The Day after the Islamic State

Marta Furlan and Carmit Valensi

The Evolution of ISIS: 2003-2014

A brief overview of the evolution of the Islamic State sheds light on its capacity to adapt and re-organize and serve as a possible indicator for future transformation.

The origins of the Islamic State reach back to the Iraq of 2003 and to the insurgent group al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (TwJ), which under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi launched a ruthless campaign of terrorist attacks against the forces of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).[1] However, the group's operational capability was constrained by a lack of financial resources and by an excessive reliance on foreign fighters that impaired the group's integration in the Iraqi insurgency.[2]

To deal with these weaknesses and enhance the image of TwJ among the Iraqi militancy, al-Zarqawi in 2004 pledged *baya'a* (allegiance) to bin Laden, who for his part was interested in extending al-Qaeda's influence over the Iraqi theater after the setback suffered in Afghanistan. After this association with al-Qaeda, TwJ was rebranded the Land of the Two Rivers, or al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and became a prominent actor on the Iraqi militant scene. Its influence grew particularly after the parliamentary elections of December 2005, when al-Zarqawi united the insurgent groups close to him under an umbrella organization known as the Mujahidin Shura Council (MSC) in order to co-opt the other jihadist organizations,[3] and increased AQI's violent attacks on Shiite targets in order to create inter-communal tensions that would strengthen the Sunnis' support for the insurgency.[4]

In 2006 al-Zarqawi was killed in a targeted killing by a joint US force, and his death became a major impediment for AQI. From the outset, in fact, the group's internal cohesion, the inner coordination among its ranks,

Marta Furlan is an MA student at Università degli Studi di Trento in Italy and an intern at INSS. Dr. Carmit Valensi is a research fellow at INSS.

and the identity unifying its members was dependent on the presence of a centralized structure built around the figure of al-Zarqawi. With his demise, the centralization that had enabled the group to assert itself as one of the most prominent actors of the Iraqi insurgency collapsed, and AQI underwent a significant process of organizational restructuring and strategic reorientation.[5] The group was reorganized under the dual leadership of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi; its cadres were "Iraqified"; and its cells underwent a process of "bureaucratization and dilution" that subjected them to an inefficient bureaucratic apparatus and that led them to be unduly widespread across Iraq.[6] As a result, AQI came to experience a high level of internal fragmentation and a fundamental lack of coordination that restrained its operational capability, and that became the major weakness of the group.

In terms of modus operandi, the military and terrorist operations that had characterized the activity of the group since its earliest stage remained the core of AQI's strategy. However, these were redirected toward a new objective as the group endeavored to create an Islamic State in Iraq, and in 2006 it rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). However, the violent military campaign embraced by the group was met with resistance in several areas of Iraq, such as the Anbar Province. There, the local Sunni tribes resisted ISI's attempt to impose its rule, and in 2008 created military councils (*sahwa*) that fought the group, undermined its operational capacities, and damaged its credibility.[7]

Therefore, when in 2010 al-Masri and al-Baghdadi were killed, the general perception was that ISI was doomed to dissolution. However, in that same year Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the new leader of the group and promoted a comprehensive reorganization on the basis of past successes and mistakes: he strengthened ISI's internal bonds so as to increase its cohesiveness; reintroduced a centralized leadership revolving around himself that enabled the achievement of high levels of operational capability and coordination; and simplified the inefficient bureaucratic apparatus of the previous stage.[8] On the strategic level, he moderated the brutal approach that al-Zarqawi had adopted against his enemies − in particular against the Iraqi Shiites − that had ultimately alienated much of the Iraqi people,[9] divided the ranks of the Iraqi Sunni resistance,[10] and aroused the criticism of al-Zarqawi's mentor al-Maqdisi and of most of al-Qaeda's leadership, including bin Laden and al-Zawahiri.[11]

