

February 2017

The Dissolution of the “Islamic State”

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The so-called Islamic State is among the most dangerous organizations in the Middle East, and perhaps the world, due to its military and financial power, effective tactical planning, and its members’ blind obedience and readiness to sacrifice themselves. These factors enabled the Islamic State to gain control of a significant amount of territory in Iraq and Syria – an area equivalent in size to the United Kingdom. After announcing its establishment with legal, military, and civil institutions, the Islamic State went on to style itself as the youngest nation in the world.

Despite the group’s power, however, it began to decline even before its institutions were finalized, and before it had truly put its concept of a modern state into practice. The Islamic State’s motto is to “endure and expand,” yet it seems more likely to fade and disappear – or in the best-case scenario, be reduced to a renegade group on the run, as it was during the period of US occupation in Iraq.

The idea that the dissolution of the Islamic State is inevitable is supported by several concrete factors, both internal and external to the group. The amount of territory that the group seized, and the speed at which it did so, are not entirely indicative of future trends. While it did gain control of vast areas in a short period, this was during a time when Syria and Iraq were at their weakest and most divided. The Syrian regime had lost control of most of the country’s territory, and decision-making in Iraq was significantly influenced by Iran and by Iraqi Shia militias. The Islamic State’s expansion was not only due to its power and organization alone, but also due to the weakness and fragmentation of others.

Losing a Breeding Ground of Support – The First Steps towards Decline

The limits to its breeding ground of support in Iraq and Syria is the most important indication that the so-called “caliphate state” is close to dissolving. Here, a “breeding ground of support” refers not only to people living in regions under the Islamic State control, but also to jihadist,

national and revolutionary forces in Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State has actively opposed all other groups and monopolized decision-making. It has even declared war on national and Islamist groups, and accused others of apostasy. This had been the Islamic State's approach since the days of Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Al-Muhajir's policies in Iraq from 2006 to 2010 led to the birth of the 'Sahawat' (Awakenings), which contributed significantly to the elimination of the Islamic State in Iraq at that time.

The Islamic State did not learn from its mistakes; it continued with its approach of calling on all jihadists to unite under its banner. In 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi tried to dissolve al-Qaeda in Syria (al-Nusra Front). This caused a deep rift among jihadists, and caused the Islamic State's popularity to plummet. The Islamic State initially earned its popularity as a group that supported Syrian and Iraqi revolutionaries in their fight against the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, collaborating with national forces and groups. Al-Nusra Front (now Fateh al-Sham) carried out large-scale operations against the Syrian regime, and its Emir, Abu Mohammad al-Julani, pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of al-Qaeda, on 24 January 2012. A few months later, on 10 April, al-Nusra Front's media outlet *The White Minaret* released a speech by al-Julani in which he renewed his pledge of allegiance to al-Zawahiri, something al-Baghdadi opposed. This rift grew over time, as the Islamic State focused on gaining control of liberated areas in Syria and silencing revolutionary voices. A long series of assassinations and kidnappings targeting revolutionary and activist leaders began shortly afterwards, reaching their peak in late 2013 and early 2014.

As a result, the vast majority of Syrians rejected the Islamic State and its caliphate. It had first appeared to be supporting revolutionaries and the Syrian people in their fight against Bashar al-Assad, and thus gained a degree of popularity. Yet instead of actually doing so, it focused its efforts on attacking the liberators, seizing control of rebel-held areas, from north and east Aleppo in western Syria to Abu Kamal in the east.

After people began to experience what life was like under the Islamic State, they increasingly rejected it. This led to the collapse of the most important pillar of the state: the people themselves. An unprecedented number of people left areas under the Islamic State's control. Fallujah, which once had a population of about 275,000 (and around 500,000 if including surrounding areas and districts), according to a 2011 census conducted by Iraq's Ministry of Planning, is now a city of 70,000.¹ Fallujah is a clear example of the situation under the Islamic State, both in Iraq and in Syria. It also clearly disproves claims that Sunnis embrace the Islamic State. Fallujah, whose resolve remained unbroken by US forces during the American occupation, has been ripped apart by Islamic State fighters, before Popular Mobilization Forces Shia militias gained control of the city. The Islamic State displaced the city's intellectuals and fought off its revolutionaries under the pretext of unifying their ranks.

