The Islamic State in Retreat

Post-workshop report

London School of Economics

31st of May 2018

Funded by the David Davies of Llandinam Fellowship

Iraqi forces recaptured Mosul three-and-a-half years after it fell to the Islamic State

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Table of Contents

Executive summary

On the 31st of May 2018, the LSE hosted a workshop entitled 'The Islamic State in Retreat'. The workshop was sponsored by the David Davies of Llandinam Fellowship and brought together leading academics on the Middle East and international terrorism to explore the future of the Islamic State (IS) in light of the fall of its Caliphate. The workshop posed three main questions; how is IS adapting to the loss of its Caliphate, have the conditions in Syria and Iraq that enabled its spectacular rise been addressed, and what does this tell us about the future of IS? Panellists addressed these questions by looking the behaviour of similar groups, the aftermath of civil wars in other states, the political and social context in the Middle East, as well as the actions of IS.

The panellists agreed that IS has been significantly degraded and no longer poses a meaningful threat in either Syria or Iraq, but it is shifting to a clandestine, network-based movement that will be difficult to eradicate completely and continue to represent a real terrorist threat, both in the Middle East and beyond. There was also broad agreement on the deep structural problems afflicting the Middle East, including the on-going conflict in Syria, geo-political rivalries, sectarian tensions, as well as weak and repressive governance. These conditions enabled the rise of IS in the build-up to 2014 and may do so again if left unresolved.

Key findings

- Inside Syria and Iraq, IS has been significantly weakened and no longer poses a strategic threat to either government. It has followed the pattern of many groups in retreat, reverting to clandestine cells and focusing on terrorist-type violence to maintain relevance.
- The loss of its Caliphate has undermined much of IS's global appeal, but there continues to be a hard-core of supporters loyal to its cause. It is evolving from an hierarchical organisation to a global network and movement in much the same way as al Qaeda.
- This transition will enable IS to sustain momentum in the form of terrorist activity. The legacy of its foreign fighter cadre and on-line activity will also provide IS (or an evolution

of the group) with the foundations to re-emerge if and when conditions become favourable once again, be it in Syria, Iraq, or another state in the region.

- There are some positive signs in the region to suggest there will be no repeat of the conditions that enabled IS's rise. Regional governments and religious authorities are increasingly recognising the ideological roots of Salafi-jihadism. The impetus for change in Iraq is strong and in Syria, while the conflict drags on, jihadist actors are in retreat.

- The likelihood of significant and enduring change in the region, however, is limited. The future of the Syrian conflict is extremely difficult to predict, and multiple pathways could benefit jihadists. The entrenched role of sectarianism and corruption in Iraq will hinder efforts to reform its institutions. Regional governments are falling back on increasingly repressive governance and political institutions continue to lack legitimacy.

- The history of the region and other conflict zones demonstrates that the failure to address these structural problems in a manner that reflects regional social and economic dynamics will sustain support for violent Islamist groups. In the worst case scenario, these tensions will increase the likelihood of another major conflict that could provide the backdrop for the re-emergence of a significant Salafi-jihadist insurgency that takes on IS's mantle.

Recommendations

- Counter-terror operations need to focus on the key nodes that will hold the remnants of IS's movement together and attract new affiliates and recruits. In the West, individuals involved in Syria and Iraq, or with a longer history of participation in radical jihadism, will be key for sustaining the global movement. Tactical cooperation with states in the Middle East and North Africa should focus on jihadi organisations that link local groups to the transnational movement.

- The West also needs to build the credibility and legitimacy of political and social institutions on the region, not just focus on security-sector support. These broader public institutions have proven crucial in stemming violence in other post-conflict zones, and country-experts make it clear that the same will apply in the Middle East.

Introduction - The Islamic State in retreat

On the 31st of May 2018, the LSE hosted a workshop entitled 'The Islamic State in Retreat'. The workshop was sponsored by the David Davies of Llandinam Fellowship and brought together leading academics on the Middle East and international terrorism to explore the future of the Islamic State (IS) in light of the fall of its Caliphate. The workshop posed three main questions; how is IS adapting to the loss of its Caliphate, have the conditions in Syria and Iraq that enabled its spectacular rise been addressed, and what does this tell us about the future of IS?

The first question is particularly interesting in IS's case. In many ways, IS mirrors a litany of territorially-focused insurgencies. Between 2012 and 2014, as a clandestine network it exploited areas of weak state control in both Syria and Iraq as well as local- and national-level community conflicts to build a small, but resilient and capable military force. In the face of this force, anaemic Iraqi state institutions in Sunni areas capitulated and the fragile alliance of rebel forces in eastern Syria fell apart. IS took much of its territory largely uncontested in a military sense.

The Islamic State at the peak of its powers

In turn, it has proven no match for the internationally-backed state and non-state military forces that have been clawing back IS territory over the last four years, be they a re-energised Iraqi military, Iraqi Shia militias, Western-backed Kurdish-Arab forces, or the Syrian military. However, IS has also deliberately internationalised its conflict. It created locally-focused affiliate groups in countries across the Muslim world, developed a robust on-line presence, and enabled terror attacks in the West through a combination of facilitation and inspiration. The workshop examined IS in its totality, attempting to understand how its retreat in Syria and Iraq affected these different layers of the organisation.

The second question also has interesting ramifications. Was IS's rise the latest in a wave of cyclical extremist violence in the Iraq, Syria and the Middle East more generally that is bound to rise again? Was it a unique set of circumstances that enabled IS to grow stronger than any previous jihadist groups, but, most likely, also stronger than any group to follow? Or, was it the result of fundamental mistakes by regional governments and international actors? If it is the latter, what can be done to ensure there is no repeat?

The following pages represent a short summary of efforts to address one or more of these questions by nine experts, covering a variety of academic fields. The workshop was broken down into three panels. The first attempted to offer insights into the future of IS by exploring how other groups have adapted operationally and organisationally to counter significant losses as well as the key factors that have affected the residual strength of non-state actors in retreat. The second panel focused on the broader political trajectory in Iraq, Syria, and the wider Middle East; how these states are likely to evolve and the space this leaves for IS's re-emergence. The final panel looked more specifically at IS; what the organisation now looks like post-Caliphate, the appeal of the organisation to extremists both on- and off-line, and trends in the sentiments that underpin support for Islamist terror groups.

Overall, an identifiable trend ran through each of the panels. IS has been significantly weakened and is unlikely to recreate its successes in 2014 and 2015 either in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is unlikely to be completely eradicated. It has taken steps to ensure its survival as a group, Iraq and Syria are likely to remain fragile states of differing levels, and there remains a robust undercurrent of support for some strands of jihadist

sentiment. IS will retain the capacity the carry out and inspire isolated terrorist operations, and the risk of a resurgent IS (or a similar group) remains real, albeit largely a function of factors outside of IS's control.

Panel 1 - A comparative perspective

Militants in retreat

Dr Matthew Dixon (London School of Economics)

When faced with significant counterinsurgent or counterterrorist pressure, most groups in IS's position revert into survival mode. They put primacy on activity that ensures the organisation lives on, even if this reduces the likelihood of it attaining its longer-term political objectives. In IS's case, this survival behaviour is likely to be different in the context of its domestic insurgency in Iraq and Syria, and its development into a transnational terrorist actor. Many commentators have noted an increase in terrorist attacks as IS has been losing its territory, often explained as IS 'lashing out'.[1] There are, however, more pragmatic explanations, focused on organisational survival, for IS engaging in more terrorist activity, both within Iraq and Syria, and further afield.

Survival behaviour of locally-focused insurgents often involves a change in operational focus. Other insurgencies that have used terrorism as part of their normal operational repertoire actually carried out less terrorist activity as they came under pressure. However, a greater proportion of their operations became more explicitly terrorist-like in nature, shifting towards attacking civilian rather than military targets. Terrorism does not increase when violent non-state actors are in retreat, but it appears to recede more slowly than other types of violence.

