

ISIS: the long-term prospect - Global trends

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The caliphate is besieged. But ISIS can take heart from global trends working in its favour.

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Mosul's impending fall and Raqqa's ongoing siege highlight ISIS's slow loss of control of the much-vaunted caliphate it declared exactly three years ago, on 29 July 2014. The costs to the movement have been huge: over 50,000 of its supporters have been killed during the coalition's three years of intensive airstrikes [1], and many thousands of civilians across Iraq and Syria have died as a direct result of the war.

But ISIS can claim to have seriously damaged the Iraqi army's special forces, making it much more difficult for Haider al-Abadi's government in Baghdad to stabilise Iraq. This will in turn help ISIS to transform itself into a guerrilla force and, it would hope, a long-term insurgency.

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ISIS's capacity to deploy at least 1,000 suicide-bombers in the battle for Mosul means it can present itself as a powerful symbol of continuing struggle. It is significant here that the movement's timescale for success is measured in many decades [2], with a short-lived caliphate only one portion. Furthermore, its self-image is enhanced by the level of force used against it by the "crusader states" of the "far enemy" [see article below]. ISIS believes it will outlast the present generation of western leaders and keep alive its historic mission of creating the true caliphate to come [3].

ISIS's current strategy has two more elements. The first is to export the war to aggressor states [see below] - the European and north American components of the far enemy. Recent examples include the attacks in Manchester and London, the potentially devastating failed attack on 27 June at Brussels' central station [4]. These operations aim to stir up as much anti-Muslim bigotry as possible, thereby weakening social cohesion in western states and perhaps even their determination to continue fighting ISIS.

The second element is to disseminate the idea around the world [5]. In a sense this is already well underway: ISIS has largely taken over from al-Qaida as the figurehead that Islamist movements in a host of countries seek to emulate: northern Nigeria, Mali and across the Sahel, Yemen, Somalia, Bangladesh, southern Thailand. Afghanistan and Egypt - where the regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi seeks to suppress Islamist dissent but inevitably provokes it [6] - are proving fertile territories. The southern Philippines is a surprising addition to the list [7]: there, a coalition of Islamist paramilitary movements is trying to maintain its weeks-long control of Marawi, on the island of Mindanao, against the firepower of the Filipino army and United States special forces.

A view across decades

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These factors raise the much broader question of whether ISIS, its offshoots and like-minded extreme movements – whether these are rooted in religious, political, nationalist or ethnic identities – may develop further, and even coalesce into broad “revolts from the margins”. This is still an open question, but it can be approached in the context of global trends [8] that really could have such a result [9].

A recent report finds that twenty-two Arab countries are home to 100 million people aged 15-24, while those in Asia and the Pacific have 400 million. This total of 500 million makes up 60% of the world's youth population. The Arab states in particular suffer from very high rates of youth unemployment [10], averaging 30% for the region but peaking in war-torn states such as Yemen at 55%.

At the same time, one of the successes of the last four decades or so has been real improvements in education, literacy and communications. This means that any perception of marginalisation and meagre life-prospects is more likely to be rooted in direct knowledge of how elites live. The combination of high rates of graduate unemployment and insecurity offers clear dangers. A prominent example is Tunisia: it is making a slow transition to more representative governance, yet proportionally more of its young people embrace extreme Islamist views than in most Arab countries (see “Tunisia and the world: roots of turmoil”, 24 January 2011).

ISIS today seems to be near collapse, but the longer-term prospects for it and like-minded movements are far more promising than many in the west are ready to acknowledge.

In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, tens of millions of young people also have poor life-chances, notwithstanding a quite rapid pace of development and the provision of much wider educational opportunities. This situation gains even further seriousness if the growing impact of climate change on the agriculture sector is added. A powerful statement from the leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger says that “drought, food insecurity, water scarcity, unemployment, hopelessness about the future and poverty are fertile grounds for extremism, and a sign of insecurity, instability and unsustainability” [11].

