq, taking those aspects into account and sorting people according to specific classifications, as there are those who are implicated in acts of terrorism, and those who socially joined the campaign of this thought, taking appropriate measures for each of them". Albadran also believes that "the case needs a clear and realistic study, taking various aspects into account to avoid any problems that may arise from implementing the plan. There are those who should be deported to their countries, and there are others who perhaps could integrate into other countries, which is one of the scenarios presented".

In the same context, an official from the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration confirmed that "the prepared plan requires evacuating the current camps of internally displaced people, which is what has happened in the latest period, to put al-Hol camp residents in their place according to a precise plan prepared by a number of Iraqi agencies in cooperation with several countries". He added that "the rejection from some parties may be understandable, but the solutions before us are limited. The plan is set to go forward within several months, and it has nothing to do with the issue of elections".<sup>178</sup>

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178 "Iraqi Experts: Three Scenarios to Solve the al-Hol Camp Crisis", Sky News Arabia, May 19, 2021, accessed May 20, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/ar-ae/news/featured>.

## **Children and the Importance of Love, Play, Communication, and Education in Reintegration Processes:**

In the reality of ISIS and its repercussions, children are the group most vulnerable to extremist group practices. ISIS carries out deliberate policies to deepen the roots of its violence and entrench its radical ideology in children, so that they will be its long-term legacy.

The terrorist practices of ISIS have negatively impacted the psychology of people in areas under its control in general, and children in particular. The scenes of lines of pupils and students dressed in bright colors on their way to school disappeared. The organization imposed educational curricula consistent with its beliefs and leanings, forcing teachers to undergo courses in the curricula and teaching methods that lead, in their entirety, to the upbringing of a generation they called “the cubs of the caliphate”. Education was restricted to males only, who were taught the arts of fighting, carrying weapons, beheading, and suicide operations. The brutal killings and practice of violence affected some children, causing them to try to imitate them. For others, they caused panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>179</sup>

Children in ISIS-controlled areas were exposed to the worst living environment due to severe and repeated psychological traumas resulting from the spread of violence, war, and displacement as well as educational neglect, deprivation, and poverty. This was repeated in the displacement camp. Such harsh and painful conditions are destructive to the organic and functional structure of the brain, because the brain goes through the most important stages of its formation in childhood. Traumas lead to tension, fear, and panic in children. That is a very important threat to their psychological and biological health, and is

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<sup>179</sup> Asia Ismail, “Children are Hardest-Hit by ISIS Practices”, Hawar News, accessed June 5, 2021, <http://www.hawarnews.com>.

usually accompanied by physiological changes in the body. This results in chemical changes in the brain and creates a toxic environment for brain cells that impacts their function, as well as the formation and structure of the brain. Because of those changes, young children grown up with weak mental abilities, learning disabilities and a high probability of developing mental illnesses such as depression, all kinds of anxiety disorders, repressed emotions, and intense irritability, anger, and hostility, as well as harmful habits such as smoking and drug use.<sup>180</sup>

In childhood, the human brain needs more than food to grow and develop well. Growth and development complement one another, but they are not identical: For example, if a child's muscles do not grow, that child will not be able to develop the physical skills of running and playing. But if a child's muscles grow but the child has nobody to play with, or was not offered a way to play, then he will not learn to play either. For children to grow and develop, they need **care, responsiveness, and stimulation**. The environment a child grows up in is what literally sculpts his brain. When one or both parents respond to the child in a warm and affectionate way, the child learns that his needs will be met, and feels safety and love. A child learns to communicate when the mother sings or talks to him, even before he can speak. And when parents encourage a child's interest and curiosity in the world, he seeks to learn more. All these activities are called **stimulation**. Lack of stimulation and quality in the care relationship a child experiences at this critical stage of life will halt the child's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development.

There is also evidence that if a child experiences severe, recurrent, or prolonged distress (as in the case of ISIS children) without receiving support from an adult with stable feelings, behavior, and inclinations,

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180 Dr. Juman Maki Kubba, "Children of War and What the Future Holds: A Time Bomb", Hewar al-Fikr Journal, no. 40 (June 2017): 105-6.

then the prolonged activation of the stress response can impede brain development as a result of emotional and sensory deprivation of the brain. When a child is malnourished and lacks parental responsiveness and stimulation, this deficit interacts with profound and negative consequences for the child, impacting his life for the foreseeable future.

Play is the fundamental component of early childhood stimulation, and is pivotal in good interaction between the family and the child. **Play is an opportunity to perform important activities that improve good development.** Children learn through play, and play strengthens the bonds between parents and children. From birth, play offers an opportunity to receive and show **love** through warm attention, smiling, and conversation. It also provides opportunities for **communication** through touch, expression, listening, and trying new words. It is an opportunity to explore and understand the world through touch and sight, building and developing new sensory skills as children do those things. Play requires attention and focus, developing the child's problem-solving, decision-making, and learning skills. It improves relationships with parents, and even with other children, where children learn to **take turns** and **cooperate**, learning **rules, negotiation, and conflict resolution.** Through play, the family can model best practices in all the aforementioned matters, and then allow the child to experiment and explore for himself safety. Play also provides a space to **try out multiple identities.** Through fantasy and role-playing, children master dealing with fear and upsetting events. They explore difficult feelings and develop the flexibility required to deal with psychological pressure and loss. Play is also a chance for the parents and caregivers to provide undivided attention to the child, and to see the world from the perspective of the child himself.<sup>181</sup>

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181 Lynne Jones, "Integrating Early Childhood Development (ECD) Activities into Nutrition Programmes in Emergencies", UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO), et. al., 3.

## **How Can the Combination of Nutrition with Play and Early Childhood Development Activities Help the Child's Growth and Development?**

There is increasing evidence available from low-resource settings that programs aimed at improving child stimulation and promoting parental care leave beneficial impacts on the child's psychological health in the long term. Additional effects are also attained if combined with nutrition programs, improving children's long-term growth and development outcomes. For example, in a study of the impact of giving dietary supplements and stimulation to children between the ages of nine and 24 months in Jamaica, of those whose growth was stunted and not stunted, it was shown that the children with stunted growth who received both interventions—food and stimulation—weekly over two years achieved higher developmental outcomes in comparison with the children who did not receive either of the two interventions, or who only received the nutrition intervention. Significantly, the group of children who received stimulation alone, or stimulation with nutrition, showed stable cognitive benefits that were noticeable even at age 17. However, these benefits did not last for children who received nutritional alone.<sup>182</sup>

There is also further evidence that, in socially unfavorable environments, children of depressed mothers (those diagnosed with depression or who have shown symptoms of depression) are more likely to be malnourished or in poor health. The potential mechanism here is that the mothers who show symptoms of depression engage or participate with the children less than others: they play less with them and respond to their needs to a lesser degree. A neglected young child becomes apathetic and irritable, and is less able to get his mother's attention. In the long run, an undernourished child can contribute to

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182 Ibid., 4.

his mother's depression because she experiences increased feelings of guilt and inadequacy. There is a downward spiral that creates or worsens malnutrition and poor health. The implications for the child, over the long term, include problems in behavior, cognition, delay, poor academic performance, and depression. In the period of childhood, the most vulnerable parents and children are found in the harshest environments, especially after natural disasters or in conflict or post-conflict areas, or in areas experiencing drought, or in refugee and displacement camps. In such emergency situations, the care networks that usually protect the health, safety, and security of the child are disrupted, and food is scarce. Displaced and exhausted parents are also less able to provide the stimulation, nutrition, and care their infant children need, and mothers are particularly vulnerable to depression in these areas. The combined interactive social effects that happen in such situations are likely to contribute to the emergence of poor outcomes for children. There are many points of entry to break the cycle presented above. The obvious points of entry are providing health and nutrition support to the mother and child, combined with play-based learning programs. These are the usual priorities in emergency situations. Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health programs also provide support to mothers. Programs that directly address the psychological and social needs of the mothers, including treating past traumatic events, the mother's security in the camp, and her ease of access to social support help increase her responsiveness to the child. What is less known is that child stimulation programs designed to improve parental responsiveness through home visits and group interventions also directly improve the mother's mood.

A review of another study also showed that programs in which mother-to-mother support groups and home visits were used to improve the interaction between the mother and the child were also

able to improve the mother's mood and well-being while enhancing the child's nutritional condition and growth outcomes as the mother became more responsive to her child's needs. The results of another five-month, randomized pilot study of psychosocial intervention carried out with war-affected mothers and older children (approximately age five) in post-conflict Bosnia showed an improvement in the psychological health of mothers and an increase in the weight of the child. The intervention included: psychoeducation and support to promote the natural coping of mothers and children who have suffered traumatic events, training to promote sensitive and expressive emotional communication, and promoting rich and stimulating interaction, as well as reactivating sound childcare practices.<sup>183</sup>

Emergencies offer an opportunity to influence or change what children learn so that it becomes more relevant to their daily lives, as children cannot access structured learning experiences at all in many crisis situations. In other situations, when school education is feasible, questions arise as to whether the education is relevant or comprehensive. In both cases, decisions are made about what children learn and how they are taught. A crisis changes the environment in such a way that, with it, new methods are urgent and new ways of teaching old subjects are needed in order to be effective. Introducing educational content or reviewing the existing content is supposed to help students live better in changing circumstances, develop individually and socially, and build the skills necessary for life-long learning.

### **What Should Education Include to Address Emergencies?**

In an emergency, there is often a sense that it is necessary to make changes to what children are learning. But before developing new material or making specific changes to the curriculum, one must have

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183 Ibid., 5.

a sense of what is necessary for children to know—not only because of the state of emergency, but also for their lives as a whole. Only then is it possible to assess whether schools can provide the full scope of educational content, or whether out-of-school alternatives are needed. Among the issues we should focus on are a number of issues we will list in detail:<sup>184</sup>

### **1. Survival Skills, “Learning to Live”:**

Survival skills are an integral part of education in emergency situations. Children should be able to access the knowledge and skills needed to enable them to cope with emergencies. In stable situations, children usually learn the basic aspects of survival from their parents, while a crisis leaves parents without the knowledge or ability to continue that role. In emergencies, topics such as safety, health, and the environment become more urgent.

### **2. Developmental Skills, “Learning to Be”:**

In the best case, education should not be about survival alone, nor should it be about academic goals alone. Individual and social development skills are equally important. Structured educational opportunities can contribute to children’s sense of themselves and their interaction with society. Having at least one constant in a daily life full of change can help children continue to grow both individually and socially. This can be achieved by bringing in specific content, such as conflict resolution or human rights awareness or social activities. Alternatively, it could mean teaching other subjects in a way that emphasizes communication and encourages positive group interaction and allows children to deal with the emotional impact of the crisis.

### **3. Academic Skills, “Learning to Learn”:**

Basic academic skills that are taught in a way that helps children

<sup>184</sup> Susan Nicolai, “What Should Children Learn? A Discussion of Learning Content during Crisis”, *Forced Migration Review*, no. 15 (January 2002): 22.

“learn to learn” during crises cannot be ignored. Crises often set children back academically, either because they face a lack of structured educational experiences for a time or because education is constantly interrupted. Literacy and numeracy, as well as subjects such as history, science, and the arts are vital to an individual’s independence and self-sufficiency. Opportunities to focus on traditional subjects and advance in them can be a social support mechanism, as it provides a sense of normalcy and opportunities for achievement.

### **What Makes Learning Effective?**

The methods used to convey new knowledge to children are critically important. They include a number of basic aspects, namely.<sup>185</sup>

#### **1. Becoming Child-centered:**

Child-centered teaching and learning makes the progress of each child as an individual an integral part of the learning experience. The focus is on what children learn, not on what teachers teach. Child-centered methods address the whole child’s needs, such as survival skills, individual development, social interaction, and academic learning

#### **2. Learning through Activities:**

Learning is effective when a child can act on what was learned. Education must link knowledge and skills of a specific subject to the competency to use them. Memorization is not enough. While education must certainly include the theoretical, it must engage the learner in the practical use of a particular activity or in research leading to a new awareness. This approach recognizes that when children play, they are often engaged in a serious activity designed to learn something they want to know or understand. Basic academic skills cannot be ignored – during and after crises.

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185 Ibid., 23.

### 3. Both Structure and Creativity:

Education must be presented in a structure that meets expectations for both teachers and students. That is particularly important during emergencies, when the world seems out of control. In this environment, a child's sense of security depends on the certainty and familiarity of routine. Structures, however, do not necessarily equate to rigidity, and giving children space for expression is no less important.

#### **Female Jihadists of ISIS (Roles and Factors Influencing Recruitment)**

One study tracking jihadist women, the nature of their recruitment, and the reasons and factors behind it—entitled “Infatuated with Martyrdom”—aimed to test pre-existing assumptions circulated in media and politics about jihadist women and their reasons for joining terrorist groups and seeking to migrate to ISIS territory. Those assumptions include linking the phenomenon to variables such as low education levels, low economic status, and unstable family backgrounds. The study relied on a case study methodology, selecting an asymmetric sample of ISIS women as the 47 cases were selected with the information available on media and social media sites. Additionally, a historical and ideological study methodology was used regarding the reality of women in ISIS territory. The study reached a number of results, as follows:<sup>186</sup>

#### **A. Differences between al-Qaeda and ISIS:**

ISIS has been markedly efficient in recruiting operations compared to al-Qaeda. That goes back to its better recruitment and political propaganda capabilities, use of local languages, the internet, and technology, and penetration of social media.

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<sup>186</sup> Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, *Infatuated with Martyrdom: Female Jihadism from al-Qaeda to the 'Islamic State'*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation Jordan & Iraq, Amman, 2017.

## **B. Transformations in Female Jihadism:**

The path of jihadist women changed from al-Qaeda to ISIS, in terms of their quantity and role compared to the secondary and limited role for women in al-Qaeda, the emergence of leading figures for women in ISIS, and the emergence of multiple roles and tasks for women, such as medicine, education, issuing fatwas, and moral policing (hisbah). This extends to carrying out combat operations, including suicide attacks, which had not been available in al-Qaeda.

## **C. Distinctions between Causes and Dynamics:**

One of the prevailing misconceptions in Western and Arab media, and even among officials and many researchers, is to attach blame for the recruitment and influencing of girls to the world of the internet and social media, as well as the so-called brainwashing process. True, that is one of the dynamics used in recruitment and education operations by ISIS, but there is a difference between it and the reasons that drive women to join jihadist movements. Dynamics are part of the process, but objective factors are another matter entirely. They explain to us why X is influenced by the contents of ISIS propaganda but not Y, in the case that both were exposed to the same material.