Shifting to softer targets can aid organisational survival but detract from a group's ability to achieve its strategic objectives in a number of ways. For one, while having less impact on a target's military strength, terrorism is more likely to succeed than a conventional or guerrilla operation and uses less resources and personnel. It is, therefore, a more efficient way of demonstrating operational momentum, which research has shown to be a key driver of recruitment for militant groups. Terrorism also creates or exacerbates community tensions, potentially boosting a group's capacity to recruit as the population seeks protection from

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[1] For example Watkins, Andrew (2016) "Losing Territory and Lashing Out: The Islamic State and International Terror" *CTC Sentinel.* 9, 3. URL: https://ctc.usma.edu/losing-territory-and-lashing-out-the-islamic-state-and-international-terror/

government reprisals. However, it concomitantly, and often to a greater extent, increases government resolve to defeat the group. Finally, as victory looks less likely, militant groups can lose their pragmatic supporters. The group's remaining cadre and support within society is often more hard-line and demands more extreme action. A group's leadership can be forced to engage in more terrorist activity to keep these supporters on board, which can then isolate it from the broader population, boosting support for its enemies. Inside Syria and Iraq, IS is likely to be affected by all three of these processes given the damage inflicted on its military force and resources, its reliance on sectarian tensions as a recruiting tool, and its mix of locals and foreigners. Rather than 'lashing out', by falling back on terrorist operations, IS is adapting to reflect its new organisational priorities.

Through the creation of an international network of affiliates and supporters, however, IS has set itself apart from most territorially-focused insurgencies, raising questions about whether it will transplant its organisation elsewhere. Retreating insurgencies that do not surrender almost always fall back to their traditional stronghold. A few relocate, but only to a different area of the same state or over a border into a neighbouring country. Even groups with a transnational focus have only moved when another government has invited it to establish a new base area in its territory. All of this suggests that IS's leadership is unlikely to refocus away from its traditional Iraqi strongholds.
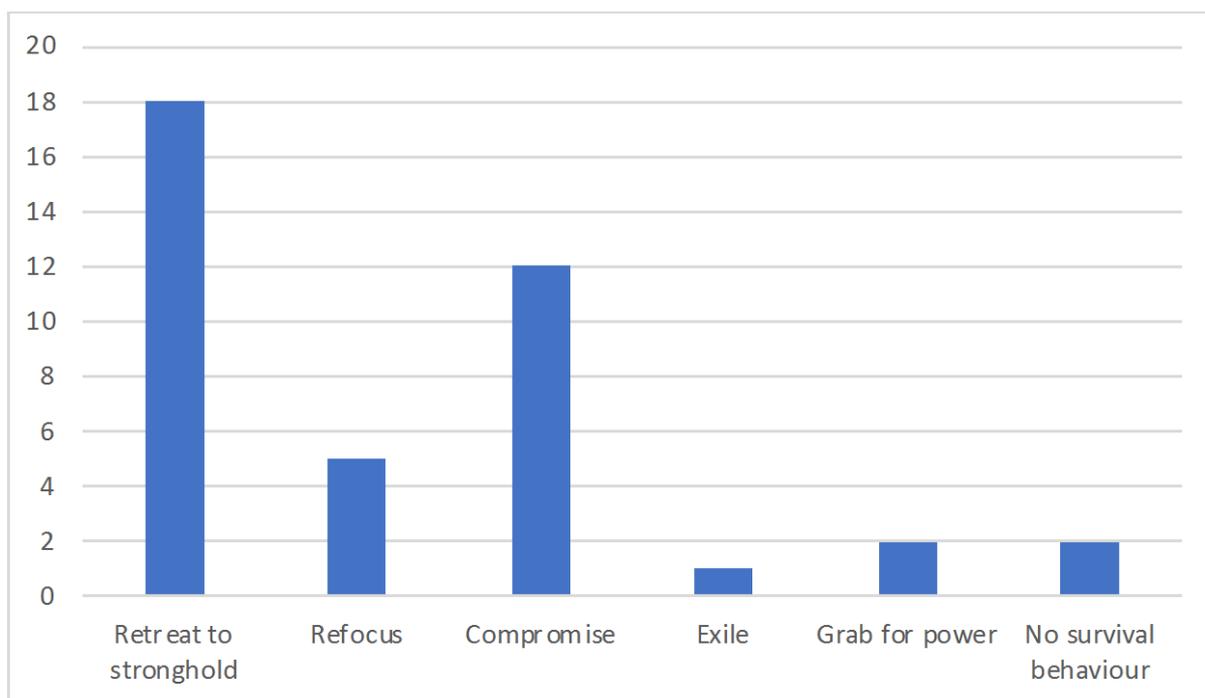
Survival behaviour of 40 insurgencies in retreat

The nature and use of its global network is still likely to evolve as the core group is weakened in Iraq and Syria. IS has essentially set itself up as the core node in a global terrorist alliance-hub. These hubs support smaller groups with funding, training, and expertise in return for those groups carrying out operations in their name and promoting their cause. IS has already used this network to sustain operational momentum, with its affiliates in Afghanistan and the Sinai continuing to carry out high-profile operations even as its operations have receded in Syria and Iraq. This has enabled the group to remain in the public eye, sustaining the morale of its supporters.

IS may increasingly rely on this global network of affiliates and loosely-connected supporters to sustain momentum as the leadership regroups. These types of alliance-networks, however, can be undermined by the weakening of the core node. Relationships are often held together by a combination of material resources and the legitimacy of the core group. The loss of the Caliphate will undoubtedly limit the resources IS can distribute to affiliate organisations and reduce its ability to coordinate activities. The extent of its global activity, therefore, will depend on the parts of its network that can operate independently and IS's legacy as the group that established an Islamic State. Sustained insurgent and terrorist campaigns are likely to rely on its stronger affiliates, such as IS-Sinai. Beyond these stronger insurgent groups, IS's global activity will be limited to isolated terrorist incidents by individuals and small cells.

Evidence from comparable militant groups suggests that an 'IS in retreat' will increasingly rely on terrorism to sustain operational momentum and maintain a narrative of success. However, its capacity to conduct terrorist operations will almost certainly reduce in Syria and Iraq as the group retreats back to its traditional strongholds. Globally, IS is likely to increasingly rely on its international network to carry out activity in its name with less direct support from the core. The amount of terrorism will depend on IS's legitimacy amongst potential supporters in light of the loss of its Caliphate.

Post-war states and support for armed groups
Professor Kristin M. Bakke (University College London)

Many post-war states are prone to instability due to the absence of an authority that citizens can trust to provide security and governance. If states fail to address this challenge, areas can become fertile ground for armed groups to form or regroup. Developing effective governance institutions that boost state capacity is, therefore, often seen as key to preventing the re-emergence of armed groups in a post-conflict state. Two different impediments can hinder the creation and success of "institutional engineering" attempts: the inability to recognise diverse institutional effects and the legacy of war-time governance established by armed groups. Both of these issues are likely to affect long-term stability in Iraq, and will become important in Syria if and when the war finally draws to a close.

While IS's campaign in Syria and Iraq was not secessionist, there are parallels to conflicts of this type; IS claims to represent a geographically bounded group and it carved out a *de facto* state incorporating a significant proportion of that community. When governments re-capture *de facto* states from armed groups (which they sometimes do not, and there are several long-lasting *de facto* states in the international system), or belligerents in secessionist conflicts engage in meaningful negotiations, there are two principal outcomes: governments make no concessions and reassert control, or they offer some form of political accommodation, often, but not always, involving the principal armed group.

Governments making no concessions sometimes accompany this with repression of the opposition movement and communities accused of supporting it. This has the effect of suppressing the armed group, but, especially if done indiscriminately, can exacerbate the grievances that led to its emergence in the first place.

The alternative is to offer some form of political accommodation that involves transferring greater power to the afflicted group or region - sometimes, though these days rarely, agreeing to independent statehood. Political accommodation within the state's borders is considered by many to be the most effective institutional solution for governing divided societies. In the context of Iraq and Syria, this is unlikely to involve IS, who will neither be offered nor,

presumably, accept such a deal. Nevertheless, commentators on both Syria and Iraq have called for Sunni areas to be granted increased autonomy as a mechanism for re-enfranchising Sunni communities and preventing the re-emergence of IS or a similar Salafi-jihadi group - and regional autonomy is essential for stemming grievances among the Kurds in both states.