In addition to this restructuring endeavor and strategic rethinking, al-Baghdadi adapted the group's goal of building an Islamic State to the destabilizing changes throughout the Levant in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring that erupted in December 2010, and in particular the collapse of traditional nation states; the loss of legitimacy on the part of most regional governments; and the exacerbation of the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. Against the background of these developments, al-Baghdadi extended ISI's tactics beyond the purely militant-terrorist dimension in order to enhance the effectiveness of the group's activity. After identifying in the Sunni heartland of western Iraq and eastern Syria the preferred location of his future Islamic State, al-Baghdadi advanced the group's activities in both countries thanks to the high coordination enabled by the renewed centralized leadership. In both contexts, ISI proved its capabilities at the military as well as at the social level: it fought successfully against the enemies encountered on the ground; in tandem, it attempted to adopt a more state-like structure and provided the population with goods (e.g., food) and services (e.g., education) that their governments were incapable of providing.[12] Exploiting factors such as the incapability of the governments in Baghdad and Damascus to address the people's basic needs and political demands; the weakness and ultimate collapse of the state structure in Iraq and Syria after the Arab Spring, which exposed the illegitimacy of their central governments; and the alienation experienced by the local Sunni communities, ISI managed to present itself as the only legitimate alternative and to gain popular support among the Sunnis. In this way, ISI succeeded in extending its territorial control over several portions of Iraq and Syria, and on June 29, 2014, after dissociating itself from al-Qaeda,[13] proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic State (IS), the caliphate of Iraq and al-Sham, thus realizing the aspiration of its founding father al-Zarqawi.

From the Early Successes to Recent Defeats: 2014-2017

With the proclamation of the caliphate, the group led by al-Baghdadi completed its transition from traditional terrorist group engaged in violent military activity to quasi-state organization engaged in the provision of governance, including goods and services as well as order and security through the use of policing and law enforcement apparatuses. In effecting this transition, the group adopted an efficient governmental pyramid structure; it established ad hoc state-like institutions; and it expanded the range of its non-violent activities. At the top of the pyramid are al-Baghdadi

and his two direct deputies who constitute the executive branch, known as *al-Imara,* and who are in charge of transferring al-Baghdadi's orders to the provincial governors. Below *al-Imara*, the pyramid comprises eight councils:[14] the Shura Council (responsible for religious affairs); the Legal Council (responsible for resolving family disputes, violations of the law, and the imposition of penalties); the Security Council (responsible for internal security and the enforcement of public order); the Intelligence Council (which supplies and conveys information to the leadership regarding rivals and opponents); the Military Council (which deals with warfare and military preparations in IS territories); the Economic Council (responsible for the movement's financial resources, including the sale of oil and weapons); the Fighters' Aid Council (responsible for receiving foreign volunteers, smuggling them to different areas, allocating housing, and addressing their different needs); and the Media Council (responsible for disseminating IS messages and official declarations, and managing the group's accounts on social networks and monitoring other sites in coordination with the Legal Council).[15] At the bottom of the pyramid, there is a large pool of both foreign and local fighters who are organized in three levels. This structure enables the leadership to control members more tightly, assign military and governmental tasks more efficiently, and deploy fighters more effectively in the areas of combat.

By means of this strong state-like structure that distinguishes IS from traditional terrorist entities, the group led by al-Baghdadi has managed to assert its control over large spheres of public life and expand its social activities:[16] it has built roads and bridges; organized economic recoveries for the poor; provided electricity; established lines of telecommunication; set up markets for the trade of goods; created offices for the collection and the distribution of the *zakat* (alms donated out of religious obligation); opened schools; maintained public order and security through the deployment of police forces; and guaranteed law and order through the establishment of *sharia* courts.

In addition to the provision of civil services, IS has continued to rely on military means to fight its enemies and employ violent tactics such as public executions and torture to instill terror among the population and thus prevent popular uprisings. By means of this duality of tactics, IS has managed to consolidate its territorial control over the Sunni-dominated Jazira region and enforce its rule there;[17] to seize control of the natural resources of the conquered territories and exploit them to finance its

activity;[18] and to garner support, or at least acquiescence, on the part of a frightened and disaffected local population.[19]

However, IS's early success began to decline after the group's expansion peaked in mid 2015. Since then, IS has suffered several defeats that have considerably reduced the territories and the population under its control: as reported by HIS Conflict Monitor[20] and by the RAND Corporation,[21] IS's territorial control declined by 60 percent from 2015 to 2017, and the number of people living under IS rule dropped from 9.6 million in the fall of 2014 to 2.6 million in the winter of 2016-17. In tandem, the group's income has declined over the past few years, dropping from $1.9 billion in 2014 to $870 million in 2016.[22] As highlighted by a recent ICSR study, the loss of territorial control has implied for IS the loss of its major sources of revenue, above all, the oil reserves that were a foundation of the group's income and that contributed to making it the "richest terrorist organization in the world."[23]