## **D. Social Background and Breaking the Stereotype:**

The sample indicates there is a significant proportion of the cases involving women and girls who were cultured, educated, and from the middle class. This mainly suggests the importance and centrality of other factors, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and looking for marriage, etcetera. The majority of ISIS women are in their twenties, making high-school- or college-aged girls the main candidates for this influence.

## **E. Responsibility Between Ideological and Social Factors:**

There is a wide range of cases of women who studied in Western

secular schools and universities, as in the case of Great Britain and Arab countries, such as Sudanese, French, or Saudi girls. Other cases demonstrate the role of educational models teaching Salafism and Wahhabism in driving women toward the path of jihadism, alongside other influential factors such as their relatives, husbands, parents, or even children.

- F. Some jihadist women had a limited and secondary relationship to the phenomenon at first, then gradually became more immersed with their husband's escalating involvement and as they had children. They moved from a secondary to a primary role, forming friendships among jihadist families. The results of relationships of kinship and marriage between them became a network of ties that formed and began to unite them, forming a community. Within this process, it became difficult to disengage or dismantle them later.
- G. Religious piety plays a vital role, with most female jihadists believing that fighting deviant religious doctrines is a religious duty. Similarly, many are enthusiastic about the idea of an Islamic state based on Islamic law in Iraq and Syria.
- H. The results of another study, conducted on ISIS women detained and sentenced in Iraqi prisons, indicated that 62% of those sampled were women who were couriers who carried explosive materials and weapons, explosive devices and belts, and car bombs and suicide bombers. This indicates the importance of women's role inside terrorist organizations, while 38% of the women were suicide bombers. Approximately 48% of female recruits sampled belong to families with a low standard of living and difficult economic conditions.<sup>187</sup>

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187 Hawra Ali Abdul Zahra, "The Recruitment of Women in Terrorist Operations", unpublished Master's thesis presented to the Department of Sociology - College of Arts, University of Baghdad, 2018.

### **Recommendations and Suggestions:**

1. The Council of Ministers should order the formation of a high committee to oversee **“operations to address the issues and problems of Iraqis in al-Hol camp”** in coordination with international organizations, the Syrian government, and the parties responsible for managing the camp. The committee’s membership should include representatives at the level of a director general and above from the Ministry of Migration and Displacement, National Security Advisory, National Intelligence Service, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, National Reconciliation Committee, and the Kurdistan Region. The Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers would lead the committee, working on the following:
  - A. Negotiate with the camp administration and Syrian government to learn the number and names of Iraqis present in the camp, and verify and categorize them (those involved with ISIS/not involved).
  - B. Send a field team to visit the camp and interview the families to learn about their circumstances and intentions regarding whether or not to return. Find out the biggest problems they face, and the proposed solutions from their perspective.
  - C. Set up an alternate camp inside Iraq, preferably in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region,<sup>188</sup> in an isolated and secure area with all the necessities and health, educational, and recreational facilities, as well as legal, psychological, and social protection. This is to be done in coordination, cooperation, and participation with international

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188 The justification for establishing the camp in the Kurdistan region: First: Cultural and linguistic differences help reduce social stigma and facilitate the reintegration process. Second: The existence of ideal camps established in cooperation with UN organizations. Third: The freedom and workforce of the international organizations in the region. Fourth: Preventing reprisals and cyclical revenge, which is likely to occur if the camp were to be established in areas of origin or other governorates. Fifth: It is far from soft areas that ISIS could exploit to win them back and control them once more. Sixth: High levels of security, surveillance, and protection from sexual assault, harassment, and violence.

organizations, as the camp is devoted to receiving ISIS-associated families upon their return.

- D. Distribute Iraqi refugees returning from al-Hol camp (who are not affiliated with ISIS) in camps that currently exist in Iraq, each specific number of families to a camp. Returnees should be spread throughout the sectors of each camp, and not grouped and adjacent to one another. This would help in faster return operations.
  - E. Resolve the cases of those associated with ISIS and involved in criminal cases, duly referring them to the judiciary.
  - F. Task the Ministry of Interior with addressing the difficulties of issuing documents to children of known parentage (one of the parents is still alive and requests proof of parentage and the issuing of identification documents), as well as those of unknown parentage, orphans (both parents are dead), in coordination and cooperation with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and in accordance with the related Iraqi laws and directives in force.
2. The Ministry of Migration and Displacement should, in coordination with international organizations, implement a series of reintegration and psychological and social rehabilitation programs for all returnees from al-Hol camp, for a period of time allocated according to each case by researchers concerned with psychological and social protection.
  3. Preferably, psychological and social rehabilitation programs for children linked to ISIS should be outside the camps to ensure environmental diversity and socialization, and to provide opportunities for comparison and coexistence.
  4. Emphasize the implementation of education and rehabilitation programs for returning children, whether in early or late childhood, through education and reintegration through play. Experiences

and studies have shown remarkable success for those programs, to be implemented by international organizations in cooperation with Iraqi civil society organizations experienced in this field.

5. Print educational pamphlets in the form of tales and stories for children and young adults with drawings and cartoons, for students to study during school hours and on summer breaks. They should also be distributed for free to families in the camps and liberated areas, and be based on enhancing trust and tolerance among children. The project should be adopted by the Children Culture House in the federal Ministry of Culture.
6. Iraqi civil society organizations, in coordination with international organizations and the Ministry of Migration and Displacement, Ministry of Labor, and Ministry of Social Affairs, should individually study families' conditions according to the distribution of roles, division of labor, and networking in order to reveal their abilities, skills, and intentions toward:
  - A. What is the work they prefer to do or request training in and empowerment to get?
  - B. What are their intentions toward returning to their areas of origin, and do they have problems preventing that? What is the nature of the problems, and what are the solutions, in their perspective?
  - C. Regarding the sustainable solutions to cases of prolonged displacement (integration into the host community or resettlement in a third area other than the area they were displaced to), what are the families' preferences with regards to the two choices of resettlement and integration, and what is the extent of their desire to do so? What areas do they prefer to reside in?
7. About six months after their return and after rehabilitation programs are completed, the National Reconciliation Committee

should present a detailed paper to the Prime Minister on the possibility of issuing an amnesty to bridge the rift and give a new chance to families who are confirmed to have a serious desire to leave the past behind and return to normal life.

## **The Human Legacy of ISIS: Returnees, Detainees, and Rehabilitation Programs**

This chapter discusses the legacy of ISIS, especially its human aspect: the fate of tens of thousands of people who joined the organization or were under its control during its period of dominance over vast territories in Iraq and Syria.

Unlike the war on terrorism in its military sense, the question about the legacy of ISIS appears complicated and difficult to a great extent. It is an unprecedented challenge. No jihadist Islamist organization has ever attracted large numbers of families, women, and children and established a society in the sense that took place with ISIS. No sooner had the dust of the military battles settled than the international community found itself facing thousands of families, classified as ISIS to different forms and degrees—whether local families linked to ISIS or those coming from abroad—in detention camps in Iraq and Syria. A large portion were young children and women whose husbands were killed.

Accordingly, a large number of important questions arise: How will such large numbers be dealt with? What are the international and domestic strategies of many states with individuals inside these camps for the process of reintegration and rehabilitation, especially for children and women not involved in violence? What is the basis for classifying and distinguishing between men in terms of the judiciary and trials? We find that the dilemma of the ISIS legacy is no less serious than that of the organization at the height of its power.

Iraqi researchers Ali Taher al-Hamoud and Dr. Ahmad Qassem Muften shed light on the conditions of al-Hol camp in the Syrian province of al-Hasakah, which houses thousands of people associated with ISIS. They describe the humanitarian and security conditions and the many problems in dealing with this issue.

The researchers also discuss the legacy of ISIS, as well as Arab and Western examples related to rehabilitation programs and dealing with a large number of questions and challenges in this field.

## Discussion

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### **Waleed Abdulmalek al-Rawi**

There are two observations: The first is the subject of rehabilitation. Dr. al-Hamoud explained al-Hol camp, displacement camps, and how the state has dealt with them in detail. However, there are now in Iraq lists of names documented by the speaker of at least 300,000 young Iraqis accused of terrorism as the result of a confidential informant or information that they are not actually with ISIS, because the person actually with the organization has either been killed, imprisoned, executed, or is still fighting with cells, especially in the western provinces. The security services and militia members have these lists, and they are not consolidated. For example, many survivors entered army checkpoints and came out without any charges against them, but when they went to the militia checkpoint where they have computers and information, they were arrested. The majority of these situations are the result of a confidential informant, involving individuals who were forced when the tribal leaders were gathered and compelled to pledge allegiance in the mosque. The point is that these suspects are not fighters, but rather are accused due to enmities, special circumstances, a problem between the tribe, or a secret informant. There are very large numbers of those people, this is the first point.

The second subject is the experience of Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, who was tasked with the issue of rehabilitation programs in Jordan. Prince Ghazi, as an advisor to His Majesty the King, signed on to a rehabilitation program with the UN. But in Iraq, there have been none of these programs. Saudi Arabia has the Munasaha program to rehabilitate some fighters, suspects, or those who believe in the ideology. The subject of criminality is another issue. For someone who committed a criminal act, the judiciary takes its course. But the program is targeting the accused, or those who are suspected.

## Mohammad al-Azamat

I wrote a book called *The Returnees*, in which I discussed the de-radicalization programs and programs to root out extremism. In the book, I reviewed all international attempts, local experiments, or those that Dr. Waleed spoke about in Saudi Arabia—the Munasaha—or in the West, and so on. I discussed what successes have been achieved by these programs, whether ideological rehabilitation or rehabilitation in preparation for integration into society (we must distinguish between the two programs). Among their basic conditions is the “ideological quarantine”, a term borrowed from the COVID-19 pandemic. But we do something called an ideological quarantine, then implement the programs—whether religious, counseling, or psychological interventions. Certainly the most important thing at the stage of implementing rehabilitation program interventions is to understand the driving, influencing, and motivating reasons for adopting the extremist ideology. The researcher Abu Rumman, when speaking, cited a saying by Hazem al-Amin, “look for sociology before ideology”. Many rehabilitation programs in the Arab world, including our program in Jordan or the Munasaha program, make an absolute assumption that young people join extremist groups out of ignorance in understanding Sharia rulings, especially the jurisprudence of jihad and issues of takfir, and so on. But in reality, judging the inmates, or those undergoing the program, as having joined or tried to join extremist groups out of this ignorance skips over the fact that there are economic, political, and other causes. We reserve even the word “causes” in a phenomenon like that of extremism and terrorism. There are motivating factors, and there are influences, but the word “causes” implies the presence of a causal relationship, cause and effect. This is not scientifically or academically proven. In short, for these programs to succeed, there must be absolute control over those undergoing the

program. There must be an ideological quarantine from mixing with schools of extremist ideology from the right or the left, and so on. The question is, for Dr. Ali, from your experience with al-Hol camp, do you believe there is space for such programs to be implemented within the camp? And can such programs succeed, in light of the large numbers that I have talked about?

The paper talked about women, how they formed hisbah groups, and so on. Is it possible that there are secret things we don't know about? Suppose there is communication between them and their husbands outside the camp, etc. Is it possible under these circumstances? Of course, there is an experience—let me talk about the experience of the Iraqi Camp Bucca. The Americans thought it was implementing rehabilitation programs for Iraqi mujahideen fighters in the period from 2003 to 2006. It later turned out—after the emergence of ISIS—that it was essentially an academy, a school for teaching and training extremism and terrorism. It is even said that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and many ISIS leaders who later founded the organization were among the detention site's inmates. So if these programs are applied to al-Hol camp, are they ideal or theoretical? Is it something we are just dreaming about, implementing programs inside the camp? Or do we suggest that people within the camp be selected and detained under certain conditions, and that we apply programs to them, and then after that consider their reintegration into society?

### **Hassan Abu Haniyeh**

In the first wave after 9/11, and even the second wave after the 2003 occupation of Iraq, international approaches to dealing with terrorism were always based on two approaches: a hard approach and a soft approach. There was the first approach – war based on military and security force, criminal justice, and transfer to courts. Alongside that, there was a soft approach, based on reorientation

and reintegration through programs, whether in Europe, daily life, or even the Munasaha program, and others. But here in this new wave, after the coup against the Arab Spring revolutions, there is a complete absence of international reorientation and integration programs. There is international interest, but no real domestic interest, focusing instead on the criminal justice and prosecution approach. Sometimes even these are unfair, as it is well-known that these laws themselves need review, since they do not meet international justice standards whatsoever.

The main approach is that of war. We have seen that what has taken place from 2014 to today is a military approach: an international coalition comes, in cooperation with local forces, then starts to expel and destroy cities. Even this military approach has become extreme, relying not on counter-terrorism tactics in the sense of relying on intelligence power and specialized agencies, but rather on airstrikes, shelling, and consequently systematic destruction. What happened in Mosul, Raqqa, and the rest of the cities was a destruction operation. As a result, a magnified problem occurs by not dealing with groups or small numbers. This is one of the challenges that has perhaps led to the lack of responsiveness to reorientation or integration programs as well as—as Mohammad al-Azamat pointed out, and he is a specialist—their failure. Failure like that of the Munasaha program. Most of those who entered the program went to al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula. This, then, is a dilemma that the Arab world must deal with. It is known that there is a failure of these approaches with regards to reorientation and integration, even with limited numbers of fighters.

What is happening in al-Hol camp to European foreign fighters specifically, who are around 2,500 people, among them men and women? There are countries, including France and all European states, who refuse to receive those fighters or prosecute them in their

countries. We have seen the proposal by French Foreign Minister Le Drian to prosecute and try them, bribing Iraq with \$1.5 billion to prosecute them under Iraqi law and thus execute them. The UN does not have any international formula for dealing with this situation. And the Arab world, as we can see, does not have any country trying to reclaim its citizens who are in this situation, for example. Set aside the catastrophic humanitarian conditions. Even parties that are supposed to enforce law and justice commit rapes, disgusting acts that one cannot even imagine. This is a big dilemma, and one of the causes of extremism. As the guests pointed out, in the end this phenomenon arises from detention centers and prisons like Camp Bucca, Abu Ghraib, and all the prisons that have led to the conditions for extremism.

### **Mouayad al-Windawi**

We are talking about really large numbers actually, versus the lack of clear strategies among the countries concerned and the surrounding countries. Early attempts were made in 2015 with a conference in which the US participated. It was the beginning of shaping an international strategy for the post-ISIS phase. Unfortunately, with the COVID-19 era, the world has drifted away from such strategies, in various ways. Either there is an inability to attend or participate, or a lack of funds to provide. So far, there have been minor attempts by some international actors to provide a few million here and there for projects that do not offer much in the absence of local strategies. I believe that the Center for International Studies can present projects like this, because it shows us clearly that the rest of the Arab movements and centers are not concerned. How can we raise the level of alarm? How can we avoid additional disasters in the Arab region, the region the whole world came to with the international coalition and is now leaving, abandoning the ruins and the people impacted by these violent phenomena – which is caused in part by injustice and exclusion?

