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Breaking the cycle of violence

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Caliphate Interrupted: Towards a Stateless IS

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Summary

The imminent disappearance of the Islamic State (IS) group from the map of Iraq and Syria should not delude us that the battle for the Middle East is over or that Western influence has prevailed. Like al-Qaida and the Taliban before it, IS and its appeal, though fragmented, are likely to endure, to evolve and to reappear.

Introduction

Oxford Research Group has analysed the evolution of the war on terror since the 9/11 attacks and throughout the past seventeen years its conclusions have tended to the view that declarations of victory after particular phases of the war have invariably been premature if not wrong. This has indicated that the early use of robust military force has not been an appropriate or effective response to what have been considerable security challenges.

In this context and with the impending loss of its final territory, it is widely believed that the Islamic State (IS) group has at last been defeated and President Trump has made it clear that he intends to withdraw the remaining US troops from Syria as soon as possible. This briefing examines the earlier declarations of victory, reviews the reasons for the false expectations of success and explores whether they throw light on the future of IS.

Afghanistan and the response to the 9/11 attacks

Following the deaths of nearly 3,000 people in the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, the Bush administration had strong international support for early military action against the al-Qaida movement in Afghanistan and its Taliban hosts. Such action followed within four weeks of the attacks and the conflict was fought mainly by air attack, the use of CIA operatives and special forces, and strong logistic support for the Northern Alliance warlords. The brief but intense war saw the termination of the Taliban regime, the dispersal of al-Qaida and international agreement over an interim leader of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai.

In January 2002, less than four months after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush gave his State of the Union address to a joint meeting of Congress, declaring that the United States had responded with great effect, had won the war and was now in a position to move beyond al-Qaida and the Taliban to confront a wider threat from an "Axis of Evil". Three countries formed this axis - Iraq, Iran and North Korea – and these were "rogue

states" (a Clinton era term) that sought weapons of mass destruction and supported terrorism. Furthermore, the United States had the right to take pre-emptive action against them to prevent future attacks.

In Afghanistan it was expected that the end of the Taliban regime meant that the country would be able to recover and would develop into a peaceful pro-Western state with considerable reconstruction aid being available to do so. European states were expected to rise to this challenge, freeing the United States to move on to the new threats from the axis of evil. Support for this expanded perspective was far from universal among Western states and it also became clear that far too little support was forthcoming from US or European sources and that a security vacuum was developing across much of rural Afghanistan.

This enabled the Taliban movement to regroup and engage in an insurgency that, by 2006, led to tens of thousands of NATO troops being deployed to the country to try and maintain control. These deployments peaked in 2011 with 100,000 US troops and 40,000 from other states. Yet even these forces failed to defeat the Taliban movement and – seventeen years on from President Bush's assertion of victory – the Trump administration is now looking to a negotiated settlement followed by the withdrawal of most of the remaining Western troops. If this succeeds, then the Taliban will most likely have a substantial role in the future governance of the country in return for disavowing links to Al-Qaida and other international groups. This is much the deal that was offered by the Taliban in autumn 2001.

Beyond their old Afghan safe haven, the six years after the 2002 State of the Union Address saw an intensification of al-Qaida activity globally with factions involved in mass casualty attacks in many countries including Tunisia, Indonesia, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, Spain, the UK, Egypt, Algeria and Pakistan, as well as the growth of loosely allied Islamist groups across the Sahel-Sahara and Horn regions of Africa.

Iraq and Libya: missions accomplished?

The termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq in early 2003 appeared initially to be even more rapid than that of the Taliban fifteen months earlier. Within three weeks Baghdad had been taken and three weeks later, on 1 May 2003, President Bush gave his "Mission Accomplished" speech. Instead, within six months a full-scale anti-occupation insurgency was developing, and this was to last five years before the incoming President, Barack Obama, was able to agree to a security assessment that control had been regained and that US troops might be able to withdraw by 2011.

During the war, a major offshoot of al-Qaida, AQI (al-Qaida in Iraq) had been at the centre of the insurgency and was countered by US and UK forces in the 2004-2007 shadow war involving the Task Force 145 special forces group. This was seen to be sufficiently successful for the withdrawal to be completed, a sense emerging that a decade of war against al-Qaida and related groups might be coming to an end. This was strengthened by the killing of Osama bin Laden by US Navy SEALs in May 2011.

Furthermore, during 2011 a coalition of NATO and Gulf Arab states, including the United States, embarked on an operation to support opponents of the Gaddafi regime in Libya – a partially rehabilitated "rogue state" from the Clinton blacklist – leading to its collapse and the lynching of Gaddafi. British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Benghazi together in September 2011, five weeks before Gaddafi's final defeat, to celebrate Libya's liberation.

As with Afghanistan and Iraq, the transition to a pro-Western elected government was expected to follow. Instead, Libya became deeply unstable with numerous militias holding territory and no effective central government. It remains in this condition seven years later, despite numerous attempts to facilitate a lasting peace.

