



After Mosul: Islamic State's Asian and African Future

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Summary

After three years and over 22,000 air strikes, the Levantine 'Caliphate' manifestation of the Islamic State seems destined for destruction in 2017. Yet the revolt of radicalised Sunni Arabs is unlikely to abate in Iraq or Syria, with the battlefield shifting to localised guerrilla insurgency, increasing attacks within western states, and the opening of new fronts in the global margins, not least Asia and Africa. Such revolutions of frustrated expectations will be a major part of the geopolitical landscape for decades to come.

Introduction

By 28 June the Iraqi Army had largely re-established control of the city of Mosul which had been taken over by the so-called Islamic State (IS) three years earlier. In the process the army was aided hugely by coalition air power and artillery support, as well as the actions of a number of Shi'a militias and assistance from personnel linked to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. This closing phase of the Mosul operation coincided with the early stages of an assault on the city of Raqqa in northern Syria by a range of Kurdish and Syrian militias, again supported by the coalition. The two operations seemed likely to mark the end of the IS "caliphate" and raised the question of the future of the movement.

Oxford Research Group has tracked and analysed the development of IS and its predecessor groups such as al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) since the early 2000s, and two monthly briefings last summer ([July](#) and [August 2016](#)) made an initial

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assessment of the status of IS through a two-part analysis - *A World After IS*. There was some updating of this analysis in the briefings of **January** and **February 2017**, but the rapid changes in the status of the movement make it useful to take a broader view once more.

The four articles taken together covered the recent experience and the current direction of IS and this briefing seeks to develop the analysis further, with an emphasis on longer term trends in global Jihadist movements, especially the advance of IS affiliates in South and South East Asia.

Context

IS as a territorial movement is under severe pressure as a result of the coalition's extensive use of air power since August 2014. There have so far been over 22,000 air strikes, mostly on multiple targets and using over 80,000 precision bombs and missiles. Six months ago, the US Department of Defence reported that over 50,000 IS personnel had been killed, and the independent AirWars monitoring group has recently given a figure of close to 4,000 civilians killed. That last number will most likely have to be revised upwards substantially when the number of civilian casualties in Mosul is known.

IS has lost control of most of its territory in Iraq and a substantial part of its territory in Syria. At the time of writing (28 June) the Iraqi government is reporting that the final defeat of IS in Mosul is only days away, albeit not the first time it has made (and revised) such projections. There remain reports of IS personnel staging attacks in parts of Mosul that have supposedly been liberated by government forces. Meanwhile, the battle to retake Raqqa, in Syria, is in its early stages and while Syrian and Kurdish forces backed up by

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coalition air strikes are reported to be making progress, independent verification is difficult.

The operation to defeat IS in Mosul has actually taken over eight months rather than the two and a half months planned, and the elite Iraqi Army forces spearheading the attack have taken serious casualties. Since these forces will be crucial in ensuring the stability of the country after IS loses Mosul, the transition of IS from a force controlling territory to an anti-government insurgency will be easier for it.

That task will further be aided by the near-certain role of Shi'a militias and Iranian forces in maintaining national stability, as well as the creeping advance of the Iraqi Kurdish presence in northern Iraq. These eventualities are deeply worrying to Iraq's Sunni Arab minority and likely to make some elements of that minority more sympathetic to IS as it re-embraces an insurgent role.

The Evolving IS Strategy

It is clear that IS is in the process of re-inventing itself for the post-caliphate era and it is useful to tease out the more significant elements of its post-Mosul and post-Raqqa evolution.

Firstly, it is probable that it will modify its claim of ruling a caliphate that is, from its perspective, a true exemplar of a new Islamist world order. Instead it will change that to a demonstration of what it was possible to achieve for three years, even against overwhelming force used by regional regimes strongly supported by the western coalition – the “near enemy” allied to the “far enemy”. Thus, the short-lived caliphate will be presented as a rich symbol of another world which will surely develop again and will eventually be victorious.

IS propagandists will most likely focus on this approach and will also make much of the numbers of young people who were willing to die for the cause. In relation to that last point it is certainly the case that the Iraqi government and its coalition partners have been shocked and daunted by the sheer numbers of suicide bombers, well over a thousand, that could be gathered together to help defend Mosul. It is strange that the eschatological nature of IS is still not fully appreciated by its opponents.