The catastrophe is much greater. I believe that Abu Haniyeh was clearer than Ali Taher al-Hamoud about what is going on. There were also mass rapes of women in the camps following the declaration of the liberation from ISIS years ago. There is a traffic in these children, where they are either adopted by unknown parties, or are sent out to other countries in secret. Women are abused and raped when there are reviews to adjust their status. We actually have positive cases that have taken place in local communities, in Mosul, Saladin, and Anbar, in which many of the disputes among the local population have been able to be settled or postponed. Some were resolved based on tribal principles of some kind. Sufficient opportunities should be left, and we should study these opportunities: how local organizations, clans, and local governments can carry out major reintegration tasks. They understand the reality of the situation, rather than groups coming from outside that want revenge and killing. The issue is not related to numbers, but rather to the communities that extend from north of Baghdad to Aleppo, a large geographical area suffering from the same problem. The Iraqis certainly do not have the capacities, as their economy cannot support it. The state of the political system does not have much to help. There are senseless violent impulses from all sides to kill these people and be rid of them. Many of them are victims. We are talking about types of victims. I am not talking about an ISIS wife or a son of ISIS, but rather about all the victims of violence in this vast area.

In light of what is going on and the COVID-19 crisis, we do not expect that there will be practical, effective strategies. We must stress the need for and importance of international support. We must emphasize more, before Arab summit conferences as researchers, that there is an Arab and Islamic need to allocate sufficient funds to help these people be reintegrated into society. We must end the traditional

ways of dealing with this that have been used so far. The UN knows everything, but it is politics that makes the UN set aside the reports that reach it about the corruption, violence, and rape going on without referring to it in its international reports.

The problem of the legacy of ISIS, especially the detention camps, is primarily an Arab and Islamic problem. The problem is regional, and it will remain regional to a large extent. So what is the call this meeting directs to the Arab governments? How should we convince the Arab leaders to help more in getting rid of it? They must know also that the persistence of this problem will turn back, one way or another, on this government or that, this party leader or that ruler. We have to be more realistic about what must be done. I believe that the Politics and Society Institute should emphasize making recommendations towards solving this problem in its final report, and not just explain the problem.

### **Saud al-Sharafat**

My question is very specific. My precise information is that the Kurds have nothing whatsoever to do with the issue, but that the Americans are the ones who control the camp: who comes in and who goes out. And they have been doing monitoring and observation for years, and are continuing in this process. On a personal level, we have had sources, so we have tried multiple times over the past three years to get information about the number of Jordanians. We were concerned about whether there were Jordanians inside the camp. Unfortunately, we have not been able to answer this question, since it is specifically the American intelligence services that are in control.

### **Marwan Shehadeh**

The brutality and violence that states have practiced, and the abandonment of their responsibilities towards women and children, will birth even greater brutality than the previous brutality of ISIS.

They are showing neither a moral nor a legal responsibility towards women and children.

All countries as a whole have refused to receive their citizens, women and children, some of whom are indeed not guilty, and who have been sentenced to a slow death. The most extreme crimes have been practiced against them: rape, deprivation of housing, of warmth and cold water, and so on, under harsh and inhumane conditions.

### **Khaled Salim**

From my experience in Tunisia—I worked with the prisons. There was a program for prisoners who committed public right offenses, but there was no program for violent extremism prisoners. In this camp, is there a program with different levels, whether for women, children or the eight percent you spoke about? Especially since, as Dr. Ali pointed out, 40% of those in the camp are children. Could you shed more light for us on this program, its features, and if there are metrics for its success or lack thereof?

As for the second question, one of the colleagues spoke about the idea of ideological quarantine, and here it can perhaps be focused on de-radicalization. My question to you is: In this camp, is the focus on de-radicalization, disengagement, or a different approach? Especially since we are talking about 40% being children. If there is space, hopefully you could shed light on this aspect.

The third question is: there is a lack of political will for rehabilitation, reintegration, and to end these problems. If there were political will, then to what extent do you think the success of that rehabilitation and reintegration would be impacted by the desire to capitalize on this camp for political purposes?

## **Maher Farghali**

According to the information available to me, Egypt has in the past year completely refused to receive any member of the organization, even on the basis of a request by such person, or if he is able to reach the embassy or take any means to reach Egypt. At the end of last year, Egypt started to take ISIS women, and has so far received about 60-70 of them. But it has imposed a kind of media blackout: they are prevented from meeting anyone or having conversations and interviews with specialists for any reason. I met with the daughter of Ayman al-Zawahiri, from al-Qaeda, about four or five months ago. Here, there was a legal dilemma. She was married to three men—one Pakistani and two Egyptians--all of whom were killed, and had 11 children with them of different nationalities. The children have no identification documents at all, which imposes great difficulties even on the security services in accommodating returnees.

After a while, Egypt began to receive returning ISIS members and subject them to trials. This is a security approach, placing them in prisons and dividing them into members (A, B, C), influential members, and active members. It subjects them to interrogations, and programs by Egypt's Dar al-Ifta, which is part of the al-Azhar Foundation but closer to the presidency. It conducts awareness programs in prison for these elements, but this does not mean their release. They undergo these programs and remain there for a period, undergoing trials according to the judge and the rulings. In the end, it is possible that their sentences will be reduced, but they will not be released. This is the Egyptian security approach. It is separate from the intellectual reconsideration approach followed with al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, which was a completely different experience.

## **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

The paper and the statements have significantly clarified that we are in a real disaster. It is as if we were aboard a half-sunken ship, and the other half doesn't know that the first half has sunk. The humanitarian legacy of ISIS must be looked at from more than one level.

The first level is in an area where a large proportion of the population has been displaced and become refugees. This is a large problem not only in al-Hol camp, but in the Syrian refugee camps on the Jordanian border and inside Jordan. It constitutes a major crisis and a major problem.

The second level is that we are facing generations of children, men, and women who are being lost. This is a very dangerous future, with major legal, administrative, humanitarian, and political problems.

The third level is that there are still no real concepts for how to solve the problem. In the West, they are talking about receiving dozens of people, and there are programs and studies set up for how to receive and deal with them. They are talking about six, seven, or eight people. And in his paper, the researcher Taher is talking about thousands of Iraqis, thousands of Syrians. So far, we have no interest in them. The Jordanian government and all Arab governments do not accept receiving ISIS families or children. This is a major crisis. Today, there are some in detention camps and large numbers of families and children who have fled to Turkey. There is no information or data about them.

I recommend "humanization" in dealing with this issue. Today, ISIS has made a huge breakthrough. The issue of fighters and jihadists is no longer linked to males. Families have become tied to this issue and taken control on the ground. There are thousands of women and children, and we must deal with them humanely, because tens of thousands cannot be condemned.

I believe that the matter has moved from ISIS control to “ISISization”. These camps, in practice, are pushing people towards ISISization, even if they did not believe in it. How can we now ask people to come out as human beings from camps with inhumane conditions, injustice, oppression, a feeling of extortion, of being at the mercy of others, of being slaves in the true sense of the word? What is happening is dangerous. Dealing with the children of the caliphate, or the cubs of the caliphate, present now in the thousands—as Ali said, 40% of al-Hol camp are children—we are talking about future “time bombs”. The Arab governments always deal with a day-to-day mentality, but if we take this issue from a strategic perspective, we are talking about the biggest threat to Arab national security and regional security: thousands of Iraqis and thousands of Syrians.

## Remarks

### Ali Taher al-Hamoud

Mohammad al-Azamat spoke about ideological quarantine, and I emphasize his call for a closed camp with close international monitoring and security in a place safe from revenge, in the Kurdistan region. This is the starting point. Then we deal with the situation there.

In response to Khaled Salim's question about rehabilitation, whether based on counter-extremism, integration, or something else: We are dealing with children from various age groups with varied levels of influence by ISIS ideology. We are also dealing women who belong to ISIS and do not belong to ISIS. There are multiple groups. If we feel that those women and children are not associated with ISIS or imbued with its ideology, then they can be gradually reintegrated into society. The word "gradually" means distributing them in other normal IDP camps in the Kurdistan or federal government regions, distributing them so they are not in one place. Then, they gradually make their way towards integration. As for children in each category, a rehabilitation program should be based on three elements: care, responsiveness, and stimulation. Does this program exist? No, there are no rehabilitation programs in Iraq. What exists is what we are proposing to the Iraqi government. The Iraqi approach is currently a security approach similar to the Egyptian approach.

What Mouayad al-Windawi spoke a lot about is that Iraqi society is torn, while we do already have some positive cases of solving outstanding problems from the time of ISIS in a tribal way. There are very successful and beautiful cases in some areas. But at the same time, there are negative cases, like the "jalwa" phenomenon that emerged after liberation, the forcible expulsion of families accused of having ties to ISIS from closed-off, tribal areas in the city of Haditha on the outskirts of Mosul.

In response to the question about the number of foreign women and children in al-Hol camp aside from Iraqi and Syrian women, there are some figures available that will be confirmed later about the number of Arab muhajirat women in al-Hol. There are 1,453 in all, not counting Iraqi and Syrian women. Morocco tops the list with 582 women and children, Egypt has 37, Tunisia has 251, Algeria has 98, Somalia has 56, Lebanon has 29 and Sudan has 24. Palestine and Yemen each have eight, while there are nine others from unspecified nationalities. I do not have a number for Jordanian men and women in the study.

Going back to Khaled Salim, and the measures of success in rehabilitating children in the experience of Baghdad. In fact, the discussion revolves around children, not women or men imbued with ISIS ideology. We are talking about children in early childhood. There are orphanages that, under Iraqi law, only take children under 18 years old. They are divided into smaller groups in each orphanage. All they did was place those children alongside regular children, with some monitoring and transparency in dealing with them without abuse. The children were dealt with normally, and they are living a life that's really moving for us as researchers. For example, an Afghan child who speaks the Iraqi dialect, who really makes you laugh and cry at the same time. This child does not have any identification documents. This is the problem we suffer from. Otherwise, they are normal children, and the word "rehabilitation" is too big for them. They need stimulation, play, and food so they do not suffer from malnutrition. This is what they need as children. For women, the matter is perhaps more complicated.

As many professors pointed out, there is no international strategy. The whole international strategy is to give some money as a political bribe to the Autonomous Administration in these Kurdish area of Syria for the purpose of dealing with al-Hol camp. This is the only available option now.

In answer to the question of whether there are programs inside the camp, in reality there are no programs inside the camp for rehabilitation, etc. Otherwise, we would not have seen these assassinations, clashes, tent burnings, organized crime, and hisbah groups inside the camp.

I propose that there be a camp in the Kurdistan region, removed from revenge attempts and so on, as well as a program in which there is some transparency and a humanitarian perspective. The matter of dealing with male fighters appears very difficult. There are problems from a cultural and legal standpoint, as well as in terms of the competence of those who evaluate programs and rehabilitation programs. So far, there are prisons for al-Qaeda and ISIS members, and there are dialogue programs along the lines of the Saudi Munasaha program. But these attempts are disorganized and sometimes counterproductive. The Iraqi security services have discovered many attempts by those who came from religious and academic institutions for the purpose of counseling and who became involved and became soldiers for ISIS leaders in the prisons.



## **Chapter Five**

# **Strategies and Policies to Combat Extremism and Terrorism: Review and Evaluation**



# **Review of Global Counterterrorism Strategies: The National Strategy for Countering Extremism and Terrorism in Jordan as a Model<sup>186</sup>**

4:30 – 5:45 p.m.

18 June 2021

**Dr. Saud al-Sharafat**

Director of the Shorufat Center for Globalization and Terrorism Studies (SCGTS)

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## **Global Models for Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism**

There is a consensus today among researchers and experts in the field of countering violent extremism and global terrorism that tough security strategies, by themselves, are no longer enough to address and eradicate the threat of terrorism. Indeed, a range of approaches are required in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, with programs of rehabilitation, reintegration and aftercare being among the most important elements of such strategies.

This paper will outline, in brief and in detail, global models for strategies of counterterrorism, before concentrating on the Jordanian strategy and its main areas of focus in combatting violent extremism and terrorism. In addition, this paper will discuss Jordan's efforts

<sup>186</sup> Paper presented at the “The Future of ISIS after the Fall of its Leaders” conference jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Foundation in Amman and the Politics and Society Institute in Amman on 18 June 2021

towards creating a program of rehabilitation, reintegration and aftercare for terrorists or suspected terrorists.

### **The US Model**

The first point to highlight about the US model is the absence of case studies on terrorist rehabilitation programs in US prisons. This is unsurprising, however, since the US attitude towards counterterrorism favors a traditional approach according to traditionalist law. The model is essentially based on a strategy of preventive war and regards terrorism merely as a form of violent crime. As a consequence, the terrorist's punishment is either to be killed in a counterterrorism operation or a suicide attack, or to receive a lengthy jail term without hope of the sentence being commuted and without access to rehabilitation programs.

The US counterterrorism model is a manifestation of realism – the school of thought in politics, international relations and security studies, which regards the state as the only dominant actor in, and most important unit for analyzing, international politics. As such, realism disregards the influence of non-state actors, most significantly terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS and Boko Haram, as well as other former nationalist and leftist groups most of whom have laid down arms and taken up politics or have been forced to disband because of war. It follows, then, that this school of thought doubts the ability of terrorist groups to change the structure and behavior of the state.

Owing to the relatively small number of terrorists in the US, and the limited number of terrorist operations carried out in the US compared to other countries (in 2020, the US ranked 29th out of 193 countries on the Global Terrorism Index (GTI)),<sup>187</sup> terrorism is not an issue that warrants the US investing in rehabilitation, reintegration and aftercare programs. Indeed, terrorists in the US receive the same treatment in

187 Institute for Economics & Peace. "Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism", Sydney, November 2020. Available from: <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>, p. 8 (accessed 15/6/2021).

terms of law, politics and security as other perpetrators of violent crime.

### **The Pakistani Model**

Pakistan has one of the highest risks of terrorist activity in the world, ranking seventh on the GTI in 2020.<sup>188</sup> It is also a country undergoing transition, as it emerges from a period of violent conflict after decades of domestic and global terrorism linked to past proxy wars and tensions with Russia, Afghanistan and India, as well as with the US following the attacks on 9/11. This is in addition to current US pressure on the Pakistani military and security establishment, plus accusations of its involvement in supporting terrorist groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and extremist groups in Kashmir. Such accusations reached their peak during the leadership of Donald Trump in the US and Imran Khan in Pakistan.