¹ Office of al-Abadi: published in the Encyclopaedia of Iraq, (Arabic), 22 June 2016: <http://www.faceiraq.net/inews.php?id=4886784>

Furthermore, they treated minorities as second class citizens or even slaves: Christians were forced to pay the *jizya* tax, and Yazidi women were taken as sex slaves. These and other practices encouraged minorities and local residents to support any force that would oppose the Islamic State.

Dwindling Support Prevents the Islamic State from Lasting

The Islamic State's greatest challenge is the fact that the number of its supporters is dwindling. Its popularity has fallen since 2014, when estimates of the number of its combatants reached 50,000.² It is currently suffering from a shortage of new recruits, and this shortage will be dramatically exacerbated at the first signs of a political solution in Iraq and Syria. This fall in support is contrary to the expectations of many observers as some predicted that the number of Islamic State combatants would only drop as a result of military action. The primary reason behind the decrease in support for the Islamic state is its mishandling of authority, not coalition airstrikes. Moreover, particularly in the beginning, coalition airstrikes actually attracted more groups of combatants and individual fighters to the Islamic State from Syria, Iraq, and beyond. Idlib's Daoud Brigade swore allegiance to the Islamic State on 8 June 2014, as did dozens of groups that split from al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham. Numerous jihadist organizations from around the world also swore allegiance under the pretext that the Islamic State was taking on the duty of protecting *Ahl al-Sunnah wal Jama'a* – that is, Sunni Muslims. These included the Islamic Youth Shura Council on 22 June 2014, and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia in July 2014, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in Egypt in November 2014, Boko Haram in Nigeria in March 2015.

2016 constituted a major setback for IS. In Iraq, it lost Fallujah, and a campaign was launched to expel it from Mosul. In Syria, it lost Palmyra on 27 March, Manbij on 13 August, Jarabulus on 24 August, and the whole countryside north of Aleppo, including the village of Dabiq, which has great religious symbolism., Islamic State's enlistment centres – once crowded with volunteers even when enrolment requirements were stringent – suddenly became empty. Members began to flee from the land of the Caliphate, as did Kareem and Mohammed al-Rafdan, cousins of famous military commander Amer al-Rafdan, in August 2016. Furthermore, according to a commander of the Sham Legion, hundreds of Islamic State members fled the countryside of east Aleppo when Syrian revolutionaries offered them safe passage if they split from the Islamic State.

² Aljazeera, "Islamic State 'has 50,000 fighters in Syria'" 19 August 2014, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/islamic-state-50000-fighters-syria-2014819184258421392.html>. The group was also reported to have some 30,000 fighters in Iraq around the same period.

Decreasing Influx of Foreign Fighters, Once the Backbone of the Islamic State

No less important than the decline in local support is the decreasing influx of foreign fighters. In the beginning, foreigners and Arabs from outside Syria had formed the backbone of the Islamic State in Syria, where foreign fighters numbered 20,000 in Syria alone. About 5,000 fighters – most of whom were foreigners – joined IS between October 2014 and early 2015, according to a report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. By early 2015, there were estimated to be 1,200 French, 600 German, and 2,500 Saudi fighters in the ranks of the Islamic State, but by early 2016, the group was unable to attract new waves of foreign fighters. While around 1,500 to 2,000 foreigners had joined IS during the previous period, by early 2016, numbers of new fighters had dropped to 200. When most of them were killed, the Islamic State lost its striking force, and foreign fighters went from being useful support to being a burden. The governorates and organizations that had declared loyalty and allegiance to al-Baghdadi lost public sympathy in their home countries. The Islamic State had also lost the emotional momentum it had gained in Iraq and Syria when it first raised the banner of defending oppressed Sunnis. Libya, which had recently gotten rid of a dictatorship, and hindered the Islamic project, was no longer of use to the Islamic State. Nor was the allegiance of Ansar al-Sharia and other groups that attacked governments of countries that stood in the way of the Houthi's sectarian project. Nor were the bombings of an airport in Turkey, or Shiite mosques in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. These acts and the pledges of allegiance from distant groups helped to raise the morale of fighters in Iraq and Syria, but lost the organization the sympathy of Muslims around the world.