The empirical record of such efforts, however, is mixed. The proponents of decentralisation as a "peace-preserving" means point to the way such institutions serve as a compromise between maintaining the territorial integrity of the state and protecting local communities' interests. Sceptics, in contrast, highlight its capacity to further divide societies and exacerbate rather than ameliorate conflict. In truth, there is no one decentralising process that works in all countries and it is dangerous to assume that what worked in one country can be applied in another. Demographics, the salience of ethnic identities, as well as levels of wealth and inequality all affect the ways in which policy, fiscal, and political decentralisation can help convince minority groups of the benefits of staying put within the state. For example, resource-rich regions can afford to fund public goods provision from their own revenues and are, therefore, likely to prefer fiscal autonomy, which enables policy autonomy. In contrast, if a region is poor, reliance on its own source revenues to cover expenditures will probably harm its ability to implement policies, fuelling a sense that the province is not receiving its fair share from the central government. In both Syria and Iraq, Sunni areas are poor relative to the rest of the country, and the identity of the respective Sunni communities have been shaped differently by their historical relationships to the central government. Any attempt at political accommodation must take account of these dynamics if it is to endure and lessen the likelihood of a resurgent IS or like-minded group.

Irrespective of the formal political institutions created in post-conflict states, the legacy of an armed group's control can endure for years. During a conflict, civilians may turn to an armed group for security, justice and broader governance functions. This can apply regardless of ideological support for a group if there is a lack of meaningful alternatives. IS was renowned for the governance institutions it put in place across large parts of areas under its control.

The informal governance institutions established by an armed group may outlive the end of formal hostilities if local elites do not want to surrender power or civilians consider these

institutions more credible than state efforts to replace them. In Northern Ireland, for example, Bakke's work with Kit Rickard (also at UCL), shows that paramilitary groups retain a role in the informal provision of justice in areas they controlled in a conflict that formally ended over twenty years ago. The fact that this can happen in a state as strong as the United Kingdom suggests that this problem will be particularly acute in Syria and Iraq. In many areas, IS empowered local communities who may now be keen to hold onto some of the benefits this brought. Perhaps more importantly, the future of areas previously part of IS's Caliphate remains uncertain. In Syria, various factions are competing for control of IS's former territory. In Iraq, reconstruction in Sunni areas has been uneven and many communities are yet to return home following counter-IS operations. Evidence from other post-conflict zones suggests that IS's legacy as a provider of informal governance to many Sunni communities may provide it opportunities to rebuild influence. Even providing rudimentary justice and security can often prove an effective recruitment tool and enable weakened armed groups to re-establish local legitimacy.

The legacy of non-state actor control in Northern Ireland

Research into other post-conflict states has demonstrated that the development of state political institutions in territory formerly controlled by IS is likely to be a key factor in

determining its future support and general levels of violence. If these institutions address weak state capacity and reflect societal dynamics then they can play a key role in dampening the influence of non-state armed groups. However, if not designed properly, evidence from other conflict zones suggests that these institutions may equally exacerbate or entrench the dynamics that enabled IS to build influence in the first place.

Al Qaeda: From organisation to movement
Dr Cindy May (London School of Economics)

Much has been made about al Qaeda's (AQ) structure, with the debate centring around three frameworks: a hierarchical organisation, a network, and more recently a social movement. In reality, AQ's structure is not so easily delineated. It has represented each of these frameworks at some point in its history, often embodying several simultaneously. Importantly, for the context of IS, its transitions between these frameworks have often been associated with waves of retrenchment and resurgence.

The first wave covered the period from the Soviet withdrawal in Afghanistan to 9/11. During this time, AQ consolidated into a hierarchical organisation, developed its capability and shifted from the 'near' to 'far' enemy. The origins of AQ lie in the Soviet-Afghan war, with Osama Bin Laden founding the group in 1988 to provide logistical support to foreign fighters who travelled to Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight the Soviet Union. When the war drew to a close, the core of the group moved out of Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia and Sudan, before returning to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. It saw itself as a vanguard party responsible for organising Muslims in jihad, supporting like-minded groups in overthrowing secular regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. As these
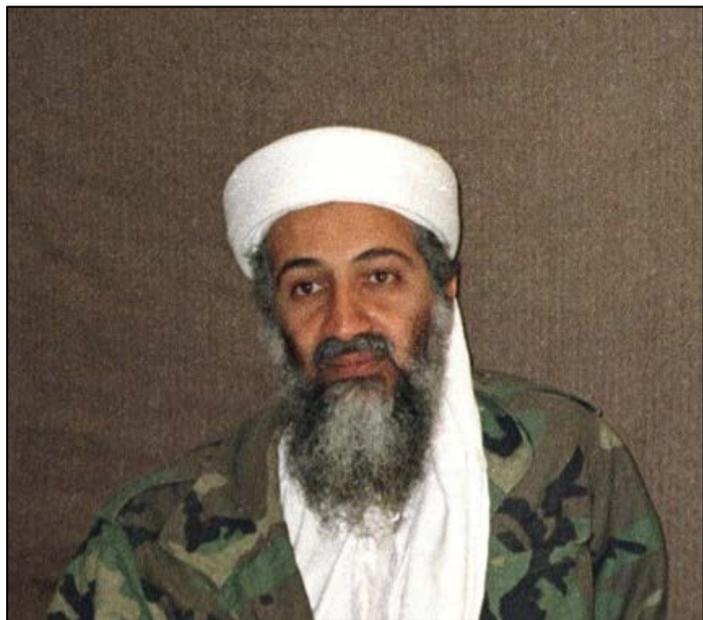
Osama Bin Laden founded al Qaeda in 1988

efforts failed, the focus shifted to the the 'far enemy', the United States, as internal correspondence from the time indicated that Bin Laden believed the US was supporting these regimes. This transition was symbolised by the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the USS Cole in 2000, and then finally the September 11th attacks. Documents seized in Afghanistan have highlighted the organisation's hierarchical structure during this period, with Bin Laden at is head, Ayman al-Zawahiri as his deputy, a Command Council overseeing all aspects of the organisation and then various specialised committees below this Council dealing with the day-to-day running of the group. As a function of this structure, the group maintained coherent operations and messaging, and was able to quickly replace lost leaders.

The second wave came in the aftermath of 2003 war in Iraq till around 2009. Serious counter-terrorist pressure on its core in Afghanistan and Pakistan made it impossible for Bin Laden and Zawahiri to maintain a centralised decision-making structure. AQ-core's operational capacity diminished and group transitioned to a network framework, establishing branches and supporting aligned-groups outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan. AQ retained some oversight of these affiliate groups. They had autonomy to conduct operations in their immediate regions, but were expected to seek approval from AQ central for external operations or before providing assistance to other organisations. In exchange, they received operational guidance, some funding, though this diminished throughout the post-September 11th period until funding flows reversed, and the prestige of the AQ brand.

During this time and especially after the Arab Spring, AQ came to inspire wider attacks in its name. These were committed by both individuals and self-initiated or homegrown cells. These groups and individuals did not have formal connections to or support from AQ-central, nor did they have formal training. By inspiring these groups, AQ transitioned from a centralised organisation and network to sparking a movement within the society of global jihadist sympathisers, which placed a greater emphasis on lone wolf and homegrown attacks. AQ's brand inspired the idea that you could be an AQ operative merely by declaring yourself to be so. You no longer needed formal ties to an established group or training. This in itself was a significant development that has had a lasting impact within the global jihadist movement. This transition was evident in Syria, where AQ adopted a lighter touch approach

to the conflict than other groups, IS in particular, by foregoing centralised control and ideological continuity in favor of wider influence. Through the Al-Nusra Front, it worked with local groups, providing local services, and attracting foreign fighters to its brand. This approach garnered some support, but still proved to be a barrier that likely contributed to the formal severing of ties between Al-Nusra and AQ central in 2016.

Each of these changes breathed new life into an otherwise waning organisation. Moreover, it is important to remember that these classifications are not mutually exclusive and there is significant overlap between periods. For instance, in 2009, Najibullah Zazi was arrested in New York for plotting to bomb the New York City subway after meeting with senior AQ leaders in Pakistan, demonstrating the continued relevance of AQ central during the affiliate phase. Likewise, the 2004 Madrid bombings can be best characterised as part of the wider AQ movement even though they occurred in the affiliate phase. AQ's structure, nevertheless, can be broken down into four layers:

- AQ central, including Zawahiri
- AQ branches, including AQAP and AQIM
- Affiliates, those groups loosely connected to AQ's brand, such as the Haqqani Network or Al Shabaab
- The wider movement inspired by the AQ brand

At various points in its history, AQ has placed different emphases on each of these four elements.

