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Is Islamic State Now Evolving into a Transnational Movement?

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Introduction

The February ORG briefing ([Is Islamic State in Retreat?](#)) analysed the view that the organisation was in retreat after six months of air strikes and considerable losses. It concluded that the movement remained reasonably coherent in Syria and Iraq, was gaining some allegiance in other countries and had the possibility of increasing its support among disaffected communities in western states.

Last month's briefing ([Is Islamic State here to Stay?](#)) extended this discussion to examine two driving forces that increased its support, the issue of

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marginalisation across significant parts of the Middle East and the ability of the movement to present itself as the vanguard in the protection of Islam under attack, this last element aided by the long-term support for the Wahhabi tradition by Saudi Arabia, especially in South West Asia and the Middle East.

This briefing is the final contribution to a three-part series and extends the analysis in two ways. One is to review recent developments in the war between the US-led coalition and Islamic State, including some setbacks for the movement but also some significant developments in Afghanistan, and the second is the increasing support for the movement in western states. The conclusion is that Islamic State shows signs of considerable resilience while also beginning to make a transition to a transnational phenomenon rather than a movement concentrated almost exclusively on seeking to establish a territorially defined Caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

The Continuing War

The war against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is primarily an air war mounted by the United States at the head of a substantial coalition of western and regional states. It has now been under way for nine months and has involved many thousands of air strikes and armed drone attacks, primarily against Islamic State units in Iraq but with US, Canadian and occasional Jordanian operations in Syria. Israel is also involved in the latter, especially against targets linked to Hezbollah, but there is no officially acknowledged coordination with the coalition. As of early February, US military sources were claiming at least 8,500 IS personnel killed but it is not possible to corroborate this, nor to get reliable figures of civilian casualties. By early May, 6,000 targets had been hit, including 791 in the six weeks to 7 May. In spite of the intensity of the war, it has received very little attention in the western media.

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The leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was reported to have been seriously injured in a US air strike in April and may be incapacitated, but reports of a recent leadership struggle have not been confirmed. Given the capacity of the organisation to handle leadership losses it is unwise to put too much confidence in these reports, especially as that there are indications that a temporary leader, Abdul Rahman al-Sheijlar, has already taken charge.

More generally, there have been claims that Iraqi Army units, backed by US airpower have made gains that IS in Syria and Iraq has lost a quarter of its territory since the air war started. Other reports cast doubt on this in that they do not allow for IS gains elsewhere in Syria, nor for successful recent attacks in Anbar Province of Iraq. Perhaps most significant of all is that IS paramilitaries have successfully gained control of a substantial part of the key Baiji refinery to the north of Baghdad and the Iraqi Army is finding it extremely difficult to take back control. Because Baiji has not been operating since last year it is not hugely significant to either side, but the ability of barely two hundred IS paramilitaries to maintain control is symbolically important, even if the unusual urban combat environment of a large oil refinery is advantageous to them.

Furthermore, the occupation of the centre of Ramadi, the administrative centre of Anbar province is a major setback for the Iraqi government and a marked counter to the claims of overall success. Even the considerable publicity around the Delta Force strike into Syria that killed Abu Sayyaf is misleading since his main value would be as a subject for interrogation given his status as a significant organiser within Islamic State – a bureaucrat – rather than a paramilitary leader. His death in the raid was not the intended outcome.

Perhaps of greatest note is the overall state of the conflict after nine months of air strikes. In summary, the movement simply cannot be said to be in retreat

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and appears to have adapted readily to a changed environment in which it is possible to limit the effectiveness of air strikes. This should not cause great surprise since the middle-ranking paramilitary leadership of IS gained considerable experience of combat operations against strong coalition forces in Iraq in the period 2004-08, including surviving extensive operations by US and UK Special Forces. Given the lack of success of the US-led operations, there have been calls to expand ground force engagements with IS, even if primarily involving Special Forces. This, though, remains unlikely given the considerable reluctance of the Obama administration to become embroiled in yet another ground war in the region although the Delta Force raid does suggest that the US Department of Defense may see little alternative to some escalation.

