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A World After IS – Part I

Paul Roger

29 June 2016

Summary

The so-called Islamic State (IS) is under severe pressure from the coalition's intense air war in Iraq and Syria, killing around a thousand supporters each month. It is responding in a number of ways and they together give some indication of what will evolve if IS as a defined geographical caliphate is eventually suppressed.

Introduction

The April and June briefings in this series analysed the position of ISIS following major military offensives against it, especially in Iraq, with the June briefing placing the status of ISIS in the wider context of the 15-year war that started after the 9/11 attacks. That briefing concluded:

> " **"...that here have been the previous instances when western states appeared to be winning the war against al-Qaida, IS and other radical groups. As before, it is highly likely that the position we are now in is essentially little different to the earlier periods of optimism. Instead, we would do well to recognise that the underlying circumstances why these extreme groups have been able to gain and maintain support have not been addressed. Unless they are, new movements will arise, much as did IS, and war will continue." "**

There have been many developments in the past month which relate to the current position of IS and while they complicate the view that IS is in serious and possibly terminal decline, they do throw light on the wider dimension of a possible post-IS world.

Syria and Iraq

IS continues to control substantial territory in Syria although there have been reversals in the north-east of the country, largely through the action of Kurdish forces allied with US air action. There is some possibility of Russia and the

United States coordinating their actions against IS but this raises three significant issues.

The first is that any joint pressure on IS will be seen by the Saudis and other Gulf States as tacit acceptance by the West that the Assad regime in Damascus is secure. This will be seen as a threat to Sunni interests across the Middle East and will add to the likelihood that private individuals in Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait will step up their aid to radical Sunni movements such as al-Nusrah Front.

The second is that the Erdogan government in Ankara will be similarly antagonistic to the acceptance of Assad's survival. The government is currently concentrating on exerting control after the recent coup attempt but in the longer term will be intent on limiting the power of the Syrian Kurds while aiding any action that supports rebel groups directly opposing the Assad regime.

The third is that the erstwhile local al-Qaida affiliate, Al-Nusrah Front, has significantly increased its control of territory in Syria, with some analysts seeing it as having a potential as substantial as that of IS two years ago. It is reported to have at least 10,000 fighters in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, where it participates in local administration of rebel-controlled areas. Unlike IS, Al-Nusrah fighters are overwhelmingly Syrians. Pushed by Qatar, and perhaps Turkey, it is currently distancing itself from al-Qaida as it seeks to link more closely with smaller militias and avoid targeting by Russian, and potentially US, aircraft. On 28 July the group formally announced its break with al-Qaida, whose leadership has endorsed the separation, rebranding itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of Syria).

In Iraq the air war has intensified. As was reported in earlier briefings, Pentagon sources estimate that the two-year air war has so far killed some 30,000 IS supporters. Moreover, the war has expanded considerably in recent months, with Drone Wars UK reporting that British air strikes in Iraq and Syria in the first six months of 2016 were 85% up on the last six months of 2015 and are now approaching a thousand overall. The tempo of Royal Air Force attacks has thus increased roughly in proportion to the doubling of the combat fleet deployed from Cyprus after the December 2015 parliamentary vote to extend airstrikes from Iraq to Syria. However, the vast majority of British air strikes continue to be on IS in Iraq, rather than Syria. There is growing confidence that the Iraqi forces, supported by Shi'a militias, Iranian military advisors and coalition air power, will be able to offer a serious threat to IS control of Iraq's second city of Mosul in the coming months.

IS Responses in Iraq

In the wake of the capture of Fallujah, a substantial part of the IS force present in that city has probably retreated in passably good order rather than fight on and face massive losses. This follows a broadly similar strategy to that used when Tikrit and Ramadi were taken by government forces and is likely to persist. Although IS has previously been distinguished from al-Qaida by its emphasis on the creation of a physical caliphate, it now appears to have adjusted its strategy in Iraq toward preparing for a long-lasting insurgency following possible territorial defeat. Furthermore, there are indicationsthat not all IS paramilitaries retreat in the face of Iraqi government advances, with many embedding themselves back in the local populations as a prelude to future insurgent actions.

Two factors aid the potential for such an insurgency. One is the continuing marginalisation of the Sunni minority in Iraq, an issue recently heightened by the lack of government aid for many thousands of Sunni refugees fleeing the government attack on Fallujah. The second is the manner in which so much of the post-conflict occupation of the city is predicated on the actions of Shi'a militias. Such control of the "city of mosques" is anathema to Sunnis across the region.

In this environment and as part of the process of increasing inter-confessional conflict, ISIS has placed more emphasis on attacks on Shi'a civilians, especially in Baghdad. The 3 July truck bomb attack in the centre of Baghdad was the most worrying example of this, an attack made worse by the many people killed in the market fire that followed the blast. The death toll was well over 300, possibly the worst single civilian loss of life in Iraq in the past decade.