Trump accused Pakistan of having receiving significant amounts of financial aid and training but failing to do what was required of it to combat terrorism. This is critical given that the Pakistani programs are fully controlled by the security forces. The situation is, therefore, extremely complicated in Pakistan at present, and has the potential to threaten the counterterrorism efforts and rehabilitation programs currently in place – programs whose operators are looking to build on the practices and approaches used in Singapore.

### **The Danish Model**

Denmark is the second biggest European exporter of foreign terrorist fighters to Syria and Iraq – a total of 145 fighters, approximately half of whom have returned to Denmark. Nonetheless, Denmark has a low threat of domestic terrorism and was ranked 85th on the GTI in 2020.<sup>189</sup>

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188 Ibid.

189 Ibid. p. 9

Denmark is a shining example for programs of rehabilitation and social reintegration and strategies for preventing extremism. It is a model that relies on the collaboration between government institutions and civil society organizations centered around three regions (Aarhus, Copenhagen and Odense), which are increasingly being referred to in studies of rehabilitation and reintegration. Denmark's efforts are focused on how to confront the rise in extremism and radicalization among the youth, not only with Islamic terrorism groups but also right-wing extremists and populists active across Europe as a whole.

### **The Saudi Arabian Model**

Saudi Arabia possesses a distinct strategy in both countering violent extremism and terrorism, and in rehabilitation and reintegration – an experience originating from the series of al-Qaeda attacks in 2004. And as one of the main Arab and Islamic countries exporting foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, it remains under threat from terrorism and was ranked 32nd on the GTI for 2020.<sup>190</sup>

The Saudi programs, run by the Ministries of Islamic Affairs and Interior, became known for overseeing the rehabilitation of 1,200 Saudi detainees transferred from Guantanamo Bay after 9/11. They gained subsequent prominence through Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud's program for care and counselling, which was created in 2007 and is founded on three elements: counselling, rehabilitation and aftercare.

### **The Iraqi Model**

Iraq represents a chaotic testing ground both for global terror and for studies of terrorism, violent extremism and insurgent movements. For more than two decades, Iraq had the highest rate of terrorist activity in the world, until 2020 when it dropped to second place on the GTI behind Afghanistan.<sup>191</sup>

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190 Ibid. p. 8

191 Ibid. p. 8

Iraqi prisons currently have no rehabilitation programs. This is despite the fact that, following the 2003 occupation, US forces under Lt. Gen. John D. Gardner oversaw rehabilitation programs in Iraqi prisons, for which they adopted an approach based on the Malaysian model.

In spite of the shortcomings and criticisms of the rehabilitation program in Iraq, the Iraqi experience has become an important cornerstone in the literature on countering violent extremism and for creating programs of rehabilitation, reintegration and aftercare.

### **The Egyptian Model**

The experience of Egypt is unique in that Egyptian prisons were the first to see demonstrable successes in their rehabilitation programs. This was achieved through the religious reconsiderations carried out by many of the leaders of Islamic terrorist groups, notably al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and al-Jihad al-Islami (Egyptian Islamic Jihad). As such, it is the leaders of these groups themselves who can be said to have taken the initiative in reconsidering their extremist ideologies, rather than the state and government institutions. In general, Egypt follows a stringent approach in combatting terrorism and violent extremism. At the same time, it also accepts women and children returning to Egypt from the battlefields of Syria, as was the case with the daughter of Ayman al-Zawahiri.

However, given the ongoing threat of terrorism in Egypt (it ranked 14th on the GTI in 2020<sup>192</sup>), and in particular the threat posed by ISIS in Sinai, the Egyptian model needs to be revitalized.

### **The Singaporean Model**

Singapore is one of the most globalized countries in the world, and also one of the countries least affected by terrorism – ranking 135th on the GTI in 2020.<sup>193</sup>

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192 Ibid.

193 Ibid. p. 9

Nonetheless, Singapore has a unique model, widely praised by researchers, that consists of three main elements: psychological rehabilitation, social rehabilitation and religious rehabilitation. The program is run by the Internal Security Department (ISD), in conjunction with Islamic associations, to ensure that released detainees do not return to extremist behavior. The program's practitioners receive psychological assistance and help in counselling from the ISD and religious guidance from the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), as well as support from the Aftercare Group (ACG), a network of Malay-Muslim associations.

### **The German Model**

Germany ranked 38th on the GTI for 2017.<sup>194</sup> Its model for countering extremism and for rehabilitation and reintegration continues to lack sustainability, and is in need both of revision and a grand strategy. Overseen by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the German model is founded on combatting the roots of terrorism through preventing radicalism and promoting democratic values in society. The most significant examples of this model include the government's "Live Democracy!" program, the "Violence Prevention Network" program supported by civil society organizations (especially academics and experts), and the local government "Exit Program", which operates in the North Rhine-Westphalia region owing to the large Islamic community (over a million) who live in this area. All these programs are geared towards countering Islamic extremism, even though German right-wing extremist groups remain the priority in Germany's fight against extremism.

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194 Ibid.

## The Chinese Model

The program for rehabilitating terrorists in China is based on the Counter-Terrorism Law of 2015. The law is focused on dealing with the Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang autonomous region and rests on three basic elements: rehabilitating detainees, rehabilitating former prisoners and social rehabilitation. This program claims to be committed to winning the hearts and minds of Uighur Muslims. However, its international reputation is very poor, particularly in the context of the rivalry with the US and their political exploitation of this issue in order to contain China's global influence.

## The National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

In 2014, the National Policies Council and its specialist committees launched an extensive campaign across all levels of government and security, along with the ministries of Interior, Culture, Awqaf, Social Development, Foreign Affairs and Education, to create a comprehensive strategy for countering terrorism and violent extremism. This campaign resulted in the 2014 "National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism", the details of which were published in Jordanian newspapers under the title "The National Policy to Counter Extremism" in 2016. Moreover, the government formed a counter-extremism committee to develop a reference framework based on three key focus points: culture/religion, democracy and human rights.

**The term CVE refers to "the pre-emptive measures for combatting efforts by extremists to recruit supporters of extremism and violence, and to reduce the factors likely to contribute towards violent extremism and the recruitment of extremists".<sup>195</sup>**

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195 Official website of the Department of Homeland Security, (2016) "Countering Violent Extremism Task Force, What is CVE?" <https://www.dhs.gov/cve/what-is-cve>.

The culture/religion focus of the Jordanian strategy emphasized the need to support and promote an authentic Islamic culture based on the objectives (maqasid) of Sharia law. These maqasid exist to preserve the five foundational goals of Sharia, described by jurists as the ultimate purposes of religion: the preservation of faith, of self, of reason, of lineage and of property. As for the second aim, Jordan views that an absence of democracy frequently goes hand-in-hand with an increase in violence and extremism in its various forms. As a result, the strategy called for the promotion of democratic values, such as freedom, justice, equality, the respect for religions and minorities, and the rejection of religious and sectarian extremism. And lastly, the strategy urged the promotion of tolerance and pluralism and a culture that respects and reinforces human rights and the acceptance of others, through institutions tasked with guidance and education such as the ministries of Education; Higher Education and Scientific Research; Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places; and Culture; as well as youth and media institutions and the General Iftaa Department.

### **Assessing Jordan's National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism**

One of the main criticisms levelled at this strategy is its poor understanding of the causes and entry points of extremism. The strategy has also failed to create solid links or consistent coordination between the participating institutions and ministries to construct an integrated roadmap. Indeed, while the national strategy led to the establishment of the Unit for Combating Violent Religious Extremism and Terrorism, this Unit's official conception remains unclear of the role it can play at the civil level. As a case in point, the Unit was initially linked to the Interior Ministry and was transferred to the Culture Ministry. Before the Cabinet subsequently decided, in its session on 19/8/2018 (chaired by Omar Razzaz), to transfer the Unit to the office

of the Prime Minister in order to broaden its scope of operation and boost its role in combatting extremist ideology. Nevertheless, the Unit has not been allocated any real resources nor given the power to access the work of the relevant institutions and ministries or to coordinate with them.

Although one of the main features of the national strategy is that it is participatory in nature, it remains classified as “confidential” and under the supervision of the General Intelligence Directorate, the Public Security Directorate, and the ministries of Interior, Social Development, and Awqaf. The strategy has also been criticized for largely ignoring the socioeconomic and psychological causes of extremism, including the failure of development projects, the lack of social justice and prospects, the spread of poverty, unemployment, corruption, the monopoly of wealth, and uncertainty and fear about the future. Not to mention other dangerous societal shifts in values such as bullying, intolerance and attacks on the “Other” – acts which ostensibly constitute forms of terrorism no less serious than those involving actual killing and destruction.

The national strategy has also addressed the role of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education, through working with them to update educational curricula to conform with “moderate Islam”, even though this remains an intellectually vague term with no precise definition. However, the strategy has not assessed the Awqaf Ministry whose Islamic intellectual system functions as a source of violent extremism. Rather, the strategy has attempted to absolve the ministry of this accusation and has enhanced its capabilities by increasing the number of preachers, imams and muezzins.<sup>196</sup>

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196 Al-Sharafat, Saud (2018). “Assessing Jordan’s National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assessing-jordans-national-strategy-to-combat-violent-extremism>

What is more, the strategy has adopted an approach which enables both the Awqaf Ministry and the Iftaa Department to monopolize the legitimacy of speaking in the name of Islam and to offer interpretations of Islamic teachings. It has, however, provided some procedural measures to control the system of sermons, guidance, preaching, and mosques in order to ensure compliance with the state's religious discourse. In the meantime, neither the violent or non-violent political Islamist movements recognize this desired legitimacy, and the contradictory nature of the national strategy's moderatism has only strengthened these movements' case.

In my view, the policy was formulated from a religious and preaching perspective, and most of it directly relates to improving the work conditions and environment of the ministries and institutions involved the policy, rather than how to address terrorism and violent extremism.

I suspect that certain people at the participating institutions and ministries saw the state's enthusiasm to counter violent extremism and terrorism with an active strategy as an opportunity to present their demands (which may well have been legitimate) for financial support and improved work conditions.

Accordingly, the Ministry of Awqaf along with the Iftaa Department took the lead among the 14 active participants in the policy who, as a whole, presented a total of 195 practical proposals. Thirty percent of these came from the Ministry of Awqaf and the Iftaa Department who together put forward 59 proposals (of which ten were by the Iftaa Department). The most significant of which included a proposal to address the shortage of preachers, imams, and muezzins by creating 3,300 positions for imams and 700 for muezzins under the pretext of ensuring proper guidance and preventing mosques from becoming hotbeds of extremism. This was in addition to proposals such as the

following: complete and proper control of all financial donations and in-kind contributions at mosques, by restricting these to authorized committees and take the necessary measures for anyone who does not comply; oversee preaching and religious activities in Syrian refugee camps; and coordination with the Interior Ministry and the security forces in developing the necessary plans to launch a program of dialogue with extremists in reform and rehabilitation centers.

The Ministry of Awqaf and the Iftaa Department further presented a vision of the arrangements for engaging in dialogue with moderate Salafis and moderate members of the Sufi Tablighi Jamaat group – to win the moderates' support and ensure they do not become aligned with terrorist groups (so that those hoping to recruit them do not get such a chance). And to bring about a religions and national reconciliation between all sides in this instance, provided that the Ministry of Awqaf is in charge of all missionary activity. The Ministry of Awqaf and the Iftaa Department also proposed to increase efforts and develop the necessary plans for spreading enlightened modes of thinking and portraying a moderate image of Islam, particularly in cities with a rise in Takfirism (Ma'an, Zarqa, Russeifa, Irbid, Salt and Kerak); to oversee and review fatwas violating Sharia law that are issued by extremist parties, individuals and organizations – to respond to these by demonstrating they are false, and with a specialist monitor to be set up for this purpose; and to hold intellectual meetings and forums, and participate in conferences advocating unity and renouncing violence, extremism and terrorism in all its forms.

The most significant proposals submitted by the other parties include the following proposals from the Ministry of Culture: continue the cultural program at reform and rehabilitation centers in conjunction with the Public Security Directorate; foster the writing of books and research, and to hold writing competitions, on the subject

of extremism and terrorism – looking at the root causes and how to address and combat both phenomena; and hold conferences dedicated to spreading moderate thinking and combatting extremist ideology. In addition, the Ministry of Interior proposed to prohibit the licensing of parties that have a religious character (whether Islamic, Christian or other).

The Ministry of Information and Communications Technology proposed for the National Information Technology Center to have control over the websites of extremist and Takfiri groups which spread, incite or advocate Takfirism, or which serve as a means for members of such groups to communicate online.

Meanwhile the Armed Forces proposed amending the military science curriculum taught in Jordanian universities, community colleges and military culture schools throughout the country. They suggested for the curriculum to be developed with a focus on countering extremism and Takfirism. In addition, they proposed for the Royal Jordanian National Defense College (RJNDC) to conduct further studies on extremism and Takfirism and their influence on national security, and to create a curriculum for countering extremist ideology to be taught at the military department of Mutah University and at all military colleges and institutes.

Indeed, the RJNDC has already launched a one-year master's program, consisting of 36 study hours, titled: "Strategies for Countering Extremism and Terrorism", the first cohort of which graduated in 2018. As well as a center for combatting extremism under the administrative authority of the RJNDC which was set up with funding from the Japanese government.

Additional proposals were put forward by the Public Security Directorate: create professionally specialized divisions and sections for combatting extremist ideology and monitoring new developments

with the Iftaa Department and the Department of Preventive Security; and provide skill development for participants in the dialogue to counter extremism and Takfirism, through specialist courses paid for either by Iftaa Department or the Department of Preventive Security. It also proposed to strengthen the role of reform and rehabilitation centers in combatting extremist ideology by continuing to isolate extremist prisoners from other inmates, and promoting dialogue with prisoners affiliated to extremist groups and terrorist organizations. In this case, there is the potential to draw on the experience of extremists who themselves have been reformed as a result of such dialogue, while protecting the other inmates from engaging with extremist ideology and involving reformed Takfiris in aftercare services once they leave these centers, in cooperation with the relevant bodies such as the ministries of Labor and Social Development, and the Zakat Fund. And, finally, the Public Security Directorate proposed not allowing human rights organizations to visit reform and rehabilitation centers until they have coordinated with the National Center for Human Rights.

Overall, many of these proposals have already been implemented, especially those relating to the military and security. Still some proposals have yet to be implemented and others are in progress but have not yet been announced.

The 400-page National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism is classified as “confidential”<sup>197</sup> and is overseen by the General Intelligence Department, the Public Security Directorate, and the Ministries of Interior, Social Development and Awqaf. Whereas officials assumed that the strategy had already been put into action (within its specific timelines), it has in fact encountered a lack of coordination between the strategy’s participating bodies.<sup>198</sup>

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197 Ibid.