The fact that the Islamic State limited its 'jihad' to Muslim countries which had already experienced political or military tensions, problems, or divisions, like Somalia or Nigeria, had negative repercussions. In the eyes of scholars from Islamist jihad movements such as Abu Qatada al-Filistini and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the result was that Muslims from 'countries of the Islamic Caliphate' began to see the Islamic State as an extremist terrorist organization. As they saw it, the Islamic State was seeking to sow divisions between people and hindering the real jihad.

Hostility between Jihadist, Revolutionary, and Local Forces

As the Islamic State lost its 'breeding ground of support', from elite Islamic scholars to ordinary Muslims, and as the influx of foreign fighters plummeted, it began to face challenges from local Islamist organizations and local and national forces. In Syria in particular, the Islamic State realized that its true adversaries, and the real threat to its existence, were these local and national forces rather than the Syrian regime or any international coalition. While coalition airstrikes intensified, the Islamic State focused on targeting the leaders of these forces with suicide operations and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They killed 14

members of Jaysh al-Islam, targeted a group of revolutionaries with two bombings in August 2016 at Atma Crossing on the Syria-Turkey border, as well as dozens of soldiers in the Free Syrian Army. Islamist organizations such as Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, and al-Nusra Front offered an alternative for combatants who defected from the Islamic State. In 2016, the number of defectors reached approximately 500.

With the help of international forces, local Kurdish forces managed to expel the Islamic State from majority-Kurdish areas in Syria such as Kobani, Ras al-Ayn, Tel Hamis, and Qamishli, as well as majority-Arab areas including al-Shaddadah, Sarrin, Tel Abyad, Slouk, the Tishrin Dam, and city of Manbij and its surrounding countryside. Meanwhile, national forces like the Free Syrian Army are still embroiled in bitter conflict with the Islamic State in Daraa, the Damascus countryside, Aleppo, and Qalamoun. These forces will play a prominent role in eliminating the Islamic State in Syria because they have popular support. This is clear in the northern Aleppo countryside, where families have returned after having been previously driven out by the Islamic State.

Sharp Drop in the Influx of Weapons and Money

In addition to the plummeting numbers of foreign fighters, including due to tighter border security with Turkey, the drop in military support (such as weapons and ammunition) and economic resources are additional threats to the group's existence. When the Islamic State expanded into Iraq in the summer of 2014, it gained control of Mosul on June 10, seizing weapons and ammunition belonging to whole battalions of the Iraqi army. This raised serious questions. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi acknowledged that Iraqi security forces lost 2,300 Humvee armoured vehicles, 40 tanks, 74,000 machine guns, and 52 Howitzer mobile gun systems to the Islamic State,³ as well as enough guns and ammunition to outfit an entire army. Some observers believe that these materials were not seized, but that the Iraqi army handed them over to the Islamic State. This theory is supported by the fact that no battles were fought in Mosul, a large city, even though there were 30,000 Iraqi army soldiers present, armed with the aforementioned artillery.

The situation repeated itself in Ramadi, where the Islamic State seized more weapons and ammunition despite the original presence of tens of thousands of Iraqi army soldiers. They subsequently used these weapons and ammunition in operations to establish control of territory. The Islamic State also captured al-Tabqah military airport, the 93rd Armoured Brigade, and Division 17, and by that summer it obtained a level of military funding that most countries never achieve.