IS exhibits all of these organisational categories. IS is different from AQ, however, in the speed at which it has progressed through these stages, its ability to combine these terrorist frameworks while its core simultaneously conducts a territorially-based insurgency and the emphasis it places on the various parts of these four layers. It places a much greater emphasis on its movement component and is less concerned about brand consistency overall, proving much more willing to accept responsibility for acts committed in its name. As with AQ, however, IS's change in emphasis between these layers has been accompanied by waning power. The emphasis on its branches and inspiring a wider movement to act in its name has come as its territorial control in Syria and Iraq has been challenged.

Using AQ as a comparison, however, we should expect IS to continue adapting how it uses these different organisational types as its external environment changes. AQ has shown itself to be flexible, most recently emphasising support for local groups in Syria in a shift away from its focus on the far enemy. This flexibility has enabled AQ to endure for 30 years. At the current time, AQ appears at a disadvantage to IS; it is under uninspiring leadership and is unable to demonstrate the kind of success IS managed in declaring its Caliphate. Now that IS has lost this Caliphate, however, AQ may adapt again, and with both groups operating with reduced organisational capacity and lacking a territorial base of operations, the competition between AQ and IS is likely to focus on inspiring the wider jihadist movement to act on their behalf.

Panel 2 - The Middle East

Iraq after the defeat of the Islamic State
Professor Toby Dodge (London School of Economics)

It may be premature to describe IS as defeated in Iraq. Undoubtedly IS has been significantly degraded, as has the more general capacity for armed opposition to organise against the Iraqi state. Despite violence remaining a part of daily life for many Iraqis, IS has retreated underground in many areas and has been limited to low-intensity operations in the face of a more effective Iraqi security force. However, the rise of IS was a symptom of a set of underlying social and political problems that underpin the Iraqi state. IS's defeat in Mosul addresses one symptom of these problems, not their wider causes. Three main issues continue to plague the Iraqi state and will determine whether IS is granted the opportunity to re-emerge as a serious threat to the Iraqi state; the pervasive use of moral populism, corruption as a political strategy and weak public authority.

Moral populism involves the use of ideologies to build support by deliberately dividing populations. IS, for example, has demonised Shias as a mechanism for generating Sunni support. However, identity-based politics in Iraq runs much deeper. Ever since the fall of Saddam Hussein, parties have exploited the *muhasasah* (apportionment) system, to pursue identity-based political agendas and fill the government with sectarian parties. These parties, in turn, fill government and civil service posts with their cronies and sectarian supporters. This has led to the deliberate marginalisation of Sunnis from political activity. Those Sunnis that are able to rise to prominence lack any real influence within the wider Sunni community. Sunni disenfranchisement is likely to be a key element in the future stability of Iraq, with their systematic marginalisation enabling IS's forerunner, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), to regroup and re-emerge after it was significantly degraded in the late 2000s.

Corruption remains the primary political strategy for securing power and access to the resources of the state in Iraq. Individuals then loot public finances for their own personal wealth, rather than spending them on public goods. Army commissions, for example, were bought in exchange for political loyalty. Officers then misused the funds allocated to their

commands. They built lists of 'ghost soldiers' to secure money that they pocketed themselves. This malfeasance was the principal reason that the Iraqi Army fell apart in 2014. No-one knew how many soldiers were stationed in Mosul. Officers had no loyalty to the position and simply deserted their posts, leading the enlisted forces that were present to follow suit. The corruption that led to the failing of the Iraqi security forces remains unresolved.

Corruption and the use of moral populism has led Iraqi public institutions to lack authority and popular legitimacy. Public institutions have been used to reward political and sectarian loyalty rather than appointments being

The Iraqi Army recaptures Mosul

made on merit. The civil service has been bloated by political appointments, putting huge strain on the Iraqi budget. Public institutions, therefore, fail to provide for the population. Many areas of Iraq still only receive electricity a few hours a day, despite the country's oil wealth. The Iraqi population has limited faith in the government to resolve their problems, leading them to seek public goods from other, often violent, actors.

Unless the Iraqi government can address egregious sectarianism, corruption and weak capacity then Iraqi institutions will continue to fail the population. It was these conditions that enabled IS, as a violent challenger to state control, to emerge from within marginalised Sunni communities. Left unchecked, it is possible that Iraq will follow a similar cycle, with the state failing to capitalise on the weakness of violent opposition to build enduring political institutions, opening the way for violent armed groups to re-emerge.

There are, however, some grounds for hope. The recent protests demonstrate a groundswell of anti-sectarian opinion, amongst Shias as well as Sunnis, and a rejection of the corrupt system and Shia Islamism. In Iraq's recent parliamentary election, former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was punished for his failure to find meaningful solutions to corruption and sectarianism. Muqtada al-Sadr's party's victory was built on a promise to focus on issues not identity.

However, the window of opportunity for change will need to be acted upon quickly. While al-Sadr's party has promised to address these issues through institutional reform, parties associated with the Shia militias that have been fighting IS came second. The elections were marred with fraud, even in Kurdish areas, and the overall turnout was extremely low. These factors could undermine the legitimacy of the elections and incentivise nefarious actors to make a bid for power, as Nouri al-Maliki managed after a similar result in 2010. As a policy priority, the international community should ensure the results hold up. The 2010 elections were preceded by similar anti-sectarian protests and, after the results were annulled, the dissipation of protestors set in motion the re-emergence of IS.

More generally, the international community should develop a more coherent non-military policy in Iraq. Western activity in Iraq needs to make greater use of competent individuals and leverage multilateral organisations such as the IMF and World Bank to build political capacity and target investment to get institutions working. The potential time-frame, however, for enacting these policies may be short. Iraq finds itself at a crossroads, but one it has been at before. IS has been severely degraded and no longer poses a serious threat to the Iraqi state and a party promising reform has won parliamentary elections. However, IS has not been fully defeated; it remains active in many of its former strongholds, is capable of sustaining low-intensity operations and maintaining clandestine cells across Sunni Iraq. If promised reforms fail to address sectarianism, corruption and the weakness of state institutions, there remains a real possibility that IS (or a similar Sunni jihadist group) will rise again.

The future of the Syrian conflict and IS

Dr Chris Phillips (Queen Mary University of London)

IS has largely been pushed to the margins of the conflict in Syria. It retains some control in Deir ez-Zor province and an aligned-group holds some territory in the south-west of the country. Its territorial influence, however, continues to decline. It has switched from a hybrid-military force to carrying out a low-intensity terrorist campaign and establishing sleeper cells in areas it formerly controlled. It currently represents an irritation rather than a meaningful threat to the Assad regime. That said, a number of factors are conducive to its return and much will depend on the broader trajectory of the Syrian conflict.

The conventional wisdom is that the Syrian conflict is ending. Bashar al-Assad is not going to be defeated and will almost certainly remain in power over the 'useful' part of Syria. It is more accurate, however, to describe the conflict as evolving. The latest evolution began with the US-led intervention against IS in 2014 and the Russian intervention in support of the Syrian government in 2016. The strongest players remaining in the conflict are those that benefitted from these interventions; the Kurds and Assad respectively. In turn, the wider conglomeration of Sunni rebel forces and IS have been significantly degraded. The trajectory of the conflict, therefore, is likely to be determined by the actions and interaction of the Syrian regime and Kurdish forces.

Assad remains in the ascendancy. He has survived in power and has had medium-term operational successes with the help of his Russian and Iranian allies. They continue to pick off pockets of rebel control, most recently al-Ghouta and al-Rastan. Moreover, Assad has proven himself more and more adept at managing these alliances to get what he wants. Nonetheless, he continues to face a number of long-term problems. The Syrian government still has to find a way to capture the remaining rebel strongholds, most notably in Idlib province. The Syrian state has been destroyed by years of conflict and it is unclear how the economy can function without external support. He also has to manage the expectations of his key allies and constituents, both internal and external. The Syrian military is much stronger now than it was before the conflict and may look to play a more active role in Syrian politics. What will Russia and Iran demand in return for their past and continued support? Other regional and

international will also complicate his efforts to consolidate control. How will Israel react to Iran's increased presence in the region? Will Turkey retire from areas in northern Syria? How can Syrian-aligned forces reconquer the east with the presence of US-backed forces?