The United Nations convention to combat desertification (UNCCD) is also focusing on this nexus [12]7. Its executive secretary Monique Barbut points to the 375 million young people who will enter African job markets by 2032, over half (200 million) of whom will be living in rural areas. She says: “Millions of rural young people face an uncertain future due to the lack of decent rural jobs and continuous loss of livelihoods due to land degradation and falling yields...Frustrations will boil over with more migration and more conflict over a shrivelling resource base”.

In short, there are many tens of millions of young, educated and knowledgeable people across the Middle East, Africa and Asia who have grounds to see the world from an entirely different perspective to leaderships and elites in the global north. For them, the current world economic system is not delivering reasonable ambitions – and that is even before inexorable climate disruption has a fuller impact [13] [14].

ISIS today seems to be near collapse, at least in a territorial sense. But in light of these larger circumstances, the longer-term prospects for it and like-minded movements are far more promising than many in the west are ready to acknowledge.

Paul Rogers

* "ISIS: the long-term prospect". Open Democracy. 29 June 2017:
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/isis-long-term-prospect>

ISIS against, and in, the west

The retreat of the caliphate in Iraq-Syria signals a new phase in the 30-year war.

ISIS's first two years of development, 2012-14, were primarily concerned with creating a new caliphate. This period culminated in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's announcement of the new entity in Mosul on 4 July 2014. ISIS propaganda greeted this as the distinguishing feature of the whole movement.

Now, over two years on, ISIS's continued loss of ground in Iraq and Syria fuels its strategic aim of taking the war directly to the "far enemy".

In contrast to the failure of al-Qaida to take over a state in full, ISIS was able to establish a hugely significant presence in the heart of the Islamic world. Moreover, this was in parts of two states that had been artificially created by the far enemy nearly a century earlier. This achievement alone supported its claim to be the true defender of Islam against the crusaders and Zionists.

The new caliphate, with al-Baghdadi as the leader, could stand in the tradition of the Ottoman-era institution dismantled in 1923 – and all the other caliphates from the time of the Abbasids in the eighth to thirteenth centuries. True, it would be extreme and radical compared with the latter civilisation; but then even that, for the new ideologues, had not been true to their perceived vision of Islam.

Within months of the declaration, the United States and some of its regional allies had recognised the threat from this new creation. In August 2014 they launched a hugely violent, intensive and continuing air bombardment. This "remote-control war", including the use of special forces and private military companies, has been a foremost instrument in containing ISIS. In the process it has killed tens of thousands of the movement's supporters and helped the Iraqi army and its allied Shi'a militias to retake territory.

The Shi'a element alone makes unlikely the complete decay of support for ISIS among Iraq's Sunni minority. This factor apart, ISIS has long since recognised the need to take the war to the west. This has involved both direct involvement in some attacks and intensive proselytising to motivate local sympathisers. It now looks certain that as its territory recedes, many of its most experienced paramilitaries will move to western Europe.

But not only there: Saudi authorities have reportedly uncovered a substantial cell in the kingdom. This is a huge concern for western counter-terror agencies, and is expected to grow still further as ISIS control diminishes in its own territory.

The next phase

The restriction of ISIS in Iraq and Syria will likely give rise to new manifestations of the al-Qaida/ISIS idea. Two aspects of this deserve emphasis. The first is the very symbolism of having

created a caliphate, a quality which will survive the institution's physical suppression in the short term. After all, the ISIS worldview is not bound by mere temporal considerations, and thus "short" in its eyes can mean decades or even centuries. It is the fact that a proper Islamist caliphate has existed, even for a few brief years, that counts: a story to be told and retold for future generations, including its having been torn apart by the hated crusaders.

The second aspect is the evolution of yet another generation of fighters. In the modern era this started with the mujahideen and their multinational allies fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Paramilitaries from Kashmir and elsewhere were among those involved, many of whom returned to their own states to foment the new al-Qaida vision after the Soviet retreat.

More paramilitary cohorts gained experience in the 1990s in the Balkans, Algeria, Chechnya and in the Taliban's fight with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance of warlords. Yet others joined after 9/11 in the fight against the Americans. In 2003 and after, Iraq was to form the best possible laboratory of paramilitarism. A great boost came when Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) was apparently crushed in the "dirty war" against western special forces from 2004-08, when survivors and escaped prisoners from the movement's ranks gave the new ISIS its toughest and most experienced fighters.