198 Ibid.

A terrorism report by the US Department of State praised Jordan's efforts and measures to combat terrorism and undermine the violent ideologies that underpin ISIS and other extremist organizations. However, the report criticized the progress and requirements for implementing some of the strategy's objectives.<sup>199</sup>

What is more, even though officials I spoke to from the security forces and the Ministry of Culture gave a positive appraisal of the program's results, the actual results are unknown to experts, commentators, researchers and journalists. Indeed, to date, there is no transparency or free access to information on the details and achievements of this program.

### **Recommendations**

The COVID-19 pandemic has not eradicated terrorism in Jordan, with ISIS continuing to pose a major threat to Jordanian national security. Jordan witnessed a marked reduction in terrorist activity in 2020 according to the Terrorism Index in Jordan (TIJ) (published annually by the Shorufat Center for Globalization and Terrorism Studies (SCGTS)), which indicates that the threat from ISIS has significantly declined. Jordan was effectively free from terrorism in 2020: there were no terrorist operations, which is the first time since 2011 that Jordan has not suffered any attacks.<sup>200</sup> Nevertheless, this does not mean that the terror threat against Jordan has ended.

In light of the potential increase in domestic terrorist operations over the next few years, according to the TIJ's expectations,<sup>201</sup> and the likely return of many fighters to Jordan, I believe the national strategy needs to be reviewed and revised. This is particularly important given that the strategy was formulated from a religious and

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199 Ibid.

200 "Terrorism Index in Jordan (2020)", Shorufat Center for Globalization and Terrorism Studies, accessible (in Arabic) at: <https://bit.ly/3nESqwY>

201 Ibid.

preaching perspective, with an overwhelming focus on improving the work environment and conditions at the participating ministries and institutions, rather than on how to address terrorism and extremism.

In order for this strategy to succeed, it must commit to being transparent and to receiving critical assessment and feedback. Researchers and journalists must also be given access to necessary information on a “need-to-know basis”, which would ultimately allow all parties of government as well as civil society organizations to participate in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, without undermining national or international security.

Moreover, this strategy must be bolstered with input from experts in psychology, politics, society and Sharia law, in addition to specialists in terrorism and violent extremism qualified to engage in dialogue with individuals who adhere to terrorist ideologies. Involving a larger segment of Jordanian society beyond the traditional government channels will help to increase the effectiveness of Jordan’s counterterrorism policy – making it more responsive to current and future threats.

It is important that this strategy is updated and issued every year as part of a draft strategy for national security and counterterrorism. It is also essential that it be published in the media, and for discussions on the strategy to be held between all active parties in society, as is common practice in the US. Similarly, the strategy should be treated with the same importance, and the same commitment to timelines, as the state budget and the Audit Bureau. Furthermore, it should be provided with the necessary financial resources from both the state’s general budget and from global partners, particularly the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism.

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## **Strategies and Policies to Combat Extremism and Terrorism: Review and Evaluation**

In this chapter, the experts discuss international, regional, and Arab strategies and policies to combat extremism and terrorism. They review the main approaches and hypotheses that different governments and states in the world have relied upon in defining perceptions of countering extremism and combating terrorism. These models range from rigid approaches with military and security force, religious approaches, and cultural approaches.

Perhaps the main question today is: after the military defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, how should global, regional, and local strategies to combat extremism and terrorism be reassessed? A number of questions and queries thus emerge: What are the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies? What are the shortcomings? And what is needed in the coming phase to avoid the rise, spread, and dissemination of extremist and terrorist groups?

In this chapter, Jordanian expert Dr. Saud al-Sharafat, the chairman of the Shorufat Center for Globalization and Terrorism Studies, presents a paper in which he considers many global and Arab models in the field of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. He sheds light in particular on the Jordan's experience and its national counter-extremism strategy.

Then, the experts and researchers discuss al-Sharafat's paper and present their perceptions of the various areas and aspects involved in the levels and trends of the needed reassessment of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism strategies and policies.

# Discussion

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## **Charles Lister**

Starting with counter-terrorism policies, the US has a problematic track record on counter-terrorism policies and policies to combat violent extremist ideologies. Many researchers, and the speaker among them, have directed criticisms at American counter-terrorism policies. Voices have been raised about the accumulated mistakes of American policies on terrorism since the 9/11 attacks. The challenge is, how to get politicians and policymakers to listen?

From an American and European point of view, the focus on confronting terrorism militarily and on the ground suffers from many flaws and problems. I would like to say that the insistence on using this approach has led to some improvement in practical military tactics on the ground over time, given American forces' use of drones in northeast Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen over the past two years. These drones can strike their targets with high precision. For example, a drone can hit a person riding next to the driver of a car without hitting the driver. In short, talk of the military approach does not end.

The US will not stop using military force, although recently it has reduced its use. The real problem we face is from decision-makers and politicians in the US. For the past 15 or 20 years, they have preferred to use military force in counter-terrorism, with the aim of protecting American territory. Protecting Syrians, Afghans, or others does not in fact matter to them. American politicians believe this approach has been fruitful, especially against Salafi jihadists, since American territory is safer than before.

The other complex problem we face is that, even if the US has become safer, the situation in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere has

grown worse with threats and extremist ideologies more widespread than before. I have written a book, *Winning the Battle, Losing the War*, in which I describe what happened over the past two decades. The current President Biden has put forward a partial solution to continue to fight terrorism, but with far fewer American forces than before, in partnership with the local forces of any country involved. Here, the work focuses on capacity building and cooperation with local partners. These partners could be non-governmental groups such as the SDF in Syria, as well as governmental bodies. This administration and previous administrations have made many investments in this field, with law enforcement and intelligence operations. This may be a step in the right direction, alongside the ideas previously mentioned in these discussions about de-radicalization and rehabilitation. But there is absolutely no interest in solving the problem of the camps and returning their muhajirin citizens in Syria and Iraq to their countries of origin.

The main problem, which can be described as toxic, is that our politicians cannot even consider repatriating their citizens, because they won't be reelected. I met with one high-ranking officer, whose name I won't mention, and asked him a question about how ISIS fighters and their families would be dealt with after the Baghouz area in Syria is captured. He answered saying that they were in a war of annihilation against those fighters, hoping to kill the largest possible number of them. As a result of this cold military strategy, the numbers of ISIS fighters have greatly increased, making them difficult to control. There is no real strategy in this matter!

As a result, the solution lies not only with the presence of local forces fighting ISIS, but also with encouraging the governments concerned to speak in one voice to increase pressure on the international community to issue resolutions strongly supporting these governments. This

would remove the full burden from them, and there would be shared responsibility among all sides.

Looking at the big picture, the solution does not only involve fighting ISIS ideology. Ideology is not the issue, or the root cause of all this. Rather, it is a tool to motivate this organization. The main roots of the crisis lie with policies, the economy, unequal political representation, corruption, mismanagement, and many socioeconomic problems.

So long as these factors remain, we will see more young people, frustrated men and women, who will join these movements and organizations. Other generations will do so as well. These factors have been dealt with before, but the preferred approach has been to neutralize extremist ideologies and not deal with these underlying issues. Because if we look deeply at the roots of these primary problems, we will see that the many of the people who joined ISIS were not motivated by ideology, but rather by politics, local policies, and domestic motivations in local communities.

### **Mohammad al-Azamat**

I believe that the National Strategy to Counter Terrorism and Extremism is oriented around a sermonizing discourse, rather than one of reform or rehabilitation. The public perception about terrorism and extremism in Jordan and all the Arab countries assumes that these phenomena arise from a misunderstanding of Islam. In the Arab world generally, the use of names and slogans with an Islamic character or flavor to describe the phenomenon of extremism and terrorism is predominant. That means an implicit acknowledgement by all the institutions and governments in Jordan that the Islamic religion is a major cause of terrorism and extremism. In contrast, recent European studies have concluded that political and economic reasons are what drive young people to join terrorist and extremist organizations.

Over my years in one of the security services working with young

people who had taken up extremist ideology, I came to the conclusion that a high percentage of them did not join terrorist organizations out of adherence to ideologies. Rather, they joined seeking adventure, weapons, and violence under the cover of legitimized violence and the guise of religion, impersonating the mujahid.

I believe that non-religious approaches are necessary in order to attain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of extremism. In Jordan, there is a reform program, but it is based on the Sharia religious approach. So its result is clear, that ignorance of Islam is a main reason for young people to join jihad. Moreover, this program does not address the social and economic conditions that drive young people to join these organizations.

The bottom line is that the problem in Jordan and the Arab world is that we are still dealing with extremism and terrorism as a defect in the understanding of religion and Sharia rulings related to the jurisprudence of jihad and so on. This template will lead us to a vicious cycle that will not counter extremism and terrorism. It is as though we are sending a clear message to the world that the problem of extremism and terrorism is due to Islam. This, in fact, does more to harm religion than to preserve it.

### **Hassan Abu Haniyeh**

In sum, the Jordanian strategy is centered on the ideological dimension, as though this phenomenon means submitting to Orientalist and culturalist approaches: that culture and religion are the two main determinants of violence in the region. But researchers and experts know that this is a complex phenomenon linked to a local circumstance where the prospects for any political solution are closed off. It is tied to corruption and the lack of representation, democracy, human rights, and freedoms.

It is also tied to the lack of any solution being reached to the Palestinian issue, leaving things at a standstill. There is also the problem of the sectarian cold war within the Arab world—between Iran and the Gulf States in particular—in which all parties are involved.

There is certainly the international situation of foreign interventions and neoliberal globalization, which has led to the impoverishment of the middle classes. All these local, regional, and international circumstances create the phenomenon of terrorism. And we find these regimes exploiting terrorism. We must understand that there is collusion with the West, as the researcher Charles Lister discussed. What matters to the West is that there are no 9/11-style attacks. We know that jihadist groups like the Islamic State have taken heed of this, and their goal became territorial control to begin with. Even ISIS has not carried out attacks except for after it was attacked, when it began its foreign attacks. It prefers the near enemy. Even al-Qaeda, in the context of its transformations, went to the Ansar al-Sharia system, local government, and territorial control to avoid this pretext.

A defect in religion requires a cultural approach, hence the focus on the issue of mosques, discourse, and local curricula without looking at the deep regional, local, and international circumstances that drive people to join ISIS. Almost 20 years after September 11, 2001, we are seeing tactical successes without strategic successes. I believe that the Arab regimes overall take advantage of counter-terrorism, in the sense that we want to implement a strategy, but there is a lack of allocations and resources so we need funds to implement these programs. We from the community of experts and researchers see the need to free the fight against terrorism from this relationship, so that authoritarianism would not be the main approach. Authoritarianism is one of the most important components of this global jihadist revival. After all these years, we see that it is growing worse. Ultimately, this is not a Western

or American problem, no matter how much we may discuss grievances – the problem is within the Arab world. The ISIS breakthrough we have seen is the result of the coup and counterrevolutions against the peoples' demands for freedom, justice, and dignity.

### **Khaled Salim**

At a minimum, centering the discussion around extremist ideology eliminates government responsibility for economic, social, and cultural conditions. Focusing on the ideological aspect by discussing rehabilitation and integration programs, such as the *Munasaha* in Saudi Arabia or the program undertaken by the *Mohammadia League* in Morocco, is an attempt to avoid the political, economic, and social challenges that lead to extremism. This is a problematic fact that needs critical review. The other aspect is that the so-called strategy is a national plan, not a strategy. The exact name as published is the *National Plan to Counter Extremism*, not *violent extremism*. Even the terminology needs to be scrutinized.

Going back to the Master's thesis by Rasha Fityan presented at the Hashemite University, we see that 14 institutions contributed to developing this plan. Three are security institutions, and 11 are non-security institutions. This is a positive indication that the preventive method is being adopted, but there is a predominance of the non-security aspect in the plan. This contrasts with the method used in Britain, which relies on the intersection between prevention and tracking, as it is practically impossible to separate the two. The other aspect is the "number of interventions", as the speaker put it. The total number of interventions in drafting the plan is about 195: 18% security interventions and 82% non-security interventions. This indicates that the religious aspect prevails in this matter, as the researcher Abu Hanieh mentioned. Likewise, there are 45 interventions in religious affairs, the highest proportion, followed by 17 interventions by the

Ministry of Political Development, followed by lower proportions. In the speaker's opinion, this indicates that the ideological side takes precedence over other aspects.

Another important issue, considering the King's past speeches, is that his speeches in the period from 2000-2005 revolved around ideology. Then from 2006-2011, they revolved around regional and international conditions. From 2011 until today, most of the speeches revolve around oppression and the problem of democracy and fighting extremism. There is some confusion between His Majesty's speeches and what has been expressed in the National Policy Paper or the National Plan to Counter Extremism. The question here is why the conditions and factors that lead to extremism have not been spoken about more clearly, despite the King's emphasis on combating them in his latest speeches?

### **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

At the outset, I do not believe that there is seriousness in combating extremism and terrorism. Rather, there is business and investment in extremism and terrorism in the Arab world. Arab countries are keen to keep extremism and terrorism as the alternative to the existing regimes, in all cases. We have seen that regimes, in their relationship with the West, have politically exploited the idea of counter-terrorism. But I believe that extremism and terrorism is the legitimate child of the Arab regimes' policies. Therefore, this is a real dilemma that we must deal with.

The second observation, as mentioned by researchers Charles Lister and Abu Haniyeh, is that US foreign policy is not concerned with countering extremism and terrorism so much as it is concerned with protecting American national security. I believe there is a gap between its vision of American national security and the programs it launches to combat extremism and terrorism. At the level of countries, there are

still European attempts to counter extremism and terrorism. Dr. Saud mentioned important experiments that we referred to in multiple previous conferences with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. These include the Danish experiment, which is good, the British experiment, which has attempts, and the Saudi and Emirati experiments. The latter two have a problem in that they adopt the religious perspective, which dwarfs the issue of countering extremism and terrorism. If you enter the Sakinah site, for example, it is linked to counter-extremism in Saudi Arabia, where you find democracy is prohibited, demonstrations are prohibited, and political action is prohibited.

Regimes that forbid democratization are the ones that design counter-terrorism strategies and policies. The irony is that this political closure is what has led to extremism. This is the essence of the contradiction in most Arab countries.

Coming to Jordan, I have very quick and cursory remarks supporting and confirming everything Dr. Saud said, as well as what Mohammad al-Azamat and Khaled mentioned, as we are working on studies of the sociology of extremism in Jordan. First, we must talk about the period before going to prison, the period while in prison, and the period after prison. These are three stages in Jordan that are glossed over. Today, prison breeds extremism and terrorism in Jordan.