While the transition of IS in Iraq and Syria into a guerrilla force is one element of its strategy, the other two are also important. One, which has been much discussed in recent briefings, is the move to encourage, incite and even assist in attacking the far enemy. This is reminiscent of the al-Qaida approach between 2002 and 2006 and differs fundamentally from the IS focus on an actual caliphate prior to 2015. Then it was concentrating on the creation and strengthening of this caliphate and had little interest in attacking the far enemy. The sheer intensity of the coalition's air assault changed that and one outcome was that attacks on western states increased substantially, as shown first in France, Belgium and Germany and more recently by the Westminster Bridge, Manchester and London Bridge attacks and the failed attempt in Brussels which, had it succeeded, would have killed many people.

These attacks have three aims. One is demonstrating that IS remains a significant part of the response to what is seen as the western threat to Islam, and another is to show revenge and a capacity for retaliation against the perpetrators of the air assault in Iraq and Syria. Most important, though, is the intention of damaging community relations and catalysing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry. The aim is to polarise, destabilise and damage western societies by inciting inter-communal violence. In this context the substantial

increase in the number of hate crimes in Britain, and especially the recent terror attack on a group of Muslim worshippers during Ramadan at the Finsbury Park Mosque, will have been welcome developments for the IS leadership.

IS and the Global Margins

Finally, there is the manner in which the IS outlook is gaining adherents in other parts of the world, especially across the Global South. Again, this trend has been touched on in some recent ORG briefings but may now be the most important element in IS's revised strategy. As well as Bangladesh, northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad basin, Yemen and Somalia, there are three other countries to watch.

In Afghanistan the US Department of Defence is concerned at the effectiveness of IS paramilitary groups and sees this as an added reason to deploy several thousand more US troops into the country, reversing the long-term withdrawal undertaken by the previous Obama administration. This 'Khorasan' branch of IS is also increasingly active in Pakistan, particularly against civilian Shi'a targets.

In Egypt the Sisi government is reacting to the increased threat of violence from Islamist groups linked to IS with a firm policy of suppression, but this is being applied to a wide range of Islamic movements, not least the Muslim Brotherhood, and it is highly likely that it will simply increase support for more extreme elements. Egypt's growing anti-Islamist intervention in Libya has at best dispersed IS elements there into the cities or neighbouring countries.

Of even greater concern is the Philippines, where a coalition of extreme Islamist groups pledging links to IS took control of the southern city of Marawi in late May. Since then the Philippine Army has struggled to regain control, even

though it is being supported by US Special Forces and US and Australian navy surveillance aircraft. The operation is now in its sixth week with mortar fire and air strikes directed largely at paramilitary sniper positions resulting in a rising toll of civilian casualties. Although not much covered in the western media, the Marawi situation has caused consternation across South East Asia, not least in Indonesia and Thailand.

Conclusion

As IS loses its caliphate it is making the transition to a guerrilla insurgency in Iraq and Syria, is escalating its attempts to damage social cohesion in western states and it is doing what it can to spread the message and gather supporters across the Global South.

While the emphasis among western security analysts may be on the first two trends it may actually be the third which is most significant. This is because of underlying demographic and socio-economic trends that have been discussed repeatedly in ORG analyses over nearly two decades. A movement such as IS can successfully draw support from what may be described as the “majority margins” across the Global South – many tens of millions of mostly young people, fairly well-educated but with minimal life prospects. In the Middle East and Africa, in particular, this is exacerbated by the demographic bulge, with an especially high proportion of the population under the age of 30, but this also applies to an extent across South and South East Asia.

While most of the focus is on IS and a presumed problem with Islam, it is worth noting that neo-Maoist movements persist, not least with the Naxalite rebellion in India. Perhaps the wise conclusion has to be that IS, the Naxalites, Boko Haram and others should all be seen as examples of an evolving era of revolts

from the margins, revolts that may simply not be amenable to control and suppression by military action.

Image credit: [Mstyslav Chernov/Wikimedia](#)

About the Author

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