This combination of territorial and financial losses has undermined IS governance capabilities because the group has found itself without the territorial control necessary to enforce a cohesive rule and a viable state-like structure, and without the financial resources necessary to sustain an efficient governance apparatus. Consequently, IS has diminished its governance dimension and focused instead on military activities aimed at ensuring the group's survival and rebuilding its presence in the lost areas.[24] Indeed, it is noteworthy how IS's territorial and financial losses have led it to abandon the conventional military campaigns mounted by al-Baghdadi in the early days of his leadership and return to the guerrilla warfare launched by al-Zarqawi during AQI's first phase.[25] Guerrilla warfare, in fact, has considerable advantages vis-à-vis conventional military operations: it can be sustained by a group even when financial resources are limited; it can be carried out effectively by small cells; it does not require territorial control. This shift in modus operandi could be seen during the battle for Mosul, when IS relied mostly on tactics of asymmetric urban warfare, including mortar shells, booby traps, IEDs, and suicide car bomb attacks.[26]

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Finally, in the framework of the recent territorial losses, IS has undergone an adaptation of its strategic thinking, whereby it increasingly emphasizes the importance of striking the "far" Western enemy and the necessity for

its fighters to spread beyond the Jazira region and join jihadists all over the Muslim world.[27] In other words, IS seems to have extended its previously localized strategy and to have embraced a more internationalized strategic discourse similar to the one traditionally espoused by al-Qaeda. It is in the context of this rethinking that IS-inspired individuals have directed their terror activities against major European cities, including Paris, Brussels, and London, and that IS loyalists have joined the jihadist battlefields in places like Libya, Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, IS continues operating in the Levant area and has not completely abandoned its local territorial feature. According to the Pentagon, in August 2017 some 20,000 IS fighters still control several areas in Syria and Iraq. Between 5,000 and 10,000 fighters are now in the middle Euphrates Valley area from Deir ez-Zoor to the Iraq-Syria border region.[28]

These recent developments and adaptations within IS raise important questions over the next phase of the group's life and urge an assessment of how IS is most likely to evolve.

The Islamic State's Future after its Military Defeat

In light of the resilience and capacity for adaptation that the group has displayed over its 15-year existence, it is likely that even if militarily defeated, the Islamic State will not disappear but will rather evolve and adapt to the changed circumstances. Among the most plausible scenarios as to the group's internal evolution in the context of organizational restructuring and strategic rethinking are the following:

a. *Mini-emirates*: Evolution of the group into several mini-entities scattered across the Middle East and beyond (e.g. North Africa, South Asia) in what would be a much looser network, highly similar to the post-2001 so-called al-Qaeda nebula. Rather than surviving as a single and unified group, IS might split into sub-groups, ideologically linked one to another but inherently independent in terms of financing, definition of objectives, strategic planning, and actual conduct of operations. At the core of this scenario lies the assumption that the Salafi jihadi current is deeply rooted and established in the Islamic world, and does not necessarily depend on a central and well-structured organization in order to flourish.
b. *Jihadi merger*: Rejoining – more or less tightly – al-Zawahiri's al-Qaeda in order to regain the lost status and deal with the setbacks suffered in terms of financial sustainability, ideological credibility, and recruitment

ability. Once defeated militarily, IS might find it worthwhile to resume the "marriage of convenience" with al-Qaeda that first took place in 2004 so as to expand its ranks, acquire more operational capabilities, and enhance its status in the global jihadist world. This scenario presumes that despite some setbacks, al-Qaeda has remained strong, resilient, and guided by a prudent strategy of winning over populations and exploiting local conflicts to its own ends. This move would not only give new life to IS but would also reassert al-Qaeda as the uncontested leader of the jihadi movement and probably encourage it to learn from IS's experience and adopt more state-like tasks and features. However, this scenario is less likely to be manifested in the short term, as the level of mutual hostility between IS and al-Qaeda would be hard to overcome. Al-Qaeda loyalists describe IS operatives as "extremists," "Kharijites," and "takfiris"; in turn, the Islamic State has named al-Qaeda devotees as "the Jews of jihad" and loyalists of the "Sufi" leader of the heretical Taliban. Hence, this split might be unbridgeable.

c. *IS.com*: On July 2017, the IS information office in Raqqa province in Syria released a 30-minute video that focuses particularly on foreigners from various countries who came to join IS: "This is a message to the new pharaoh of today, Donald Trump, you may have your eyes on Al-Raqqah and Mosul, but we have our eyes on Constantinople and Rome. 'Bi Idhn Allah, Bi Idhn Allah [with Allah's permission], we will slaughter you in your own houses."[29] This scenario includes the maintenance of a small and underground nucleus in the Jazira region (namely the Sunni tribal region stretching across western Iraq and eastern Syria) where IS first emerged and expanded and a shift of strategic focus to attacks in foreign countries (e.g., in Europe and the United States) by means of an ad hoc ideological propaganda conducted primarily online. The end of the "caliphate dream" will thus lead the group to revise its original objectives and strategy and shift from aiming to hit the "close enemy" by means of military campaigns and territorial conquests, to aiming to hit the "far enemy" by means of online radicalization and recruitment of sympathizers abroad. This relies on the robust external operations arm that was built over three or four years even before the caliphate or the Islamic State was declared. This network exists in Europe and elsewhere, including Southeast Asia and North Africa. In September 2016, al-Baghdadi called on his followers not to come to the Levant to

fight, but instead to migrate and strengthen the branches precisely so that the branches could continue the struggle.