The biggest crime we have committed in Jordan is with the amendments to the terrorism law. The amendments have put those who promote terrorism in prison, put them in the terrorist wards. Today, there are hundreds of young people who only went to prison for giving a “like”, saying a word, or writing in a WhatsApp group, and then after prison they became part of ISIS. We have provided a delivery service for ISIS. This is dangerous. More dangerous than that is that we also humiliate people after they leave prison. We don’t leave a door open for them. We continue to oppress anyone who goes to

prison after he gets out. It is as though we are effectively telling him, “you have no choice but terrorism and extremism”. We close the doors to him. He can’t get a certificate of non-conviction and is forbidden to travel. An extremist’s family is treated as though they are extremists, as though they produced this person, so this is their responsibility. We commit grave errors in countering extremism and terrorism.

## Remarks

### Saud al-Sharafat

I would like to comment on the conference discussions with several points:

- First, those known as Salafis and takfiris have no real knowledge of the ideology of Salafism or takfiri Salafism, to the extent that they do not pray in mosques. So how can the state devote a full strategy and financial support to the mosques?
- The state, represented by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Awqaf, believes that it has a monopoly on the public sphere, especially in matters of religion. It believes that the so-called terrorists are competing with it in this field it controls, and that it speaks with the same discourse and language of these groups.
- There is confusion in the understanding and employment of the word “Kharijites” in state speeches and discourses about terrorism. The term “Kharijites” is not precise in these discourses, and does not apply to the case of those terrorists. The Kharijites have a known definition that is historically and ethically accurate. Is this term compatible with a national counter-terrorism strategy? Do they not know that there is a street in the Shmeisani neighborhood of Amman called Qatari ibn al-Fuja’a? And while the state attacks Kharijites it opens a street for them, and names it for the most famous leader of the Kharijites?
- I see the Arab world as having drifted to a geography of anger. Political, economic, and social conditions, as well as changes to the scene have all contributed to a state of turmoil and anger. Violent extremism is one manifestation of this. Other manifestations are poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and a sense of alienation, surrender and injustice, which drives people to a state of hatred and mistrust manifested in fear of the other.

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- There is a gap between the rhetoric with which His Majesty spoke about extremism and terrorism, and its connection to globalization and counter-extremism strategy. The King is aware of the process and of global interdependence in a sense that is not limited to religious extremism alone. He emphasizes a holistic approach to counter-terrorism. More precisely, a holistic methodology that is more than the sum of its parts. It is necessary to look at the whole picture. The economic, social, cultural, and religious factors related to Islam and the Islamic code as a whole must be looked at more comprehensively, without focusing on the particulars and ignoring one side or another.



## **Chapter Six**

# **The Future of Global Jihadism: Trends and Approaches**

## **The Future of Global Jihadism: Trends and Approaches**

This chapter discusses the future prospects of global jihadism and the groups associated with it. It focuses especially on the question of the conflict between ISIS and al-Qaeda and that conflict's impact on the expansion of jihadists and local groups in different parts of the world.

This chapter includes two main papers. The first is by Hassan Abu Haniyeh, a Jordanian researcher on terrorism and extremist affairs. In it, he talks about the different schools of global jihadism and future prospects. The second paper is presented by Abbas Saleh, a Sudanese researcher specializing in terrorism issues. In this paper, he discusses the spread of jihadist groups in Africa and how to confront this phenomenon.

The researchers and experts participating in this seminar then discuss the future prospects of global jihadism and of a post-caliphate ISIS. They also present their final views, conclusions, summaries, and recommendations in this final chapter of the book.

# After the Caliphate: Terrorism and International Political Transformations

## Hassan Abu Hanieh

Twenty years after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S.-led international campaign against terrorism has achieved clear, tactical victories in the moment but not sustainable strategic success. Global jihadism, led by al-Qaeda, has proven its flexibility, adaptability, resilience, and reach. The world was surprised about six years ago, in June 2014, by the emergence of a new jihadi, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria and installed himself as caliph. His group, renamed the Islamic State, controlled a territory approximately the size of Britain, encompassing a population of 10 million people. At the time, the achievements of al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups appeared trifling in comparison. The pull of the Islamic State's and al-Qaeda's organizational ideology was still strong, and a small number of their followers in the West would seek to take up arms. Although the threat today is lesser than in 2014, policymakers must recognize that partial success may be the best they can hope to achieve.<sup>205</sup>

The task of expelling the Islamic State from areas it controlled in Iraq and Syria was not as easy as the Islamic State's takeover of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. In Mosul, six Iraqi army divisions collapsed, as did federal police forces and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Local forces were unable to check ISIS fighters' rapid advance toward Erbil and Baghdad until a broad international coalition was formed in September 2014. Led by the United States and involving more than 80 countries, the coalition was tasked with repelling ISIS attacks and removing them from the territory under their control. Operation

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<sup>205</sup> See Daniel Byman, "What Comes After ISIS?" The "Brookings Institute, 22 February 2019: <https://tinyurl.com/22j7h938>

Inherent Resolve was launched in October 2014 in coordination with field-level allies in Iraq and Syria.<sup>206</sup>

Since the loss of the last ISIS enclave in the Baghuz area of northeast Syria in March 2019, the organization's capability to launch major attacks has declined. It has shifted approaches from classical warfare, territorial control, and empowerment to attrition warfare, guerrilla tactics, and retaliation, and has transitioned from centralization to decentralization. Meanwhile, interest in combating terrorism declined with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and American priorities changed to focus on strategic competition with China and Russia, as well as confronting the consequences of the health and economic crisis that the pandemic created. The American approach to dealing with terrorism is extremely important, as it is the lead nation in anti-terrorism efforts. The last two decades have demonstrated the weakness of local regimes in confronting terrorism and their military, security, and economic shortcomings in the face of jihadi movements. Moreover, they have been unable to establish political systems with legitimacy and stability, and democratic norms and human rights are weak or absent. These are root causes of violent extremism and create an ideal environment for the growth of terrorism.

In this context, the American reconsideration of its priorities in the war on terrorism has repercussions for the rest of the world. In spite of tactical successes, the American approach is strategically flawed. The war on terrorism has turned into the longest ongoing armed conflict in U.S. history, according to Bruce Hoffman, lasting longer than U.S. participation in both World Wars and even American combat operations during the Vietnam War. The war on terrorism has cost the United States more than \$5 trillion and has claimed more the lives of more than 7,000 U.S. servicemembers. Nevertheless, as

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206 See Michael Knights, "Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq, By the Numbers", The Washington Institute, 29 March 2017: <https://tinyurl.com/4ncsc526>

the war on terrorism enters its third decade, any kind of real victory seems more elusive than ever. Stability and security remain perishable goods in Iraq these days. Eighteen years later, the seeds of democracy that those who planned the invasion hoped to plant in Baghdad, thus enabling democracy to spread throughout the region, remain tragically dormant. The calamitous American experiment in Iraq led to unintended consequences, spreading misery, death, and ongoing destruction there, and those effects have extended to neighboring countries as well. Twenty years after the liberation of Afghanistan from the Taliban, the United States has foolishly entered a rushed agreement that will in all likelihood result in the Taliban's return to power.<sup>207</sup>

Indeed, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a disaster by all measures. It enabled the ascension of al-Qaeda and global jihadism, and simultaneously enabled Iran to expand and spread its influence, as American intervention contributed to a quantum leap for Sunni and Shiite jihadism. In Afghanistan, the U.S. invasion in 2001 ultimately led to the growth of the jihadi movement. The Taliban is on the verge of reinstating the Islamic Emirate as soon as the American forces leave, sometime before September, as Biden pledges to end "America's forever wars".

The term "forever war" or "endless war" – used frequently by U.S. President Joe Biden and Donald Trump before to describe the sort of conflicts the United States must leave behind – refers simply to the country's wars over the last two decades following the 9/11 attacks under the banner of the "war on terrorism". Open-ended in both time and space, the forever or endless war, as many people call it, consists primarily of a broad range of military actions outside the United States

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207 See Bruce Hoffman, "The War on Terror 20 Years On: Crossroads or Cul-de-Sac?" Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 18 March 2021: <https://tinyurl.com/4shns598>  
English Ver: <https://institute.global/policy/war-terror-20-years-crossroads-or-cul-de-sac>

against an invisible enemy called terrorism. Then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told us that this enemy was “not just in Afghanistan” but also in Iraq and elsewhere: “It is in 50 or 60 countries, and it simply has to be liquidated”. During his confirmation hearing in the Senate, Biden’s secretary of state, Anthony Blinken, stressed, “We want to end this so-called forever war”. It may be difficult for those born since 9/11 to imagine the extent of the changes that occurred after the attacks. Five years later, with two endless wars in their early stages, the United States had entered a state of permanent war. What was then called the war on terrorism has been described as “a generations-long conflict similar to the Cold War, a conflict that may continue for decades as allies work to eradicate terrorists around the world and fight extremists who want to rule the world”.<sup>208</sup>

The post-9/11 U.S. approach to combating terrorism is characterized by an aggressive, global defense forward posture. As former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, “it is better to fight them on their 10-yard line than on our 10-yard line”. This anti-terrorism project has been a remarkable success from a tactical perspective. It has thwarted attacks and disrupted terrorist networks. Protection from future attacks requires constant vigilance and caution, but nearly 20 years after the 9/11 attacks, according to Matthew Levitt, there is “growing consensus” that this forward defense posture that the United States has adopted for combating terrorism “is neither financially sustainable nor strategically balanced against the resource needs of other national security threats”. The last two U.S. administrations have been in agreement that the United States must reduce its military presence around the world – a reversal of the long-standing global anti-terrorism model led by the United States and enabled by its partners

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208 See “Despite his repeated promises, why Biden will fail to end America’s ‘long-term’ wars”, Arabic Post: <https://tinyurl.com/tuabreby> | English Ver: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/19/can-biden-end-americas-forever-wars/>

– and focus its efforts on the groups most capable of targeting the American homeland. As the 2018 National Defense Strategy explains, “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security”. As the Biden administration begins implementing its decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan, however, translating these ideas into action on the ground has proven to be an elusive goal.<sup>209</sup>

The positive spin on ending forever war relies on success in preventing attacks on U.S. territory along the lines of the 9/11 attacks, and success in preventing large-scale attacks on the West by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. This has been largely achieved, as the United States has not witnessed major coordinated attacks, nor have European countries since the Paris attacks of November 2015; the last major attack ISIS carried out was against the Reina nightclub in Istanbul in January 2017. The efforts of the Washington-led international coalition led to the defeat of the IS Caliphate and the capture or killing of enough ISIS leaders to reduce the risk of large-scale attacks directed from abroad.

In spite of all those efforts, there remains a combination of personal, group, societal, and sociopolitical factors that continue to generate extremism and spur people to violence. According to Russell Travers, “there are roughly four times the number of radicalized individuals today as there were on 9/11, and the U.S. database of known or suspected terrorists has grown by a factor of twenty since then. As radicalized populations grow, America’s ability to identify, capture, and kill terrorists will decline. Furthermore, migration out of Africa, due in part to global warming, is engendering far-right extremism against refugees and asylum seekers in Europe. The burgeoning of the radicalized community requires robust terrorism prevention efforts”.

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209 See Matthew Levitt, “Harmonizing Counterterrorism and Great-Power Competition”, The Washington Institute, 9 May 2021: <https://tinyurl.com/kw9tp6h4>

The truth is that decades of investing to counteract a severe threat can, over time, come at the expense of investing to confront other threats that are just as urgent. In November 2019, Russell E. Travers, the acting director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, said: “We will never eliminate terrorism, but a tremendous amount of good work has been done, which facilitates a conversation about comparative risk”.<sup>210</sup>

Nevertheless, according to retired Lt. Gen. Michael K. Nagata, “after nearly two decades, and despite all that we should rightly be proud of, the time has come to ask ourselves some difficult but necessary questions: Despite the capabilities we have developed and the progress we have achieved, why is terrorism today more widespread and complex than when we began? Why has terrorism proven to be so resilient and adaptive despite our successes and the continuing pressure and might that we and the world bring to bear against it?” An assessment based on and drawn from the Global Terrorism Database compiled by the START program at the University of Maryland is a good example of how basic trends in terrorism have become very alarming despite our intensive efforts. Since 2010, the number of terrorism-related deaths worldwide has increased by more than 300 percent, and the number of terrorist attacks with victims has increased by about 200 percent. Apart from that, here in the United States, federal law enforcement authorities are conducting some 1,000 terrorism-related investigations in our local communities in all 50 states.<sup>211</sup>

The recognition that terrorism is more widespread and complex today than when the war on terrorism began, and that terrorism has become more resilient and adaptive despite tactical successes and

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<sup>210</sup> See Russell Travers, “Counterterrorism in an Era of Competing Priorities: Ten Key Considerations”, The Washington Institute, 12 November 2019: <https://tinyurl.com/829var2d> [The first quote in this paragraph is taken from the article in the footnote, [but the second is actually taken from this report](#)]

<sup>211</sup> See Lt. Gen. Michael K. Nagata, “Taking Stock of U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts Since 9/11”, The Washington Institute, 10 July 2018: <https://tinyurl.com/mp2a8y33>

continued ongoing pressure and might, does not require overwhelming evidence. Outside Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda still have active branches and provinces (wilayat) in several countries. Despite the increasing capabilities of some branches, especially in Africa, both organizations have found it difficult to move their centers of gravity from their respective traditional strongholds to locations in other countries where they have established branches and wilayat, such as Sinai, Libya, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, Nigeria, West Africa, Somalia, East Africa, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, Chechnya, and the North Caucasus. In all of these places, the organizations have neither widespread territorial control nor any significant funding, and they are under pressure from local, regional, and international counterterrorism agencies. It is expected that ISIS will travel one of two paths in the coming phase. The first is that disintegration of the organization could lead it to consolidate into a small, centralized, albeit weaker group. The second possibility is that the organization will adopt the approach taken by al-Qaeda at the start of the new millennium, in that its influence will diminish at the core (Iraq and Syria) as momentum shifts to its provincial operations in areas such as Afghanistan, Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, and Yemen.<sup>212</sup>

It should be borne in mind that a final defeat of the jihadi movement is unrealistic and unfeasible. Global jihadism remains attractive enough, as it does not involve a military approach for groups operating outside national and community contexts. Jihadism is based on deeply rooted political, economic, and social causes that take on variable, flexible dimensions, and it is adaptable. Once an elite, centralized, pioneering organization in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has become more widespread, and there is now internal competition for influence and control. The organization became more dangerous after it split into three jihadist

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212 See Charlie Winter and Colin Clarke, "Is ISIS Breaking Apart?" Foreign Affairs, <https://tinyurl.com/htyu8yay> | [[Link to English-language version in Foreign Affairs](#)]

schools. Following the Arab Spring, global jihadism split into three major schools:

**The first** adheres to the traditional al-Qaeda agenda as led by Osama bin Laden. Its priorities call for prioritizing the “far enemy”, represented by the West in general and the United States in particular as a protector of totalitarian Arab regimes and a sponsor of Israel, its strategic ally. This school has adopted a combat and strategic approach that revolves around retaliation, based on the concept of *jihad al-nikaya* (fighting to hurt the enemy). At the forefront of its mission is to bring the entire Islamic community into a state of jihad, regardless of the sectarian division of Sunni and Shiite. This school has therefore worked to forge relations with Iran and to cooperate with all Islamic groups in spite of disagreements about how to manage public affairs and their different approaches to religious advocacy, politics, and jihad. It has therefore worked to initiate ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups. According to al-Qaeda, all of these elements in combination make up the Islamic community (the Ummah) that will implement Sharia law and ultimately achieve the goal of establishing a caliphate. Bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, worked to bridge the gap between elite and popular tendencies by putting forward the theory of *Ansar al-Sharia* (“supporters of Islamic law”), which became al-Qaeda’s core strategy and which would lead to the disintegration of the organization.