The many that survive will join with other younger fighters to create new teams of operatives. This time, many will be embedded across the western world, a ready resource available to train newer devotees of the dreamed-of caliphate.

It is perhaps a little early to make a firm judgment. But there are early indications that the decline and fall of ISIS is but a metamorphosis into the next phase of the 30-year war.

Paul Rogers

* Open Democracy. :

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/isis-against-and-in-west>

Islamic State vs its far enemy

Behind the flux of conflict on the ground in Syria-Iraq, all sides are digging in for a long war.

Much of the recent attention on the war against Islamic State has focused on the intense conflict between the movement and local Kurds in and around Kobane, close to the Syria-Turkey border. Its 60,000 people had been relatively undisturbed by the Syrian war until a few months ago, when thousands of people displaced by the escalating conflict began to swell its population.

Within a short period, as many as 400,000 had arrived. Most fled across the border to Turkey when the town was besieged by Islamic State (IS) militias. Today, control of otherwise deserted and ravaged Kobane is divided between these militias and Kurdish fighters, including some from Kurdish Iraq (see Tim Arango, "In Syria battle, a test for all sides", New York Times, 20 November 2014)

Kobane is strategically important for IS, not least as seizing it would give the movement command of a long stretch of the border. The repeated targeting of IS positions by US airstrikes has made the

battle there even more pivotal. At the same time, it is but one part of a wider war with many other elements. Three of these involve western and Iraqi governments, and three the Islamic State.

In the first category:

- * The Pentagon is deploying a further 1,500 troops to Iraq. This will take the acknowledged total to around 3,000, although this may not include special-force units whose deployment is seldom reported

- * The US chair of the joint chiefs of staff, General Martin Dempsey, has not ruled out deploying US ground troops to the frontline with Iraq army units

- * Both US and Iraqi sources have strongly discounted talk of an Iraqi army "spring offensive" in Anbar province in 2015, on the basis that rebuilding, retraining and re-equipping Iraq's army will take many months.

In the second category:

- * The Islamic State is reported to have concluded some sort of limited agreement with the al-Nusra Front (the al-Qaida affiliate in Syria) in order to bring inter-militia violence to an end there. In turn this development follows al-Nusra's success in capturing a number of towns and villages from other Syrian militias with a more secular agenda

Al-Nusra is also reported to have overrun arms dumps containing modern weapons provided by western states for use against Bashar al-Assad's regime. These may include as many as eighty US-made BGM-71 anti-tank missiles (see Columb Strack, "Jihadists make gains in Syria after weapons seizure", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 2014).

- * The Islamic State has reputedly secured the allegiance of the most violent of Egypt's militant groups, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (see David D Kirkpatrick, "Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS", *New York Times*, 10 November 2014). If confirmed this would be its biggest international boost, as the group is fighting Abdel Fattah al-Sisi government in Cairo and challenging the latter's violent suppression of Islamist and other dissent (see Sara Khorshid, "Egypt's new police state", *New York Times*, 17 November 2014).

- * Iraqi Kurdish sources say that western agencies are underestimating IS's military capacity. The true number of IS paramilitaries may be over six times larger than the 31,500 often quoted (see Patrick Cockburn, "War with ISIS: Islamic militants have army of 200,000, claims senior Kurdish leader", *Independent on Sunday*, 16 November 2014).

The narrative

In other aspects of this complex conflict, the Islamic State's ability to make major advances has stalled. The movement is now preparing for a long conflict. A priority will be maintaining and enhancing its transnational support, in terms both of personnel (an estimated 15,000 have already come to join IS from across the Middle East and beyond, but it needs more) and finance (with individuals in western Gulf states playing a key role). These efforts require IS to determinedly promote its core narrative, which may be extreme by western perceptions but does have a sufficient basis to attract support.