d. *Comeback*: this scenario sees a resurgence of IS in the areas from which it was expelled. This resurgence is a possibility that is likely to concretize under three specific circumstances: first, if the international coalition fighting against IS makes the same mistakes that it did when it withdrew too promptly from Afghanistan, assuming erroneously that the al-Qaeda menace had been successfully and permanently eradicated and that the mission had been accomplished. However, that assumption stemmed from a fundamental underestimation of al-Qaeda's capacity to survive and reinvent itself, and indeed bin Laden's group proved able to transfer its base to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and evolve into a more complex and less easily detected "nebula." Second, IS might revive if the different actors currently involved in the fight against the group refrain from properly addressing the problem of the "day after IS" and do not draft any coherent and viable politico-social plan of reconstruction for the liberated areas. Third is the permanence of the factors that enabled IS's rise in the first place. In other words, if the root causes that created a fertile ground for the group to find support among a Sunni population that felt marginalized and estranged from the Iraqi nation-state are not addressed, it is likely that the remnants of IS will regroup. Similarly, if the Salafi jihadist ideology inspiring IS's *weltanschauung* is not countered with a credible and appealing ideological religious alternative, IS or new IS-like manifestations are likely to (re)appear on the scene.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The imminent military defeat of the Islamic State does not imply its complete disappearance. Rather, it implies the end of its existence in its current form and the emergence of a different but not less threatening entity. In light of the possible scenarios regarding the future evolution of IS, the following measures are necessary to deal effectively at the local and international levels with the new threat posed by the group.

At the local level, the possibility of a resurgence of IS (or like entities) can be reduced by addressing the causes that paved the way for the group's emergence and the factors that favored its consolidation. In this regard, it will be crucial for the Iraqi government to address the grievances, alienation, and disaffection that the Sunni communities felt under Nuri al-Maliki's

tenure and that led many among them to see in IS a desirable alternative to the sectarianism of Baghdad. For this to be done, a political compromise that ensures power-sharing between the country's ethno-religious groups; reforms that guarantee that state institutions offer national rather than sectarian representation; and the effective implementation of a 2013 decentralization law[30] that devolves more autonomy and responsibilities to the single local governments will need to be encouraged and emphasized as the only way to resolve those inter-communal tensions that foster insurgencies and state failure.

Both urban and rural areas freed from IS must be rebuilt by means of ad hoc cooperation among the Iraqi government, its partners in the US-led coalition, the United Nations, and aid agencies so as to address effectively the economic, security, and social needs of the local communities and offer credible alternatives to the institutions and services provided by IS at the apex of its state-building project. Training, equipment, assistance, and consulting for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as developed in the framework of the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) should be continued and improved in order to enhance the effectiveness of the ISF in countering terrorism and countering insurgencies and to increase their legitimacy, credibility, and trustworthiness in the eyes of the local communities.

At the international level, the security threat posed to Western countries by IS, particularly IS-inspired individuals and returning foreign fighters, should be confronted by addressing both the pre-recruitment and the post-recruitment phase. Other measures include countering and obstructing IS's online propaganda; increasing intelligence cooperation and database sharing to detect radicalized individuals; and addressing the problem of returning foreign fighters with responses that can range from "hard" measures such as revoking citizenship, confiscating passports, and issuing arrest warrants, to "soft" measures such as developing programs of de-radicalization, psychological counseling, and social reintegration.

Finally, past experience shows that these measures are more likely to be effective when local actors and international actors coordinate their endeavors and share responsibilities. Therefore, while preparing for the day after the Islamic State, efforts first need to be invested in building this crucial coordination.

Notes

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30 In August 2013, the Iraqi Parliament approved amendments to Law 21 (also known as Provincial Powers Act) that increased the powers of provincial councils and governors. According to the law, local governments should choose their own judiciary and heads of security; provinces should have more control and autonomy in the management of their financial resources; in areas of shared competency between local governments and the central government, and in case of disagreement, the decisions of the local government should prevail; the governorate should have responsibility for all state officials in its jurisdiction; within two years, control over housing, employment, education, health, and finance should be transferred to local authorities.