The Kurds, on the other hand, are apprehensive. Despite their successes against IS, they remain under threat from Turkey and the Assad regime. Turkey is terrified of a strong Kurdish polity on its border and will feel emboldened to weaken Kurdish control after its successes elsewhere in northern Syria. Assad has stated his intent to reconquer the rest of Syrian territory, either militarily or through negotiation. Negotiations would probably mirror reconciliation deals between Assad and other opposition groups, in which some autonomy has been granted in exchange for falling under the control of state institutions. However, Assad would see any such deal as a stepping stone towards exerting total control over eastern Syria. The Kurds know this, but may find themselves in no position to fight the Syrian regime militarily. That would depend on US support, which they do not feel they can count on given the unpredictability of President Donald Trump, betrayals by previous US administrations and the not unreasonable belief that the US will prioritise its alliance with Turkey.

The Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. Millions of refugees remain in camps awaiting resettlement.

IS (and other extremist jihadi groups) have limited power to affect any of these dynamics but could benefit in three ways. Firstly, weak state institutions, the dire economy and the plight of millions of refugees has the potential to fuel resentment against the Syrian regime or Kurdish-backed forces. This is likely to be amplified by the lack of Sunni participation in the forces that defeated IS. Most Sunnis are pleased to see the back of IS, but will equally resent a perceived occupation by Shia and Kurdish forces that fails to kickstart social, economic and political life in the region. Arabs within the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces remain divided and do not represent a meaningful bloc within the wider alliance. Secondly, a direct conflict between Assad and the Kurds could destabilise the east of the country again, creating the opportunity for IS to exploit the political and security vacuum to rebuild its organisation. Lastly, Assad may choose not attack the Kurds directly, but may facilitate the rebuilding of IS in order to undercut Kurdish control indirectly. IS's dramatic rise in Syria was significantly aided by Assad believing it threatened his opponents more than it did the regime and it is plausible that we will see a return to this strategic calculation.

The dynamics of the Syrian conflict have shifted multiple times since 2011, lurching from despair to despair for many of its citizens. In this context, it is impossible to forecast with any confidence the future of the conflict. It is clear that IS is no longer a significant player and currently lacks the organisational capacity to represent a meaningful threat to the Syrian state. Nevertheless, the conflict remains complex with key issues to be resolved. While unlikely at the current time, it is not inconceivable that the conflict will evolve again and create a permissive environment for IS to re-emerge.

The politics of the Middle East
Michael Stephens (Royal United Services Institute)

From a regional perspective, the rise of IS can partially be attributed to the low priority placed on it by regional actors. While the counter-IS mission was, and remains extremely important in the West, for the Gulf States, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Israel and even Syria and Iraq, the issue of IS has remained secondary when set against geo-political rivalries, the conflict in Yemen and the various other internal struggles afflicting these states.

It is not clear that these lessons of IS's recent rise have been learnt. Many in the region still blame others for its successes, either considering it an invention of the West to find an excuse to stay in the region or of Israel to destabilise and divide its neighbourhood. There has been very little effort to understand how the broader structural conditions of geo-political competition and ethno-sectarian rivalries contributed to the conflicts that enabled IS's rise in the build-up to 2014.

It is not, however, business as usual. There have been some shifts in how regional actors view the problem. Many of the conspiracy narratives continue to resonate, but clerics across the region and the Saudi state have begun to publicly accept that the way Sunni Islam is taught in many mosques, regardless of the strain of Islam, has contributed to the rise of extremism and the allure of Salafi-jihadist groups. Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman has even openly criticised how the Islamic faith is being expounded across the Middle East. The recognition of the problem, however, is yet to translate into concrete

Crown Prince Mohammed Bin

solutions. The Saudis remain intent on controlling the Sunni narrative, but are yet to formulate a credible alternative.

The nature of the geo-political rivalries that drive instability in the Middle East has also changed in recent years, lessening the likelihood of a direct conflict or the aggressive proxy wars that create conditions conducive to the rise of extremist groups. Even Iran and Israel have improved communication, lessening the chance that disputes will escalate into full-scale war. More importantly for the future of IS, there have been changes in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. They continue to openly blame each other for supporting terrorist groups, but this has created an incentive for them both to limit support for proxy groups, at least in public. They have both been more open about where financial support for non-state actors is going and have made strong statements acknowledging the issue of extremist tendencies within Islam. They have also both learnt of the difficulties in pursuing state policy

by engaging with sub-state actors. In Syria, Saudi Arabia and Qatar took different approaches to arming rebel groups fighting Assad in an attempt to shape the conflict in their favour. Both approaches, however, failed and inadvertently benefitted extremist groups, including IS. Arms fell directly into the hands of extremist groups and the competition for this support drove competition between more moderate groups, weakening them relative to other, more extreme rebels.

In spite of these developments, it is not clear that the lessons of IS's rise have been applied in a manner the West would consider favourable. Many Middle Eastern leaders still consider extremism in the region to be a military problem, not a socio-political issue. They are yet to fully grasp the underlying societal dynamics that can give rise to extremism and continue to see all political opposition as a security threat, often making opposition more extremist and confrontational. The rise of extremism has led to a strengthening of centralised state control in many Middle Eastern states. Saudi Arabia has loosened some of its social restrictions, but has simultaneously increased its political control over the population. States like Kuwait, that were more socially liberal but had limited political freedoms have started tightening controls over social activity. The response to the rise of jihadism has been increased state control, more domestic repression and a reversal of many of the gains in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011. As we proceed through a generational shift in the region, with the current fifteen-year olds becoming young adults, then new instances of mass-opposition could emerge. In turn, these could incorporate extremist elements, leading the jihadist movement to gain new footholds across the Middle East. The West needs to shift its focus in the region from security to building broader social and political institutions in order to address these issues, albeit this will become more difficult as Middle Eastern states become less dependent on Western support.

It will be impossible to eliminate extremism entirely from the Middle East, little pockets of jihadist strength will persist. Whether these pockets can once again coalesce into a meaningful force and develop a mass following that threatens to destabilise one or more Middle Eastern states will depend on the application of the lessons of the last five years. There have been some signs of Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia, shifting their approach to dealing with extremism and finding ways to address their tensions with each other.

Nevertheless, Salafi-jihadist terrorism remains a low priority for most Middle Eastern states and many of them are following a similar pattern of domestic repression to deal with political opposition. The regional mistakes that created the space for IS to grow, therefore, may well be repeated.

Panel 3 - The Islamic State and Islamist terrorism

IS after the Caliphate

Professor Peter Neumann (King's College London)

From its inception IS was a transnational organisation and it will fall back on this network after the loss of the Caliphate. Over half of its forces were non-Iraqi or -Syrian, with estimates suggesting around five-to-six thousand of its fighters came from Western Europe. The global nature of the organisation is unparalleled. IS is unlikely to ever become the force it once was in Syria and Iraq, but it is important not to misunderstand how this transnational organisation is morphing into a movement and what this means for the current and future terrorist threat.

In attracting a global cadre of supporters to join its organisation in Syria and Iraq, IS far outstripped anything AQ achieved even at its peak. Compared to the migration levels into Syria and Iraq, very few foreigners have responded to AQ calls to support AQ-aligned insurgencies. IS succeeded where AQ failed due to the three main reasons.

The first was the seemingly existential crisis faced by Sunni Muslims in Syria. This narrative was used by many Syrian-opposition groups and, through social media, they were able to keep a constant feed of the suffering being inflicted on their religious brethren. Research on individuals travelling to fight in foreign civil wars – be they religious, ethnic or class-based conflicts - has consistently demonstrated that an existential crisis facing a group of shared identity is a key element for motivating this travel. IS was able to appropriate this narrative and become the largest beneficiary of these travellers after the early stages of the conflict.

The second attraction was clearly the Caliphate itself. This brought in a much wider demographic than those witnessed in other conflicts, moving beyond migrants motivated by the glory of fighting or protecting Sunni civilians, to those wanting to form part of a utopian societal project. Many of these people felt alienated from their current societies, believing them to lack opportunities and excitement. Travelling to live in the Caliphate offered a way out.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi shortly after the declaration of the Caliphate

The third main driver was the extensive network of recruiters that facilitated this travel. While many people believe IS's slick social media campaign was responsible for its appeal and the travel of so many, research has shown the decisive factor was contact with a select number of individuals that motivated and then arranged onward travel. Almost all known travellers had connections to other foreign fighters and one of these influential personalities, many of whom had long histories of jihadist agitation. Western intelligence agencies recognised the importance of these characters, but felt it better to observe them as a means to illuminate the wider network.