³ Al-Hayat "Weapons Seized by Daesh from the Iraqi Army", (in Arabic), 3 June 2015: <http://www.alhayat.com/m/story/9399713>

The capture of Palmyra in Syria was similar to that of Mosul; the Islamic State seized control of the Syrian army's second largest centre of military stores, which were not destroyed when control was lost.

Financial support is no less important than military support. The Islamic State acquired 500 million dollars from the Mosul Bank when it took control of the city in June 2014. It also seized oil and gas fields in Syria and Iraq, including the Deir Ezzor oil fields, which produced 40,000 barrels of oil per day, al-Jbeysa oil fields, which contain 500 oil wells, al-Qayyarah oil fields, and many others.

The economy of the Islamic State eventually grew to surpass that of many countries. Its military budget – which does not include the military development programmes that make up a portion of military spending in most countries – facilitated the recruitment of thousands of combatants. At its peak, the Islamic State paid its fighters generous salaries, double what the Syrian regime pays its soldiers. As a result, whole regiments of mercenaries joined the Islamic State, especially when work became scarce and unemployment levels rose. Thus, the recent drop in military and financial support has hit the Islamic State where it is weakest. Information from an American research organization, shows that the Islamic State's revenue dropped by 30% between mid-2015 and March 2016, falling from 80 million dollars to 56 million dollars.⁴ With the decline of the Islamic State, the impact of dropping arms and money transfers has become clear. The Islamic State no longer has control of the situation, and most of its operations are defensive bombings.

Losing its Leadership and its Elite Troops

The loss in both its political leaders and its elite troops may be one of the most significant reasons the Islamic State is on the path to fade and disappear. At the time of writing, the Islamic State has lost 39 of its 43 founders.⁵ Leaders killed in large battles or bombings include Abu Ali al-Anbari, Abu Syyaf al-Tunisi, and Haji Bakr in northern Aleppo; Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, and Abu Jirnas in Nineveh; Abu Osama al-Iraqi (the governor of al-Burka), and Omar al-Shishani (Tarkhan Batirashvili, a Chechen and tantamount to the Islamic State's Minister of Defense, killed in July 2016), and Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (Taha Subhi Falaha, official spokesperson of the Islamic State, killed on 30 August 2016), Abu Mohammad al-Furqan (Wa'il Adil Hasan Salman al-Fayad, Minister of Information, killed on 7 September 2016) and many more.

⁴ Mobtada website, "The Collapse of the Daesh Financial Empire," 17 July 2016 (in Arabic) available at http://www.mobtada.com/news_details.php?ID=488602

⁵ Araby21 website, "Thirty-Nine of the 43 Founding Leaders of IS Have Been Killed and Its Grip Weakens." 29 June 2016 (in Arabic) available at <https://arabi21.com/story/917945/-/39-من-43-ممن-قتلوا-وقبضتها-تتأكل-43-من-39-خب-ير-قيادة-أسسوا-الدولة-قتلوا-وقبضتها-تتأكل-43-من-39-خب-ير>

The Islamic State also lost the many of its elite troops in battles at Kobani in 2014 and 2015, where it suffered a humiliating defeat. This was a significant turning point for the Islamic State in Syria. Prior to this, the Islamic State had lost more than 100 of its elite troops in other battles, including the battle for the al-Tabqah military airport. The importance of their elite troops lay in their ideological beliefs and readiness for sacrifice. Although their numbers were small, these elite troops, and not the second generation of troops who joined later, were responsible for achieving the early victories for the Islamic State and enabling it to expand. Many individuals in the second generation joined because they were eager for fame, power, and money. This explains the Islamic State's decline and why its leaders are fleeing. Recently in Manbij, for example, Islamic State emirs deserted before the battle began, something that never would have happened with the elite of the first generation.