The Transnational War in Southern Asia

IS has also sought to increase its involvement in existing conflicts in southern Asia, especially in Bangladesh and Afghanistan. In neither state is IS the dominant paramilitary actor but in both states its influence is growing. Extreme Islamist actions in Bangladesh have until recently been domestic incidents, often directed at religious minorities and rarely involving foreigners. That changed with the 1 July attack on a restaurant in the Gulshan district of the capital Dhaka that killed twenty people, all foreigners - nine Italians, seven Japanese, an American and an Indian. Many more people were taken hostage but only foreigners were killed.

The Bangladeshi government initially played down reports of IS involvement but later acknowledged it, part of a wider recognition that IS supporters are actively

trying to link in with domestic groups and encourage attacks on foreigners. In this case, there was substantial concern that the attack could have been undertaken in the Gulshan district since it is one of the few wealthy parts of Dhaka, the location of a number of diplomatic missions and subject to high levels of policing and much private security activity.

In Afghanistan the government of President Ashraf Ghani has been struggling to contain the Taliban-led insurgency which has expanded following the withdrawal of most western troops in 2014. The Afghan National Army (ANA) lost around 5,000 soldiers killed in 2014 and 6,000 in 2015. The death rate has continued to climb this year and the army is plagued by desertions. President Obama has given up on his aim of completing the withdrawal of US troops by the end of his second term. Instead the numbers will be maintained at around 9,000 and recent changes in rules of engagement mean that combat troops will cooperate even more closely with ANA troops in operational deployments. The UK also increased the number of its troops in Afghanistan from 450 to 500 in July and delayed their planned departure until 2017.

From the Afghan government's position, the one positive development had been the recent claim that the attempt by IS to increase its presence in the country had been defeated, but this was thrown into disarray when a large-scale attack on a gathering of the mainly Shi'a Hazara community in the centre of Kabul killed more than eighty people and injured hundreds on 23 July.

The European Dimension

Thus, in both countries IS has made significant inroads, even though it is under severe pressure in Iraq and Syria and has also suffered reversals in Libya and, earlier through its loose affiliate Boko Haram, in Nigeria. This may be serious

enough but what may be even more relevant to understanding the future of the movement is the increase in external attacks, primarily across Europe, by groups or individuals with some links to IS. The overall pattern has been covered in earlier briefings, including attacks in Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Belgium, the United States and France, but what is now emerging is the strong possibility that there is a coordinated strategic plan being followed by IS, albeit with markedly different levels of central involvement in individual attacks.

Thus there may be some attacks that are independent of the movement yet inspired by its aims and readily claimed by it, whereas others may have more definite links and may even have a level of central planning. They include recent small-scale attacks in Germany, a much more devastating attack in Nice and the killing of a Catholic priest in a suburb of Rouen.

While there may be intelligence failings in some cases, public responses tend to see the levels of insecurity as directly linked to the movement of migrants and as part of a wider "threat from Islam", with particular tendency for the more markedly right-wing political parties across Europe benefiting to from the changing public mood.

What is important here is the need to recognise that such a response is precisely what the IS leadership desires. The attacks serve three purposes – to demonstrate the movement's continuing power in the face of the intense air assault, to damage community cohesion by increasing anti-Muslim bigotry and to increase the power of hard-right political parties, which are likely to multiply societal schisms and further alienate European Muslims.

In France, in particular, it should be assumed that IS is particularly interested in affecting the outcome of next year's presidential election, a two-part process

scheduled for April and June. The leader of the Front National, Marine le Pen, was already polling the best of the candidates, even before the Nice and Rouen attacks, and is likely to benefit from further attacks.

There are other countries in Europe which, like Germany until very recently, have had no particular experience of attacks by IS or Islamist paramilitaries but which in coming months face divisive elections, particularly around migration issues, that may impact on European cohesion. These include Austria, where the right-wing populist Freedom Party has a second chance to win the presidency in the rerun of the presidential election on 2 October, and the Netherlands, where the Eurosceptic anti-Muslim Party for Freedom is way ahead in polls for the March 2017 parliamentary elections. These states, too, could be politically vulnerable to future attacks.

Conclusion

In light of these developments it would appear that IS strategy is now aimed at preparing for an extended insurgency if its current areas of control are overrun by various coalitions. The main focus of such an insurgency will be Iraq, together with expanding its influence in south and south-west Asia and by doing as much damage as possible to the cohesion of a number of western states.

Early successes of this strategy are seen as Brexit, the rise of the Front National in France and the consequent possibility of Frexit, the substantial support for Donald Trump and other radical political changes in the West. In practice many other factors may be involved in these developments but for the IS leadership it is the movement's role, and future potential, which will be at the forefront of strategic thinking. A geographical entity or Caliphate may not

endure but IS may already be looking beyond that to what otherwise might be thought of as a post-IS world.

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About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His 'Monthly Global Security Briefings' are available from our website. His new book Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins will be published by I B Tauris in July 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.

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