All three of these conditions no longer exist or have changed significantly, leading the appeal of IS to decline. The existential crisis facing Syrian Sunnis possibly still exists, but audience-fatigue has meant that interest has begun to wane. The Caliphate project ultimately failed. After 1988, Osama bin Laden and the early iterations of AQ were able to project of narrative of success, claiming they had defeated a global superpower. IS can make no such claim. As a result, much of the enthusiasm for IS has waned within jihadi communities. Their arguments that the declaration of the Caliphate are part of the longer march of history are treated risibly. Finally, the approach to important recruitment nodes in Western jihadi networks has changed, with much greater emphasis being placed on reducing their influence, either by arresting them or breaking apart their networks.

The decline of IS, however, may not be permanent. For one, just as AQ managed, IS has the potential to endure as a more loosely-connected movement. A small but not insignificant number of people still believe in the underlying jihadist ideology that drove IS. Moreover, many of those that fought for IS will return to their home countries or other conflict zones and begin to form their own organisations. In the West, the next generation of jihadi recruiters is likely to emerge from those that fought in Iraq and Syria. In other Middle Eastern countries, these individuals will link up with other fighters and radicalise existing opposition movements, awaiting the next crisis they are able to exploit. In each wave of jihadist violence, the leaders have emerged from the rank-and-file of the previous iteration. Indeed, the likelihood of those conditions re-emerging somewhere else in the Middle East is very real. While support for IS has dropped significantly, this has not been accompanied by a rise in support for the states it has been fighting. Commentators often talk about the importance of 'weak states' or 'ungoverned spaces', but it is conflict that enables terrorist groups to build organisational capacity, with the vast majority of global terrorism emanating from a small number of conflict zones; namely Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These jihadi networks retain an extremely long time horizon and are willing to bide their time for the next conflict zone to present itself.

IS has been significantly weakened on a global scale. The perfect storm of events that saw its incredible growth has passed. Its organisation and networks have been degraded and it has been unable to find a sustainable narrative with broad appeal to replace the loss of its Caliphate. However, a looser network of individuals, including many that have fought in Syria and Iraq, remains in its stead. This network will continue to pose a serious terrorist threat to the West and the Middle East. It is also battle-hardened and patient, awaiting the next conflict in which conditions favour the re-emergence of a strong, globally-oriented jihadist organisation.

Broader trends in Islamist terrorism
Dr Lars Berger (University of Leeds)

Overall there is very little support for radical Islamist terrorism across the Middle East and North Africa and there is no reason to think this will change in the near future. IS has always

lacked meaningful popular support across the region, either for its use of violence or its ultimate end-state. However, some elements of the Islamist agenda continue to resonate with significant portions of the population. Jihadi groups will, therefore, retain some support and the capacity to achieve short-term tactical and operational successes.

Opinion polling is not a completely reliable way to track support for groups like IS, but one can use it to assess how populations feel about particular ideas. Polling shows that certain strands of thinking that empower Islamists are believed by significant minorities of many regional populations. Many continue to believe that IS was a creation of either the United States or Israel, refusing to accept that its extreme use of violence or particular interpretation of Islam was borne out of local ideas and beliefs. The use of suicide attacks on civilians has limited support across the region, but as you get closer to the Palestinian territories this support increases significantly. A meaningful minority of the population in many Middle Eastern and North African countries still believe there should be role for Islamic law in their states even if this precludes political parties and elections. They do not necessarily believe in the specific type of state created by IS (or that proposed by other radical Salafi-jihadists), perceiving the failure of these projects to be the result of incorrect implementation. While rejecting the most radical interpretations, populations remain susceptible to ideas presented by Islamist groups that offer an alternative type of Islamic state.

To what extent would a system governed by Islamic law in which there are no political parties or elections be appropriate for your country.							
	ALG	**EGY**	**JOR**	**LEB**	**MOR**	**PAL**	**TUN**
Very suitable	9.2	3.3	8.7	1.7	8.0	11.3	5.6
Suitable	12.6	5.5	12.7	4.4	11.3	21.4	6.5
Somewhat suitable	27.6	9.0	13.7	12.0	12.1	18.6	5.2
Not suitable at all	44.5	65.3	57.2	80.3	59.1	44.7	79.4
Don't know	5.6	14.8	7.3	1.5	9.0	3.8	2.9
Declined	0.5	2.2	0.4	0.1	0.6	0.3	0.4

Response to survey question in Arab Barometer 2016
www.arabbarometer.org

This type of thinking is unlikely to change any time soon. Societies across the Middle East and North Africa continue to be highly unequal, creating high levels of relative deprivation. Many countries are also undergoing urbanisation. Both of these factors have been found to correlate with support for ideas proposed by Islamist groups. There will also continue to be a reaction to the proliferation of Western political and social culture in many Muslim countries. This matters because it is perceptions of Western culture, not Western policies which drive support for violent Islamist radicalism.[2] Lastly, the legitimacy crisis of authoritarian Arab regimes shows no signs of abating, prompting them to compensate via an increasingly repressive stance in response to Islamist threats, both violent and non-violent, but also against secular opposition. Evidence shows increased repression to be an effective short-term tool for eliminating terrorist threats in authoritarian contexts. It often, however, creates longer-term resistance to regimes that erupts when conditions change. Suppression often brings together like-minded Islamists, allows them to compare ideas and creates the foundations for future militant movements.

For these reasons, therefore, we should expect Islamist terrorist groups to be able to retain minimal levels of support for the foreseeable future. This does not mean, however, that Islamist terrorism is likely to achieve its goals. They will have some success at the tactical level, conducting terrorist attacks. They will also achieve some of their operational objectives, maintaining, and in certain periods even increasing, their organisational capacity by attracting recruits and other forms of support. On the flip side, they will almost certainly fail to achieve any of their strategic goals and effect political change at either a domestic or international level. Radical Islamists are highly unlikely to capture power in a functioning state and they will certainly not unite diverse states under a single Islamic flag. The Arab states, both internally and as a regional system, are far too entrenched for non-state actors to effect political change at either level. Over the past century numerous individual leaders, backed by the power of their respective states, have attempted to alter the dynamics in the region and have been unsuccessful, as have external superpowers. There is no reason to believe that violent Islamism can succeed where these much more-powerful actors have failed.

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[2] Berger, Lars (2014), Foreign Policies or Culture: What Shapes Muslim Public Opinion on Political Violence Against the United States?, *Journal of Peace Research*, 51(6): 782-796.

The fall of IS's Caliphate represents the latest in a long line of failed attempts to create political change in the Middle East. In its aftermath, Islamist terrorist groups will have to switch strategies while they attempt to rebuild the credibility of Islamist terrorism as a political strategy. They are likely to revert to ensuring their organisations survive; pursuing tactical and operational successes as way to sustain momentum and ensure at least a minimal level of support. The failure of the Caliphate may also lead to the next evolution of Islamist terrorism at a strategic level. With the rise of IS, Islamist terrorism switched from focusing on the 'far enemy', the United States, back to the 'near enemy', corrupt and authoritarian Arab regimes. The fall of the Caliphate may induce a return to the 'far enemy' as the idea of domestic success becomes incredible, Arab regimes increasingly clamp down on political opposition, and Islamist terror groups focus on survival. The transition of IS from an organisation to a transnational network, as fighters return to their home regions, may both create the impetus for this change and aid in it achieving tactical success.

Online jihadi culture – The Islamic State's strategic depth?
Dr Gilbert Ramsay (University of St Andrews)

IS's propaganda has changed significantly since its peak in 2015, shifting to simpler production value and a more decentralised approach reliant on dislocated supporters of the group. This simpler approach reflects the organisation's much lower profile on-line. It has, however, created a resilient a community of radical believers, capable and willing of proliferating its message to potential supporters.

At its peak, IS's media production was highly-centralised, with all media filtering through central dissemination outlets and conforming to strict format standards. This type of approach to media production proved extremely effective when IS had the territory to sustain the necessary communications infrastructure. As it lost territory, however, its reliance on this operating model meant production dropped off dramatically. While it has been able to get it going again, the quantity and quality of propaganda distributed by IS's official media outlets has reduced significantly. This reduction has aided efforts to counter its on-line messaging. Since 2015, huge amounts of on-line propaganda have been removed by government

authorities and internet companies. At first, IS was uploading so much content that efforts to remove it were heavily outpaced. As the amount of IS media has slowed, this dynamic has reversed.