**The second** is driven by the Iraqi branch known as the Islamic State, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Its agenda is based on prioritizing the confrontation of the “near enemy” within the framework of an overarching doctrine of integrating local, regional, and international jihadism and combining various modes and methods of jihad. Chief among them are, first, the jihad of empowerment (*tamkin*), which involves control of territory, the imposition of its rule and the

implementation of Sharia law, and the declaration of a caliphate. The second is jihad al-nikaya, pursued through retaliatory military operations reliant on very violent tactics by lone wolves and on coordinated attacks, including suicide and kamikaze-style attacks. The third is the jihad of solidarity, meaning support and assistance for causes that ISIS regards as matters of Islamic law. ISIS insists on fighting the near enemy, i.e. regimes it sees as led by apostates and unbelievers. It emphasizes fighting the far enemy, i.e. the United States and Europe, regarding them as Crusaders and infidels. And it stresses fighting an enemy that falls between near and far, the regional enemy, i.e. Shiite Iran, whom ISIS depicts as territorial unbelievers pursuing a “Safavid project” (“Safavid” being the group’s epithet for Persian Shiites). ISIS also calls for fighting the Jewish enemy, Israel, depicting it as a racist, infidel entity pursuing a “Zionist project”. Thus, religious identity – Muslim vs. Jewish/Christian, Sunni vs. Shia – became the main ideological engine of the Iraqi branch that split off from al-Qaeda. In the view of IS, al-Qaeda has deviated from the path of global jihadism and committed violations of Sharia that run counter to Islam, by forging relationships with infidels and apostates such as Iran, and by allying with Islamic religious, political, and jihadi movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Taliban. To ISIS, these are movements of unbelief and apostasy because they are national movements that are not based on Islamic concepts such as the oneness of God, loyalty to Islam and disavowal of non-Islamic ways, and unbelief and idol worship. They seek to establish local and national governments and they back infidels. They have abandoned Sharia and are not working to establish an Islamic caliphate.

**The third** school is composed of jihadist groups that have adopted local stances closer to the Syrian branch that split off from al-Qaeda, driven by al-Nusra Front under the leadership of Abu Mohammad

al-Julani. Its approach is similar to that of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hamas in Gaza. The organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in Idlib, underwent a series of profound transformations since it took on its current name, which translates to Levant Liberation Committee, in January 2017. HTS has sought to shed the legacy of al-Qaeda as a group with a radical ideological and strategic agenda. It endeavors to present itself as a local jihadist group fighting the Syrian regime, with no global jihadist agenda. Its rhetoric has shifted from global jihad to a focus on local affairs, and it no longer uses the terminology of global jihadism. The al-Qaeda jihadist vocabulary like "jihad al-Ummah" has vanished, as has sectarian jihadist vocabulary like "jihad against the Nusayris" (a derogatory term for 'Alawites). These terms have been replaced by new ones like "jihad in defense of the Syrian revolution" and "struggle for the freedom of the Syrian people". HTS has worked hard to shed its classification as a terrorist movement and to open communication channels with countries in the region and around the world. It not only cut ties with the Islamic State in 2013 and al-Qaeda in 2017, it entered into bloody armed conflict with both to prove its moderation. HTS is working hard to be removed from global lists of terrorist groups, an indispensable step for rehabilitation, and for inclusion and recognition as a national liberation movement. HTS now prioritizes securing a political future for itself in Syria, and its model is closer to that of the Taliban and Hamas.

Global jihadism has suffered severe operational difficulties, ranging from organizational and financial adaptation to running propaganda operations, recruiting the necessary adherents to continue its expansion and spread, and carrying out attacks as global and local efforts focus on "terrorist" security risks. Nevertheless, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived at the worst possible time for the Middle East, giving representatives of global jihadism – most notably, the Islamic

State and al-Qaeda – a rare perfect opportunity to capitalize on the pandemic and attempt a resurgence. Global jihadism has capitalized on the chaos and the worldwide preoccupation with, first, preserving public health, and second, jump-starting the global economy. The war on terrorism has fallen to third place on the list of priorities.

Africa seems to be a promising arena for ISIS and al-Qaeda in the time of coronavirus. The organization has stepped up its attacks in West Africa, the Sahara and Sahel region, and Somalia. Jihadism has been active in West Africa, northeastern Nigeria, and around Lake Chad. The ISIS branch in the organization's Central Africa Province has launched violent attacks between in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, all the way to the Gulf of Guinea. ISIS has expanded and launched attacks in Mozambique and Somalia, and attacks have increased in its East Africa Province, on top of those committed by al-Shabaab<sup>213</sup>. The growth in the ISIS and al-Qaeda presence on the African continent is clear. According to the Global Terrorism Index published in November 2020, the ISIS “center of gravity” has shifted from the Middle East to Africa and, to a lesser extent, Asia. The report noted the organization's ability to exploit other, existing conflicts in Africa that originally broke out due to local grievances and demands – it has reshaped these local wars in its image. In another report, Colin Clarke and Jacob Zenn said ISIS and al-Qaeda will intensify their attacks in the coming months, taking advantage of the weakness of African states and internal conflicts and feuds, in addition to Western states' determination to withdraw their forces from the continent to focus on confronting Russia and China.<sup>214</sup>

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213 See Hassan Abu Hanieh, “Global Jihadism is Flourishing Thanks to Covid-19”, Politics & Society Institute: <https://tinyurl.com/2rrtb6jy> [Link in footnote must be an old one, as it doesn't go anywhere; here's the actual article]

214 See Colin Clarke and Jacob Zenn, “ISIS and al-Qaeda's Sub-Saharan Affiliates are Poised for Growth in 2021”, Defense One: <https://tinyurl.com/f5ey8mw5>

The global competition with countries like Russia and China and the withdrawal for the sake of strategic rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific – which began with President Obama, continued with Trump, and has been consolidated with Biden – will cast a shadow over the counterterrorism efforts of local partners. The U.S. has retreated from its role, creating an opening for interventions by states such as China, Russia, and others. U.S. counterterrorism activities in Africa consist principally of training and guidance roles and make up about 0.3 percent of Department of Defense personnel and budgetary resources. In December 2019, as part of U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper’s review of global deployments, he made “proposals for a major reduction — or even a complete pullout — of American forces from West Africa”. AFRICOM has seen its forces on the African continent cut by up to 10 percent to address security challenges elsewhere. According to Matthew Levitt, “Whether or not Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, or other terrorist groups in Africa pose an immediate threat to the U.S. homeland today, Africa has become a fast-growing terrorist hotbed, with violent extremist incidents in the Sahel doubling every year since 2015. It would be folly to wait until that threat metastasizes and suddenly does present a threat to the homeland before deciding to put some skin in the game to help counterterrorism in Africa”.<sup>215</sup>

Although global jihadism has split into three ideological and strategic templates which have entered into armed conflict with one another, what unites these schools is greater than what divides them. It seems that all of them have begun moving toward the ISIS model of wars of empowerment and control. “Compared to the period stretching from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, [al-Qaeda] is now more focused on launching insurgencies and local governance projects in the Muslim world than planning attacks in the West”, according to Matthew Levitt and Aaron Zelin. “This is due to the movement’s internal evolution and

<sup>215</sup> See Matthew Levitt, “Harmonizing Counterterrorism and Great-Power Competition”, op. cit.

the greater opportunities it has had to achieve its ultimate goal: create an Islamic state based on its interpretation of Sharia ... Policies aimed at ameliorating insurgencies and countering jihadist governance projects require different solutions than preventing potential attacks against Western interests or territory. If U.S. officials fail to understand this distinction, [al-Qaeda] will have a never-ending bench of new operatives capable of replacing those killed by drone campaigns”.<sup>216</sup>

It appears that the reunification of al-Qaeda and ISIS not only is not impossible but is actually quite likely, similar to what happened when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi merged with Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda. Merger and unification are likely prospects, as what unites them is greater than what divides them. This time would be a reversal of the first merger, with al-Qaeda moving in the direction of ISIS following the triumph of the ISIS model of statehood, governance, control, and empowerment. This is the “counterterrorism nightmare” posited by Bruce Hoffman: the possibility that al-Qaeda and IS may reunite in several parts of Africa and enter into some sort of tactical alliance or cooperation. Although it does not seem to be imminent, such a rapprochement would be highly logical for both groups and would undoubtedly lead to a threat “that will be an absolute, unprecedented disaster for the U.S. government and our allies”.<sup>217</sup>

The declaration of a final defeat for global jihadism is not a matter of objective facts. Military and security approaches grounded in external interventions have proved capable of achieving tactical victories. On the other hand, they are a cause of growing jihadist tendencies. The primary problem posed by the rise of jihadism is linked to the root causes and objective circumstances that contributed to the rise of

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216 See Matthew Levitt and Aaron Zelin, “al-Qaeda’s External Operations One Year After the Pensacola Attack”, The Washington Institute, 11 December 2020: <https://tinyurl.com/uru9734d>

217 See Bruce Hoffman, “The Coming ISIS-al Qaeda Merger: It’s Time to Take the Threat Seriously”, Foreign Affairs, 29 March 2016: <https://tinyurl.com/cz94umbj>

al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. These causes remain unaddressed. The political, economic, and security situation in the Middle East and Africa is more fragile, and the region suffers from instability. In most countries where ISIS and al-Qaeda are active, official local forces lack the competence and resources to go after jihadis as jihadist organizations shift to attrition warfare and guerrilla tactics. Instability and the deterioration of reconstruction efforts, along with misgovernment, prevalent corruption, widespread tyranny, and proliferating sectarianism, create fertile ground for the return of al-Qaeda and IS. In a region that is a soft target thanks to external interventions and conflicts among regional and global forces, the Covid-19 pandemic is an extra gift for jihadists amid doubts about the international coalition's future role in the Middle East and Africa.

The Middle East and Africa are still far from achieving sustainable stability. The countries of the region suffer under authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian regimes, an absence of democracy and freedom, and rising poverty and unemployment. The causes of violent extremism in the region include the slim prospects of internal political change, the failure to reach a just solution to the Palestinian cause, and the escalating severity of external interventions. The coronavirus has been an extra gift enabling the resurgence of jihadist activities.

# Beyond the Caliphate and the Future of Jihadism in Africa

## Abbas Mohammad Saleh Abbas

The experience of ISIS in Syria and Iraq has provided an inspiring model for global jihad movements. In Africa, where the environment is generally fragile on multiple levels, several factors help produce the ISIS paradigm there in different forms, despite its global decline.

Along these lines, factions belonging to al-Qaeda and ISIS coexisted for years in Africa, in what some called the “jihadist exception”. Recently, this has turned into a competition for control and influence.

Africa has become a new global face of the war on terrorism, after the rise of jihadist models on the continent as part of what have become known as “global jihad networks”. This has taken place through taking control of land and managing the population. These are very important features for understanding the future of these movements.

### 1- Factors that Perpetuate ISIS Caliphates in Africa:

- The loose borders and absence of regional integration to deal with cross-border challenges and threats such as terrorism, as well as the failure of international counter-terrorism experiments.
- The crisis of governance and political turmoil, as well as the expansion of ungoverned areas in multiple countries and between countries. Also, the weakness of central governments, which encourages these groups to expand and extend their powers and establish their model of “governance”.
- The demographic factor: The size of the youth bloc of the population, among whom unemployment, poverty, and the desire to emigrate are common due to the lack of development and prevalence of despair.

- The failure of counter-terrorism policies: The approach of only using force and the brutality of the security services have driven dozens into the arms of terrorism.
- The pastoralist-farmer conflict: This factor recently emerged in multiple countries, with major security implications, especially in countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.
- Jihad: There is a dynamic based on the integration of the local and global in the jihadist phenomenon. In other words, there are examples of local groups that have sought to associate with global jihadism or have been linked with it in some way. Among the most prominent of these models currently: Northern Mozambique (al-Shabaab or Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (the Allied Democratic Forces, also known as ISIS-Central Africa Province), and the Masina Liberation Brigades, which embodies what has become known in the Greater Sahel as the "Fulani" jihadists. They play on factors such as ethnic marginalization in countries like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and the "ethnicization" of local jihadists, who view associating with global jihad currents as a way to support their causes, especially ethnic discrimination by government and foreign forces. Another model is Boko Haram and the Islamic State (West Africa Province) in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.

## 2- The Main Scenarios:

Based on the above, the jihadist rise in Africa will continue in the future. Hence, we expect the following scenarios:

- Intermittent control: Perhaps more like hit-and-run operations between jihadists and the local, regional, or international forces fighting them.
- Control through a jihadist outpost: "Caliphates" could be established of varying size from one country to another, and from one region to

another. These can persist if they do not clash with the interests of “the others”.

- **Intensifying rivalry between jihadists:** The conflict between the extreme and the more extreme. Currently, Boko Haram and the Islamic State (West Africa Province) are wrestling for control of strongholds and rear bases such as the inaccessible Sambisa Forest in Nigeria, for example.
- **Foreign fighters:** In the case of Africa, the flow of these fighters could take on a different pattern from that seen in the case of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. It could be regional (from within the continent, or from countries located in a single region), as there are factors that aid in this. These factors include: first, recruiting through taking control of the land and the population; second, an influx of fighters from neighboring countries or the region; and third, the continued stimulus of the ISIS media machine, especially the production of materials in widespread local languages such as Fulani, Hausa, Swahili, etc.