Developments in Afghanistan

The [April briefing](#) pointed to groups in other countries pledging allegiance to Islamic State, including elements of Boko Haram in Nigeria, militias in Sinai and coastal Libya, and also to the growth of IS-linked paramilitaries in Yemen. In the past month attention has moved to Afghanistan and the end of April saw a sudden surge in Islamic State involvement in operations against Afghan National Army units around the northern town of Kunduz. In protracted fighting over two weeks the ANA sought to regain control against Taliban units that had been strengthened by paramilitaries linked to Islamic State.

Being clear as to the extent of IS involvement is not easy since it may be that the Afghan government is exaggerating this to ensure that the United States maintains its forces in the country and also its considerable financial and personnel commitment to training and equipping the ANA. Even so, there is substantial evidence that there is a growing IS involvement, and among those killed around Kunduz were a number of foreign nationals, including Uzbeks and

Chechens. Reports suggest that while IS paramilitaries may be directly involved in combat, their more important role has been in training Afghan Taliban, suggesting that the relationship developing with the Taliban leadership, at least in some parts of Afghanistan, is substantial.

As the Islamic State presence in Afghanistan has grown, western analysts have on a number of occasions suggested that the Taliban and other armed opposition groups, being primarily motivated by ethnicity and nationalism, would tend to come into a degree of conflict with the more religiously-motivated Islamic State. This may well be the case but the indications from the actions around Kunduz do suggest that there is an increasing commonality of action.

A Transnational Trend?

At root, the distinguishing feature between the al-Qaida movement and Islamic State is that while the former has sought the creation of a Caliphate through the overthrow of existing regimes, however long that might take and so far with little success, Islamic State is far more territorially orientated. In this context, Baghdadi's declaration of the Caliphate in Mosul last July was the key event. What we are now seeing in Afghanistan suggests a further development beyond the territory of the Syria/Iraq Caliphate, in that IS paramilitaries are linking up directly with Taliban elements, a transnational trend that is at a different level to local groups pledging support for the movement. On its own, this may have some significance, but it is another emerging trend that may be more important to watch.

Over the past twelve months there has been an increase in interceptions of potential attacks in western states, notably Australia, the UK and the United States. On 7 May, the FBI Director James Comey reported the FBI view that

there were “hundreds, maybe thousands” of people across the United States receiving new social media messages from Islamic State encouraging them to join the movement. A common route is that recruiters in Syria initiate contact with possible supporters and then feed them through to secure encrypted sites to continue the process. Corney reported hundreds of individual investigations under way right across the United States.

A particular feature of people recruited to the cause of Islamic State in a number of western countries is the prevalence of recent converts to Islam, the indications being that IS recruiters put considerable effort into this cohort. Moreover, the process of moving from conversion through to espousal of an extreme agenda can be very rapid, making it particularly difficult for even close family members, let alone counterterror forces, to counteract the change.

Conclusion

The question that arises from this briefing is whether Islamic State is in transition from being a primarily geographical entity focused on a distinct Caliphate that serves as a beacon to would-be recruits and a bulwark in the defence of its version of Islam, to a more transnationally-orientated movement. The current evidence does not provide a conclusive answer but does indicate the beginning of a trend.

If so, this raises the question of whether this was always seen by the IS leadership as a natural development of the movement or whether it is in response to the nine-month old air war. There is a connection here in that the singularly vigorous use of new social media by Islamic State to spread the message of the extent of the “crusader attack on Islam” is actually aided by the very intensity of that air war. Moreover, even if the movement is experiencing

setbacks, the ability to point to its expansion overseas, both by groups pledging allegiance and especially in its recent direct involvement in Afghanistan, can be useful in continuing to spread the message of a movement capable of withstanding the worst that the “crusaders” can throw at it.

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Paul's previous briefings on Islamic State are available here:

Part I: Is Islamic State in Retreat? (February 2015)

Part II: Is Islamic State Here to Stay? (April 2015)

About the Briefing

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