This sees the Islamic State as a vanguard movement in the global defence of Islam at a time when Islam is under attack and leaders of Muslim states across the Middle East are either apostate or utterly untrue to the tenets of Islam. The movement has established a renewed caliphate, currently

centred on Raqqa (the early capital of the most durable caliphate, the Abbasids of 1,200 years ago) with plans to extend it to Baghdad (the later and much longer-lasting Abbasid capital. In turn it will spread to Saudi Arabia, ousting the House of Saud and claiming guardianship of Mecca and Medina (sites of the “two holy places”) - and, ultimately, reclaim the “third holy place” in Jerusalem.

The Islamic State is leading this historic renewal against the “far enemy” of the United States and its allies that have brought chaos to Afghanistan and Iraq, killing over 200,000 Muslims and wounding many more in the process. These enemy forces have also killed Muslims in Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, Mali and many other states, while propping up corrupt and un-Islamic regimes (al-Sisi’s Egypt being the latest). IS points to the far enemy’s practice of rendition, torture and detention without trial, and it emphasises the role of the Zionists. Indeed, Israel is seen as little more than an extension of the United States, and Israel strike-aircraft and helicopter-gunships as US military hardware with Israeli markings.

The prospect

The reality of the Islamic State is very different from its self-portrait. The progress it has made since mid-2014 has owed much to largely secular Ba’athists and others who hardly buy into its theology or long-term vision are prepared to make common cause against the hated Iraqi government and the United States. The narrative does resonate, though, with a small minority of young Muslims, for whom Islamic State answers a longing even more seductive than did al-Qaida after 9/11. The fact that IS has created a territorial entity, a physical manifestation of the promised caliphate, adds to its aura.

This narrative is not easy for western analysts to comprehend, especially given the brutality of many of the movement’s operations. But it is being worked on and developed relentlessly, then propagated over and over in many different forms (especially through new social media). It is helped greatly by the actions of the Israeli government of Binyamin Netanyahu, and would dearly like a serious ground war with western troops - which the current “mission-creep” may well provide. If that war comes, there will no doubt be elements in Islamic State that look forward to the capture of American soldiers, their detention, waterboarding, and on camera execution in orange jump-suits.

Perhaps a few western policy-advisers and analysts are thinking such a narrative through, recognising its seductive nature and acting accordingly. There is, though, not too much sign of that, which makes it all the more likely that this will be a lengthy war.

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* Open Democracy. 21 November 2014:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/islamic-state-vs-its-far-enemy>

For integrated links, see the original article.

P.S.

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Tauris, 2016), which follows *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* (Polity, 2007), and *Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st Century* (Pluto Press, 3rd edition, 2010). He is on Twitter at: @ProfPRogers

A lecture by Paul Rogers, delivered to the Food Systems Academy in late 2014, provides an overview of the analysis that underpins his openDemocracy column. The lecture - "The crucial century, 1945-2045: transforming food systems in a global context" - focuses on the central place of food systems in human security worldwide. Paul argues that food is the pivot of humanity's next great transition. It can be accessed here:

<http://www.tansey.org.uk/news/PRtalk.html>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 41854), [The Zeus complex: against air war – The limits of remote warfare](#).

[2] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/thirty-year-war-still-on-track>

[3] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/isil-caliphate-crumbles-ideology-remains-170628093014443.html>

[4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/world/europe/brussels-belgium-station-attack.html>

[5] <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/new-counterterrorism-heat-map-shows-isis-branches-spreading-worldwide-n621866>

[6] <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/6/23/egypts-sisi-declares-three-month-extension-of-state-of-emergency>

[7] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/04/opinion/isis-philippines-rodrigo-duterte.html>

[8] http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/paul_rogers_monthly_briefing/after_mosul_islamic_state's_asian_and_african_future

[9] see "After Mosul: Islamic State's Asian and African Future", Oxford Research Group, 28 June 2017

[10] <http://www.ipsnews.net/2017/06/what-future-for-700-million-arab-and-asian-youth/>

[11] <http://www2.unccd.int/news-events/global-observance-world-day-combat-desertification-burkina-faso>

[12] <http://africasciencenews.org/africa-acts-on-distressed-migration-of-youth>

[13] [8https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/climate-disruption-new-reality](https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/climate-disruption-new-reality)

[14] see "Al-Qaida, and a global revolt", 22 May 2014:
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/alqaida-and-global-revolt>