### 3- **Recommendations:**

In light of this conference’s discussions and the indications that the future of global jihadism—and specifically ISIS—will be concentrated in some parts of the African continent, we recommend the following:

**First**, move towards new policies on terrorism and de-radicalization through national programs and policies. That is, credible national programs and institutions should own these programs, rather than programs being externally imposed or belonging to local security institutions within the framework of their partnerships with foreign countries. There should also be a focus on overcoming the gaps in “national” plans, as some participants mentioned with regards to the Jordanian model, for example.

**Second**, establish national networks to research and produce knowledge about jihadist movements to understand the dynamics behind their revival and spread at more precise local levels, thereby providing more effective solutions and approaches to dealing with this phenomenon.

**Third**, after the example of negotiation between the Taliban and the US, the idea of dialogue with jihadists has become more strongly proposed in more than one country in the Great Sahel, specifically in Mali and Burkina Faso. This, then, requires study of the scenarios and methods of dialogue with jihadists as a means of pacifying the jihadist situation and limiting its dangers to countries that already have serious structural problems and are not able to bear the consequences of any jihadist rise, like with ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The implications of this approach should be examined.

# Discussion

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## **Mohammad Abu Rumman**

Some of the conclusions that can be drawn from this are as follows: First, I believe that the decline of ISIS in Iraq and Syria does not necessarily mean the end of the organization. It is completely clear that the conditions that produce extremism and terrorism exist and continue in the Arab world, and that there are thousands of children and many ISIS families. This matter is a real problem. Also, the weakness of ISIS in one place could lead to its rise in another. The indications are that there is a significant resurgence of the organization in Africa, and there is also an ISIS presence in Afghanistan.

Second, the conditions of the rise of these organizations are linked to sociology and the social, cultural, and political aspects more than the ideological aspects.

Another matter is that there is a big problem in dealing with counter-terrorism strategies at the global, regional, and local level. Unfortunately, what we see and notice is that there is more investment in terrorism than there is in countering terrorism and extremism. Usually, the outcomes are what is dealt with, not the conditions and causes.

## **Charles Lister**

The essence of the problem, or the issue, is not related to ideology or religion. Looking at the reality of ISIS, we can reach the following conclusions:

First, the problem cannot be killed. The organization's existence cannot be eliminated militarily on the ground. Rather, the issue must be addressed in a clear political way. However, this poses a complex challenge. Secondly, addressing it requires a very long time.

The question I will pose is related to my work with my research team on HTS in Syria, which I gathered information about over the course of 10 years. This organization is currently striving hard to reach the international community in order to improve its reputation. The questions now are: Are these efforts real? And if they are real, what is the appropriate response?

### **Khaled Salim**

There are several variables that have impacted the structure and program of global jihad. The first variable relates to the status of Zionist normalization with certain Sunni Arab countries. This will, in my view, strengthen Sunni-Shia division. The second variable is the absence of a centrist model, despite countries claiming that their discourses are centrist (as well as the Muslim Brotherhood being designated as a terrorist organization despite its well-known image as a moderate group). The third variable is the firm establishment and consolidation of the extreme right-wing current. The fourth variable is the stumbling democratic transition, part of which has regressed to military regimes, and part of which is the election results we heard about weeks ago. Even in Tunisia, and despite the integration of the Salafist movements into the democratic process, there is still a faltering, and a radicalization of the secular-religious conflict.

The question I pose to Hassan Abu Haniyeh is, in your view, what is the impact of these variables on the global jihadist movement? And what scenario do you see for the structure of this movement? Will it be centralized? Or decentralized, united by a virtual caliphate? What shape do you see for the structure of global jihad over the coming decade?

### **Saud al-Sharafat**

Through observation, whether at the theoretical or operational level, or at the level of counter-terrorism topics, or theories explaining

terrorism and its causes, this issue remains unresolved: what are the causes of terrorism? I think that studying the relative weights of the causes can perhaps refine our understanding of these causes. We continue to say that the main causes of terrorism are not just religious or ideological, there are other causes. But the main cause—I want to touch on the Arab region at least—what is the main cause among the set of causes, and the full matrix of these causes in all three dimensions. From my point of view, religion is the primary cause. Yes, there are economic and social causes. There are wars. The latest Global Terrorism Index issued by the Institute for Economics and Peace in Australia said that 95% of the causes of terrorism and terrorist operations, at least in the Middle East and Southwest Asia and our Arab countries of Iraq and Syria, are countries located at the heart of a geography of anger, in areas that suffer from conflicts. But you have to give me a matrix, arrange them and tell me what the causes are, economic or social, and provide a relative weighting for each of these factors. The economic weighting is such-and-such, the relative weighting of the social factor is such-and-such, and the weighting of religion in the system of extremism and terrorism or violent extremism and radicalism leading to terrorism is such-and-such. We don't see this much.

Unfortunately, the economic causes have been worked on, in the past two decades, not in the Arab world, but in the Western academic system, in the US and Britain and France. They have focused on economic reasons. I won't hide that a large portion of the criticism directed at this approach, that economic reasons are behind extremism and terrorism, is that when you say there are economic reasons, and social reasons, and colonialism and so on, you want to escape. You want to run away from a problem that you have. If we approach economic reasons on the basis that they are the real driver or root cause of terrorism, we find that there are various countries that are extremely poor but have

zero terrorist operations. This applies at the level of leaders as well. Rich leaders such as Osama bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and others were not poor. They were not eating dirt and took up terrorism. This is a question that I think needs more emphasis from us.

In the end, even if we suppose that it is ideology or religion—no matter what religion it is, and it is not limited to Islam—there is a tidal wave of nationalist extremism and the extreme right that is now spreading in Europe and the USA. We saw how this extreme right mobilized in the last days of the Trump era, and Americans are still confused as to what to call it. A holistic approach is needed that weighs all the determinants and factors and does not exclude any of them as the causes of terrorism. We do not say it is ideological, we do not say it is economic, and we do not say it is social. Rather, we include all of them in the study and examine them to investigate this. Of course, we do all this boldly, with impartiality and objectivity. We do not want to evade our responsibilities or the responsibilities of the countries we represent. This is the best approach, I believe, to understanding the ongoing debate over the causes of terrorism.

We know there are approximately three prevailing narratives: We have the realist narrative, talking about the American approach that is in control. It is political realism, which sees the primary unit of analysis as the state, and does not recognize groups below the level of the state. There are many experts who talk about the importance of non-state factors or sub-state groups, but the state mentality is still realist. It still sees terrorism as not being a problem, regardless of whether or not it threatens American interests. And you have the structural approach, which tries to integrate the social factors we mentioned with the political ones. Our problem is that the Islamic approaches are extremely weak, and either take paths of justification or content themselves with condemnation.

## **Maher Farghali**

I have a number of conclusions I would like to divulge at the end of this conference:

First, the security approach to addressing violent extremism or terrorism is very inadequate, and is not the only solution to addressing this problem. We are supposed to have a preventative approach, a curative approach for those who have fallen into extremism, and another tactical approach for the terrorist organizations. The total dependence on dismantling and changing the paths of these organizations with force and security is, to a very large degree, failing. This requires a huge strategy, and it is not useful for a single state, organization, or institution to make the strategy. This is the first conclusion, from my perspective.

Second, Arab society as a whole has a susceptibility to extremism, because we as peoples largely believe in texts (textualists), we believe in the salaf (pious predecessors), and going back to the salaf. This is very important for our people and our societies, and we have been raised on that. Therefore, dealing with this phenomenon through the issue of ideology, and thinking about ideology, and this talk that is presented often on many platforms, is a very limited and difficult approach. It is simply not possible for us to destroy the religious heritage, or to sanctify this heritage in another way—taking the positive and leaving the negative. This is difficult. These groups and terrorist organizations will not respond to any corrections, amendments, or different readings of the religious texts by some institutions or individuals. So the subject of addressing this with ideology is a very difficult one. Susceptibility to extremism turns to violent extremism, and then to terrorism, and then to a very deep problem in our societies. There are unprecedented opportunities for this, especially after the Arab Spring, opportunities in sectarianism, and in the issue of Palestine and others that pave the

way for terrorism, extremism, and the emergence of these groups.

Third, the phenomenon today is liable to extend and spread, and is disposed to new theories. These groups, as one al-Qaeda leader, Hisham Abaza, told me personally in a direct meeting with him, “have work that precedes theorizing. We commit the act, and then search for evidence to see the extent of its accuracy and validity. The evidence comes later, and does not precede the action”. These groups, whether local, globalized, or within global jihad, look for the evidence after they commit the act.

### **Marwan Shehadeh**

One of the conclusions I reached is that political systems and countries are unable to find solutions to the problem of terrorism and extremism. Likewise, Islamist groups, whether moderate or extremist, are living in a state of crisis in dealing with the lived reality. So both sides are in a major crisis, which I believe is caused perhaps by the occupation. The occupation is still perched in the hearts of the Arab and Islamic nation, alongside the Palestinian issue, corruption, and the lack of seriousness from governments and political systems towards reform. This is not to mention the processes of excluding an important part of the fabric of society. If we accept that groups, including militant and extremist groups, are part of the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of societies, then we must find solutions to integrate them, not exclude them and remove them from the scene altogether. Because just as we have carried out processes of systematic eradication and exclusion for many years, so too have they been compelled to practice policies of eradication by killing and takfir and spreading violence to counter the tyranny of states. In my estimation, the efforts made by countries to confront armed jihadist groups’ media have been largely successful in recent times. Some companies that provide services to social media sites have begun to hack accounts, especially

Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other companies that provide services and alternative media platforms. While digital, they and their content reach a wide public of supporters and supporters of these groups, as well as the members and leaders of these groups.

My estimation is also that the continued efforts to communicate, consult, and discuss with specialists may help limit the extent of extremism and address the problems of the existing political systems. As I said, the problems and challenges political systems face are not isolated from extremist groups, and vice versa.

### **Mohammad al-Azamat**

I have three recommendations:

- 1- We should get rid of the mentality of investing in combating extremism and terrorism, as Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman said – we need to escape the business mentality, the mentality of begging for security assistance to go towards countering extremism and terrorism.
- 2- As Arabic speakers and Muslims, or even if we are of another religion, we are more familiar with Islam. I believe that we are the ones most capable of understanding and absorbing this phenomenon, and weaving together the necessary recommendations to combat it.
- 3- Reduce the gap between security and academics. Allow me to speak boldly by saying that our security institutions and agencies—and here I mean the security agencies specific to counter-terrorism—must stop keeping all these files locked up. I am talking about interviewing terrorism and extremism inmates. I am talking about statistics, studies, and consultations. But in reality, specialists and academics in the Arab world are the last group allowed to intervene or express their opinion in this field. If we were able to achieve

these three recommendations, I believe that our understanding of extremism and terrorism would be more comprehensive and accurate. Consequently, we would be able to propose logical and actionable recommendations.

## Remarks

### Hassan Abu Haniyeh

The field of jihadist or violent movements, i.e. terrorism, is linked to military and security strategies, interests, and national security. Even the term terrorism has no definition. As Edward Said put it, it is a subjective term, not an objective one. The authority of force, as mentioned by Jacques Derrida, is the one that determines who is a terrorist and the identity of the terrorist, not the act itself. If you look at the Palestinian case, there is an enemy and an occupation recognized under international law. Yet it designates as terrorists movements that we classify as resistance. And there are peaceful movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, despite the presence of some violence, because violence, as the Italian philosopher Dominic Lisergio says, is not a choice in the first place. Violence by choice is not chosen. The Americans have reached a nice definition, which is the loss of options – do not leave options for this person. If you look at all the movements that started from the local level, whether the Tamil Tigers, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), or any movement of those we have studied that were associated with al-Qaeda and ISIS, they are movements of a local nature that have their own problems. There is no formula. For example, with respect to what Saud al-Sharafat said, that the biggest cause is religion, that is a difficult assessment. Why? Because the causes differ from place to place.

It is necessary to refer here to “the myth of religious violence”, as stated by William Cavanaugh, in the sense of violence related to a single religion, for example, and not connected to a secular ideology. We know that an age of terrorism began in Europe after the French Revolution. We know that there is a discussion that European Enlightenment philosophy created the largest three terrorist, extremist, or violent phenomena: Stalinism, the Holocaust, and colonialism. These are extremely violent phenomena. Nevertheless, we say that it is not

necessarily the Enlightenment, but an interpretation of it. And there is always a debate in anthropology or sociology between discursive traditions and embodied interpretations. There are always embodied interpretations in our case, and therefore violence may arise from religion, but you must understand it. For example, the phenomenon of the Kharijites is linked to violence and always talked about as the historical and intellectual root of contemporary jihadist groups. But the irony is that the Kharijites reject the prophet's hadith as a primary source of Sharia and rely on the Qur'an alone, while most contemporary jihadist groups rely on the prophet's hadiths as a main reference. We must always be wary of that Orientalist culturalist machine that ties religion to terrorism. We must do away with it because, as we have said, it is a phenomenon linked to all ideologies. And all the secular ideologies were more and more severely violent, with colonialism, the Holocaust, and Stalinism.

We must be fully aware that we are facing a composite, complex phenomenon. The causes of terrorism in Iraq are different from those in Syria, which are different from those in any country in Africa, Southeast Asia, or elsewhere. We have to look at these complexities at three levels: a global circumstance, a regional circumstance, and a local circumstance. Researchers have started to call these the root causes of violent extremism.

In sum, we say that democracy is a devastating weapon in the face of terrorism. Democracy means the absence of authoritarianism. It means opening political horizons and fighting poverty. All of these are root causes of violent extremism. Will violence remain even if we enter the ranks of democratic countries? Yes, it will remain. But it will remain very limited within the framework of a country that enjoys all the universal values, religious or secular. Because the values of justice and freedom are not secular or religious values. They are human values.

This book is the product of research papers and academic discussions during the proceedings of a closed research workshop held by the Politics and Society Institute in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Amman. Participating of a selected group of Arab, Western, and Jordanian researchers, experts, and specialists.

The conference participants attempted to gauge the repercussions and consequences of the collapse of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. They explored this at the level of the ability of the organization itself in recruitment, political and media propaganda, mobilization, ideological resilience, and organizational cohesion, as well as its ability to rise again.

The conference was limited to the group of researchers and experts participating in it. The goal was to discuss and develop approaches to studying the “jihadist phenomenon” (here, meaning radical groups that take violence as a path under the pretext of implementing Islam). Another aim was to promote dialogue and an exchange of opinions, experiences, and knowledge to be shared among researchers specialized in this field. The specialized academic discussions aimed at building a deeper conceptual and methodological framework in studying, understanding, and reaching conclusions and findings about the phenomenon.

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