To address these problems, IS has switched to easier production and dissemination techniques. Within Iraq and Syria, its media has become much simpler, mirroring its production before 2014. It often features only a list of operations, designed to demonstrate its military prowess.

هجوم انغماسي وسط سيناء، يخلِّف عشرات القتلى والمصابين من الجيش المصري

النبأ

العدد ١٢٨

صحيفة أسبوعية تصدر عن ديـوان الإعلام المركزي

هاجم انغماسيان من جنود الدولة الإسلامية السبت (٢١/ رجب) مقر كتيبة للجيش المصري المرتد في قاطع الجنوب وسط سيناء، مما أسفر عن مقتل قائد الكتيبة ونائبه وأكثر من ٢٠ عنصرا بينهم ضباط، وإصابة العشرات، ولله الحمد.
وذكر المكتب الإعلامي لولاية سيناء أن الانغماسيَّين أبا حمزة المهاجر وأبا بكر المهاجر -تقبلهما الله- هاجما -فَجراً- كتيبة للجيش المصري المرتد في منطقة (القسيمة) وسط سيناء مزوَّدين بسلاحين رشاشين وحزامين ناسفين، وتمكنا -بفضل الله- من قتل وإصابة العشرات من عناصر وضباط

استهداف عضو فى الجبهة التركمانية المرتدة وكمين لعناصر الشرطة الاتحادية في كركوك

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Screenshot from local media

For a number of years it sustained a range of foreign language magazines, tailored to English, German, Turkish, French and Russian audiences amongst others. These have now been collapsed into a single magazine, *Rumiyah*, released in various languages. *Rumiyah* also includes articles of less sophistication and production quality, reflecting IS's reduced capacity to dedicate personnel and resources to the production of propaganda. It very rarely uses *Twitter* to disseminate propaganda anymore, preferring to use *Telegram*. This makes it much harder to authorities to find and remove content, but also significantly reduces the audience that sees it.

A large part of its externally-oriented media, either by design or as a natural evolution, is cultivating an imagined community of on-line IS followers. They use videos of invented futures in which the Islamic State now stretches across large parts of the world. They talk about the current reversals in Syria and Iraq as part of the struggle in reaching that goal. In large part, this detachment from reality binds together its most ardent followers. These types of communities become self-reinforcing with the strength of the bond between individuals enough to create a barrier to rational reasoning. The loss of the Caliphate is unlikely to shake the confidence of such individuals. However, this type of media also exposes the organisation's weaknesses and the contradictions of its current position to many others in the jihadist community. The same detachment from reality that appeals to its most fanatical followers, may make it difficult to attract new ones. Broadly speaking, therefore, IS's official media strategy reflects an organisation in retreat, conserving resources and attempting to demonstrate momentum to its most ideologically committed supporters.

Outside of its official media, IS fans are sustaining the movements presence on-line even as its organisational capacity dwindles. Individuals aggressively justify IS's actions and explain away its failure. They are also becoming increasingly sophisticated in their on-line activity in order to prevent its quick removal. For one, unlike many official IS media productions, they use non-jihadi images as a cover for their content, which makes it far more difficult for those monitoring extremist media to identify sources of jihadist material. They also rely on relatively mundane, everyday cultural symbols and narratives, and their critiques of non-jihadis often reflects sentiments held in wider society. There is very little chance that this on-line activity is going to create the type of mass-following reached by IS's media campaign after 2014. However, it does create an on-line social milieu from which IS, or subsequent jihadist movements, can draw support when they develop the organisational capacity to launch a more concerted, cohesive media campaign.

In many ways, changes in IS's media reflects broader changes in the organisation as it has been significantly degraded in Syria and Iraq. Locally, it has reverted to unsophisticated media, shying away from grand claims on governance, mirroring its media from before its rise. Globally, it uses less resource-intensive propaganda and less-risky dissemination platforms. At the same time, it focuses its media on a smaller, more radical audience. It has also been

able to rely on the global movement that is evolving as its organisational capacity is degraded to create and distribute media in its name. While its media campaign is highly unlikely to ever reach the heights of 2014-2016, this evolution means it will retain some form of on-line presence for years to come regardless of its off-line fortunes.

Conclusion

This workshop posed three main questions; how is the Islamic State adapting to the loss of its Caliphate, have the conditions in Syria and Iraq that enabled its spectacular rise been addressed, and what does this mean for the future of IS? In response to these questions, two main themes ran through all the panels. Firstly, IS has been significantly degraded and no longer poses meaningful strategic threat in either Syria or Iraq, but it is shifting to a clandestine, network-based movement that will be able to achieve tactical successes, continuing to represent a real terrorist threat. Secondly, a window of opportunity exists to address some of the issues that gave rise to IS, but a combination of sectarian and geo-political rivalries, repressive governments and denial means there is no certainty this window will be taken.

Understanding the threat from IS

Across the workshop there was a broad consensus that IS's ability to achieve its strategic goals was always limited. Few terrorist or Islamist groups in its position have ever achieved meaningful strategic success, and there is little actual support for the extreme goals that groups like IS espouse. The loss of its Caliphate was always likely as much stronger actors in the region responded to its rise. In retreat, IS has behaved like many other groups in its position. It has fallen back on operations and an organisational model that prioritise its survival and tactical success over achieving a strategic effect. While it has lost its more general appeal, the remainder of the organisation will be more committed and have historical ties to the group, making it more difficult to break apart. The personal ties developed during its campaign in Syria and Iraq and its use of the internet will give the movement a reach far beyond the borders of Syria and Iraq. The residual terrorist threat posed by this network will, therefore, endure for some years to come, even if IS fails to re-emerge as a credible military threat. Its ability to once again present a more conventional security threat will require the re-emergence of a permissive environment.

Forecasting conflict in the Middle East

There are some signs that such a crisis is less likely to recur as regional governments and populations begin to acknowledge some of the root causes of jihadist support. However, many of the solutions posed to prevent the re-emergence of IS fall back on the same old practices; increased repression, identity-politics, deflecting blame, and little effort to reform the political and social structures that give rise to support for jihadists. Political legitimacy remains a problem in many Middle Eastern and North African states, which are also afflicted with a plethora of social, economic, and political problems. Ethno-sectarian tensions continue to drive politics in many states in the region and geopolitical tensions remain elevated.

At best, left unchecked, these problems will enable IS and similar groups to attract enough support to keep their movements active. At worst, they could lead to the re-escalation of the conflicts in Syria or Iraq, or new wars within or between other Middle Eastern and North African states. This would create the opportunity IS and other jihadist groups are looking for to move out of survival mode and re-build their organisational capacity.

IS's organisational outlook and multi-national character may enable them (or a similar group) to exploit events in any number of Middle Eastern or North African states, even if lasting solutions are found in Syria and Iraq. Predicting the next likely jihadi hotspot, therefore, is extremely difficult. It may not be IS that rises from the next political crisis in the region, but the movement it leaves behind is likely to play a substantial role in determining jihadist capacity to infiltrate and shape any violent confrontations.

A window of opportunity

The combined contributions from the panellists at this workshop suggest that there is a window of opportunity to address IS and Salafi-jihadist terrorism more generally. This applies both to the individual countries most afflicted by IS, and its global movement. The group is on the defensive, with its organisational capacity and narrative largely destroyed, presenting the best time to break its network and deal with the underlying conditions that drive support for Islamist extremism.

The panellists seemed to suggest, however, that a new, more coherent, forward-leaning approach is required. We need to be more aggressive in identifying and interdicting the key nodes - both on- and off-line - that hold the movement together and bring in new adherents, rather than waiting for the movement to coalesce in a new conflict zone before acting. Counter-terrorist operations in European countries need to identify the key individuals that radicalise and recruit from within their communities. These individuals will either have a long history of participation in the Salafi-jihadist movement or have earned their credentials through involvement in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Tactical cooperation with states in the Middle East and North Africa should focus on jihadi individuals and organisations that link local groups to the transnational movement. These movements have been held together by the trust developed from shared experience and personal relationships. Undermining these relationships will lessen the ability to the movement to sustain itself and, in turn, reconstitute itself as a military force either in Syria and Iraq, or in another conflict zone.