Common to Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya was the fragmentation of these 'liberated' state owing to a failure of weak Western reconstruction and "stabilisation" efforts, the rapid rise of local anti-government Islamist paramilitaries, and competition for influence among more determined regional rivals (including Iran in Iraq; Iran, Pakistan, India and Russia in Afghanistan; and Egypt, Gulf States, Turkey and Russia in Libya). None of the regimes established through these military interventions was able to survive without massive Western military assistance.

The Rise and Fall of IS

US forces very largely withdrew from Iraq in 2011, just as neighbouring Syria was collapsing into a brutal civil war. What remained of AQI had been ex-communicated by al-Qaida in 2006 and rebranded itself as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). ISI was already regrouping after its rout in 2004-2007 and had connected with the rapid growth of Islamist groups in north-east Syria opposed to the Assad regime in Damascus. By late 2013 and aided by the breakout of some 2,000 experienced paramilitaries from Iraqi high security prisons, ISI had transformed itself into a territorial entity, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

By mid-2014, when ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself Caliph at the head of an Islamic State potentially extending well beyond Iraq and Syria, IS controlled territory almost the size of the UK with a population of six million or more. Following the taking of Mosul and the expansion of IS towards Baghdad, the Obama administration commenced an intense and sustained air war, supported by Western states and a few Arab monarchies. This reached its peak in 2016-2017 and enabled the taking back of most of the caliphate territory by Iraqi forces in Iraq and US-backed Kurdish forces in Syria.

This air war involved some 30,000 air operations and the use of over 100,000 missiles and precision-guided bombs using strike aircraft and armed drones, with US sources estimating over 60,000 IS supporters killed. Pentagon sources concede that over a thousand civilians have also been killed but independent monitors put this figure much higher, a minimum of over 3,000 being likely and possibly many more. Although the operation involved the use of special forces on the ground as well as sustained air power, there was little Western media coverage of either. The sheer extent of the force

used and the level of casualties involved thus attracted little public attention in Western countries, a notable example of the move to remote warfare that has been in evidence over the past decade.

With the last pocket of IS-controlled territory on the Syria-Iraq border seemingly sure to fall to US-allied forces in February 2019, the contention of the Trump administration is that the war has now been definitively won. It should be noted that this is not a view shared by all military analysts in Western countries.

IS and its future in the era of remote warfare

Despite its seemingly catastrophic losses across the Levant, there are already signs that IS is returning to being an insurgent movement in Syria and especially in Iraq. In the latter case, this is aided by support from Sunni Iraqis angry at their treatment by the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad and its Iranian-trained militia. Apart from the neglect of Sunni regions, more than 19,000 people have been detained on terrorism-related charges since 2014, with over 3,000 sentenced to death in trials that may take barely ten minutes. Attacks within Iraq, often directed at government targets, have risen to 75 a month, with many thousands of IS supporters still reported to be present in Syria and Iraq. Beyond the immediate region, IS-affiliated paramilitary groups are well established in Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Yemen, Somalia and across the Sahel (primarily Mali, Niger and Nigeria), with French and US units heavily involved in counter-terror operations.

Many of the operations in Yemen, the Sahel and Somalia – where factions affiliated with al-Qaida remain more potent than IS affiliates – concentrate on special forces operations and the extensive use of armed and reconnaissance drones. One of the key questions is whether this major change, from tens of thousands of "boots on the ground" to remote warfare, will prove effective. The history of the War on Terror so far is that paramilitary movements may not initially be able to adapt to the Western use of force, as in Afghanistan in late 2001, the very early months of the Iraq war or the assault on Libya's Sirte in 2016, but given time and the extensive experience and adaptability of combat-trained paramilitaries, they are eventually able to respond.

One issue that arises from this is that the use of what might be termed "remote control" is conducted with very little political oversight and even less public knowledge and debate. Largely because of this there is little public discussion of the effectiveness of remote warfare, just an assumption that the retaking of territory means a presumption of victory when recent experience in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya suggests that caution would be a more sensible stance. The shattered, barely inhabited ruins of Mosul, Raqqa and Sirte bear witness to both the power and devastating consequences of Western-led remote warfare.

Conclusion

Over the past year and the seizure of the last remaining IS territory there is still little understanding of the motivations and persistence of groups such as IS or al-Qaida. In

February 2018, following the collapse of IS control of Raqqa, when President Trump was already of the view that it was time to move on, a briefing in this series concluded:

> "Trump's vision of a United States now in a position to confront China and Russia may itself be yet another indication of the dangerous prioritising of military power over other forms of engagement but even that dubious shift is almost certainly a serious misreading of the issue of revolts from the margins. More generally, it shows that what is often referred to as the "control paradigm" in military thinking is deeply embedded, which means, in turn, that we most likely *are* engaged in a multi-decade conflict.

One year on, and even with the final collapse of the geographical caliphate of IS, it is wise to assume that this is still the case. IS is off the map but it should not be off the radar.

About the Author

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