The Fall and Metamorphosis of ISIS

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After the recapture of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the terrorist organisation has ceased to exist as a state-building project, but enters a new phase of a transition into a scattered, umbrella group that gives a flag and inspiration to local jihadi and radicalised factions. In this new emanation, its expansion potential will be reduced by its rivalry with Al Qaeda. ISIS will use its existing resources for terrorist attacks in the Middle East, mainly Iraq, Syria and possibly Egypt, as well as in Southeast Asia and Europe.

The Fall of ISIS as a Pseudo-State. In 2014, in an unprecedented move for a terrorist organisation, ISIS created a pseudo-state with two administrative centres, one in Raqqa (Syria) and the other in Mosul (Iraq). Since the formation of the anti-ISIS coalition—today comprising 73 states and organisations—87% of ISIS-held territory in Syria and Iraq has been recaptured, including the two main cities. Before that happened, though, the head of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and other leaders had left Mosul and Raqqa. According to a Pentagon assessment, 60,000–70,000 ISIS fighters have been killed since 2014, including 180 key commanders. The state-building project of ISIS will end in the disintegration of its territory into small enclaves, which, surrounded by enemy forces, will eventually be recaptured. The smaller the territory under ISIS control, the lower its revenues from taxes, extortion, and oil production (which have fallen by 90% since 2014). The influx of new recruits has virtually stopped in comparison with the 1,500 new fighters a month at its peak. Together with the waning of human and financial resources, the organisation's propaganda capabilities have diminished: the quality of published materials is lower and they are translated into fewer languages.

Transformation Mirrors Al Qaeda's. For a year now, ISIS has been morphing from a state-like structure, consisting of a head of state and councils in Iraq and Syria, into a network of a core group and local cells affiliated with the group or sympathising with it. Al Qaeda changed in a similar way following the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. As a result of territorial and financial losses as well as external pressure in 2017, ISIS has delegated decision-making to a lower command level and transported cash out of Syria and Iraq while channelling remaining resources into terrorist attacks, mainly in the Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt) and Europe.

ISIS is still financially supporting its sympathisers outside of Iraq and Syria through money transfer services or by sending cash in small, difficult to intercept, batches. It has sent money to places where it had not established a presence before, which signals its intention to prepare outposts in case it is completely defeated in Syria and Iraq. Apart from money, ISIS is also giving radicals tactical clues: it recommends using easily available tools (knives, vehicles) or improvised explosive devices. In social media, it disseminates techniques for acquiring materials and how to assemble them.

Similar to Al Qaeda in Iraq in 2007, ISIS in Syria (and Iraq) is now waiting out the direct fighting period to make use of the transition phase after the ceasefire of the warring parties. In conditions of obscure money transfers and contracts, ISIS and other extremist organisations may benefit from funds allocated to Syria's

rebuilding. Outside of Syria, ISIS has less potential to consolidate local cells where Al Qaeda is strong, such as East and West Africa. The two organisations, though sharing a similar ideology, are in conflict because they compete for the same potential supporters. ISIS could prioritise building new structures in countries where Al Qaeda is less active, namely in Europe, the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Egypt) and Southeast Asia.

Relocating and Returning ISIS Fighters. While the territory under ISIS control shrinks, more non-Syrian and non-Iraqi fighters will either return to their countries of origin or relocate to other countries to set up or strengthen ISIS-affiliated factions.

It is most likely that active members of ISIS (their number is currently estimated at less than 30,000) will relocate to third countries rather than their states of origin, where most face capture because their identity is known. The easiest terrain for ISIS to act is in war-torn countries. One destination for relocating or returning fighters may be Yemen. The number of jihadists there has been rising, but most likely the strength of Al Qaeda will not allow ISIS significant expansion in that area. Libya, another war-torn country, is an exception. There, ISIS cooperates with Al Qaeda and is financially self-sufficient. In the past year, however, it has lost all its territorial outposts. In both Libya and Tunisia, fewer than 800 fighters are active, although some fighters may return to the Tunisian regions of Al-Qasrayn and Bin Kirdan. In Egypt, they could join the ISIS-affiliated Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in the Sinai, which would give them the possibility of attacking Copts and tourists. In eastern and western Africa, the organisation is weak: it amounts to a couple hundred people. In Somalia, they are countered by Al-Shabab, locally the strongest and an Al Qaeda-affiliated group. ISIS is growing in Afghanistan despite opposition from the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It seems that the greatest opportunities for ISIS to expand are in Southeast Asia: it is already present in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and could potentially find fertile ground for growth in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The priority and most demanding target for ISIS are not Middle Eastern or Asian but European countries. Some 5,000 fighters have European passports and hail mainly from Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, with fewer from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. By July 2017, a third had returned to their countries of origin—it is estimated that up to 3,000 will ultimately return. The inflow will be gradual and more probable for women than men.

UN and Radicalisation Awareness Network reports identify three groups of European returnees: (1) disillusioned with ISIS (prone to deradicalisation), (2) active members capable of orchestrating an attack (less numerous but posing the greatest threat), (3) radicals who have cut contact with ISIS but could join other terrorist organisations (they are the most difficult to identify). Even though further attacks in Europe cannot be prevented completely and the returnees from Iraq and Syria pose a substantial security threat, their identities are mostly known, and European and national agencies have been preparing for their return.

Protracted Problem with a Global Solution. Jihadism results from structural economic and political problems of Middle Eastern countries. The problems, such as economic underdevelopment and non-democratic political systems, will not disappear in the short nor medium term, so jihadism will also remain, although taking on different institutional shapes. The two most prominent ones—ISIS and Al Qaeda—remain strategic competitors and limit the strength of the other. The crimes perpetrated by ISIS have already resulted in very low support for jihadists: 89% of respondents in Arab countries think of them unfavourably, which reduces their recruiting and propaganda potential. In these circumstances, ISIS in the longer term can hold on where it is already well established (Syria, Iraq), where its presence can produce the widest media coverage (Egypt, Europe), and where Al Qaeda's presence is scarce at best (Southeast Asia).

International cooperation, especially on the global level, is crucial if ISIS is to be defeated. The UN and Interpol have proven to be the most convenient forums for such initiatives. In September 2017, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2379 to hold ISIS accountable for its war crimes in Iraq. Greater private-public cooperation is planned to counter the threats that terrorist organisations pose to information technologies, as is the establishment of UN-led global partnership of intelligence agencies. With the fall of the pseudo-state of ISIS, the cross-border movement of fighters has increased. To limit the risk, sharing identity data among countries who are in possession of the global Interpol database of suspected terrorist fighters is key. Even though global cooperation can hardly ever be complete, there is no alternative to it, i.e., in cutting terrorist organisations from their sources of financing.