We also need to build the credibility and legitimacy of political and social institutions on the region, not just focus on security-sector support. These broader public institutions have proven crucial in stemming violence in other post-conflict zones and country-experts make it clear that the same will apply in the Middle East. In spite of their accepted importance, the West has systematically failed to induce regional actors into developing political capacity in a way considered necessary for the long-term eradication of Salafi-jihadist groups. Admittedly, this will be no easy task, especially as regional governments become less dependent on the West. However, the failure to address the weakness of political institutions and their lack of popular legitimacy may mean there is very little we can do to prevent a further cycle of jihadi violence. Despite its current weakness, IS and the wider Salafi-jihadist movement remain positioned to exploit permissive environments if and when they emerge in Syria, Iraq and across the region.

Appendix - Speaker biographies

Dr Matthew Dixon

London School of Economics

Dr Dixon is the David Davies of Llandinam (DINAM) Fellow for International Relations at the LSE, where he is on a one-year sabbatical from the Ministry of Defence. His research focuses on how militant groups behave when losing as well as why and how transnational militant groups build affiliate networks. Prior to this year, he spent eight and half years at the Ministry of Defence, spending the first four years working Afghanistan and Pakistan, before taking on a number of roles working on the Islamic State, both inside Syria and Iraq and its affiliate groups.

Professor Kristin Bakke

University College London

Professor Kristin Bakke is a Professor of Political Science and International Relations and University College London. Prior to joining UCL, Professor Bakke was a post-doctoral research fellow at Harvard University, at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (2007-2008) and an Assistant Professor in political science at Leiden University (2008-2009).

Focusing on political violence, Professor Bakke's research explores how states respond to opposition within their borders, the dynamics of violence in self-determination struggles, and post-war state-building. Her research draws on both quantitative and qualitative methods in her work, including surveys and fieldwork—in Russia, Northern Ireland, India, Guatemala, Canada, and the post-Soviet de facto states.

Professor Bakke's recent work has focused on post-war societies, including state-building in *de facto* states in the post-Soviet world, including Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria. As part of a collaborative project, she has investigated people's perceptions of post-war governance and legitimacy across these *de facto* states, drawing on public opinion surveys.

She is also working on a collaborative project called "Attitudes for Peace", which examines post-conflict public opinion in Guatemala, Nepal, and Northern Ireland, focusing on people's attitudes to peace agreements, as well as the legacies of wartime networks (with Kit Rickard).

Dr Cindy May
London School of Economics

Dr May is a Fellow in foreign policy analysis in the department of international relations. Prior to joining LSE, she was a Lecturer in U.S. Foreign Policy at Queen Mary University of London. She was also previously a Lecturer in the Defence Studies Department at King's College London.

She completed her PhD in Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge and has worked on two occasions at the U.S. State Department in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and the Political and Military Affairs Bureau. She has also served as a researcher for the UK Defence Forum Defence Viewpoints publication.

Her research interests broadly focus on U.S. politics and foreign policy, Middle East politics, and terrorism studies. Dr May is currently working on two research projects. The first examines the role of rhetoric and power fluctuations in American decline phases. The second explores the connection between the anti-terrorism policies of North African and Middle Eastern states and their domestic politics.

Professor Toby Dodge
London School of Economics

Toby Dodge is a professor in the International Relations Department at LSE and Director of LSE's Middle East Centre. His main areas of research include the comparative politics and historical sociology of the Middle East, the politics of intervention and state-society dynamics and political identities in Iraq. His publications include three books, *Inventing Iraq: The failure*

of nation building and a history denied (2003), *Iraq's Future: The Aftermath of Regime Change* (2005), *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (2013).

Dr Chris Phillips

Queen Mary's University of London

Dr Chris Phillips joined the Queen Mary's University of London in January 2012, having previously worked as deputy editor for Syria and Jordan at the Economist Intelligence Unit. Before then he did his PhD and Masters in International Relations at the London School of Economics, and BA at Cambridge. He is currently an associate fellow at the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, working primarily on the Syria conflict and its impact on neighbouring states and the wider Middle East. He is co-curator of 'Syria: story of a conflict' a public exhibition at the Imperial War Museum and the Imperial War Museum North. He was a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University in 2014 & 2015.

Dr Phillips lived in Syria for two years, in Aleppo, Damascus and Latakia, and much of his research focuses on that country. Since the beginning of the civil war there in 2011, he has regularly consulted various government agencies and NGOS, and has made numerous media appearances on outlets including *BBC Newsnight*, Radio 4's Today Programme, *BBC News, Al-Jazeera, Sky News* and *Channel 4 News*. He has written for *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek* and *CNN*, among others. His latest book, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the new Middle East* was published by Yale University Press in 2016.

He blogs at www.cjophillips.com and tweets at @cjophillips, mostly commenting on Syria, the Middle East, and the lamentable state of Aston Villa Football Club.

Michael Stephens

Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

Michael Stephens is the Research Fellow for Middle East Studies and Head of RUSI Qatar. He joined RUSI's London office in September 2010, first in the Nuclear Security Programme before moving to International Security Studies.

From March to June 2017 he was seconded into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, serving as the Senior Research Analyst for Syria and Lebanon.

Michael has twelve years of experience working in the Middle East, and has conducted research across many countries including Turkey, the Levant, Iraq and the Gulf States. His research has focused on Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Kurdish regions of Syria, their social composition and responses to the threat from the Islamic State; Arab Shia identity across the Middle East and its relationship with Iran, which included co-authoring a Whitehall report focusing on regional responses to Iran's nuclear programme (2014). He is also a specialist in Gulf security.

As a frequent commentator on Middle East affairs, his writing has appeared in many news outlets and he is also a regular broadcast commentator. Michael also regularly advises the Crown Prosecution Service on issues relating to national security, and counter terrorism. Michael studied at King's College London and undertook three years of post-graduate research in the Middle East. He is proficient in both Arabic and Hebrew.

Professor Peter Neumann

King's College London

Peter Neumann is Professor of Security Studies at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and founded the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation in early 2008. Neumann's latest book in English is *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat against the West*, published in 2016. He has authored or co-authored five other books, including *Old and New Terrorism* and *The Strategy of Terrorism*.

He has written numerous peer-reviewed journal articles dealing with different aspects of terrorism and radicalization, and edited Routledge's recently published four-volume *Major*

Works Collection: Radicalization (Routledge, 2015). Shorter pieces have appeared in the *New York Times, New Scientist, London Review of Books, Wall Street Journal,* and other periodicals.

He currently serves as the OSCE Chairman's Special Representative for Fighting Radicalisation and advises the *Club de Madrid,* the association of former Presidents and Prime Ministers, and was a <u>senior consultant</u> for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations during the process of crafting UN Security Council Resolution 2178 on "Foreign Terrorist Fighters". He has testified before a <u>full session of the UN Security Council</u> as well as committees of the U.S. House of Representatives, the UK House of Commons, the German *Bundestag,* the Canadian House of Commons, and the European Parliament. He has been an expert witness for the UK's Crown Prosecution Service, Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service, and Scotland's Crown Office.

Dr Lars Berger
University of Leeds

Dr Berger received his MA in Political Science, Islamic Studies, and Sociology as well as my PhD in Political Science from the Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena in Germany. In 2006-07, he was a British Academy Fellow at the Department of Politics at Newcastle University. From 2007 to 2013, he was Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Salford.

He has studied, travelled and researched widely in the Middle East, including a one-year study stay at the American University in Cairo, as well as further research trips to Egypt, the Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies in Tel Aviv/Israel, the King Faisal Centre for Islamic Research and Studies in Riyadh/Saudi Arabia, as well as the Council for British Research in the Levant.

He has been a frequent commentator for UK and international media on terrorism and counterterrorism, US foreign policy, as well as the domestic and international politics of North Africa and the Middle East.

Dr Gilbert Ramsay

University of St Andrews

Dr Ramsay works as a lecturer in the Department of International Relations and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews, where he teaches within the areas of political mobilisation, terrorism and the Internet. His research work has ranged over topics including online jihadi-salafi culture, jihadist targeting practices, surveillance of political activism and theories of dehumanisation in relation to the violent practices Islamic State. He is presently working on a co-authored book on the role of humour in relation to Islamist extremism in the Arab world.