The Clash between Security Specialists and Jurists

The Islamic State is a composite organization, and not as cohesive as depicted in the media. Internal conflicts threaten to fracture the Islamic State from within, and spread these conflicts beyond the organization itself. These include conflicts between local members and foreign fighters, conflicts between emirs, and regions that are becoming increasingly factionalized. The conflict between security specialists and jurists is the most crucial, as it undermines the very concept of the Islamic State, which the organization has strived for since its beginning.

The jurists want to develop the Islamic State's institutions according to Islamic law, while security specialists and influential emirs think in terms of security. This is a result of their Ba'athist security background; most leaders in the Islamic State come from the former Iraqi army. This dispute developed into bloodshed in mid-2014 when security specialists dared to execute Abu Abdulrahman al-Masri, a well-known preacher, for rejecting the declaration of the caliphate. He was executed in the city of al-Bab, along with five other scholars, and no revolutionaries interceded with the Islamic State on their behalf. The Islamic State has since executed many jurists for a variety of reasons. They executed Abu Abdullah al-Kuwaiti, in September 2015 in the city of al-Mayadin in Deir Ezzor governorate, for example, on charges of working for the British intelligence services.

Moreover, this is in addition to *takfiri* movements. The Islamic State launched a broad campaign against those it called '*takfiris*' within its ranks, claiming that they had gone too far by accusing other Muslims of apostasy, and invented something they called 'takfir in succession.'

In sum, the Islamic State claims to have built a strong state, yet it appears to be as fragile as a spider web and fraught with internal divisions.

Coalition Airstrikes

Coalition airstrikes are helping to make the fall of the Islamic State inevitable: 13,000 aerial sorties have helped halve the area of land controlled by the Islamic State. Since its peak, the Islamic State lost control of multiple regions in Iraq, including Sinjar, a vital corridor between Mosul and Raqqah, as well as Tikrit, Ramadi, Baiji, and Salah Addin. It also lost control of Fallujah in June 2016, and the Qayyarah military base near Mosul in July. In Syria, the Kurdish Defense Forces have taken back Ras al-Ayn, Tel Hamis, Kobani, the Tishrin Dam, Sarrin, and Tel Abyad, as well as cities that had been strongholds for the Islamic State, including al-Shaddadah, Slouk, and Manbij. The Islamic State also lost Palmyra and the countryside north of Aleppo, all due to airstrikes conducted by the international coalition and others; Kurdish forces did not actually engage in direct conflict with the Islamic State. In contrast to what the Islamic State sources reported about their dead, they suffered significant casualties among their ranks.

Between May and September 2016, the Islamic State lost more than 3,000 fighters in battle in Manbij, al-Rai, Jarabulus, and the countryside north of Aleppo, according to testimonies from within the organization. The situation is similar in Jadid al-Akidat, a village with a population of 25,000, where nearly half of its 1,000 fighters have been killed over the past two years. Among these fighters was Amer al-Rafdan, the former governor of Deir Ezzor. Furthermore, in the countryside west of Deir Ezzor, more than 100 of 350 fighters were killed, and the Islamic State executed an additional group of its own security specialists.

The situation in the Aleppo countryside is not much different. In these areas, people have almost entirely stopped joining the Islamic State, and with every day more members are killed in battle or by coalition airstrikes.

The End of Sectarian Regimes, and the Beginning of the End of the Islamic State

The Islamic State took advantage of conditions on the ground in Syria and Iraq in order to establish itself and expand. In Iraq, Sunnis were marginalized and political decision-making was dependent on Iran's Wali al-Faqih. In Syria, the regime's actions helped to channel the popular revolution into a dangerous type of sectarian conflict by using a specific type of sectarian militias from Lebanon, Iraq, and East Asia to help suppress the popular revolution. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad cleared the way for the Islamic State, which played the tune of sectarianism and easily took root in such a hatred-filled sectarian environment. The conflict changed from a political conflict into a sectarian battle for survival.

The existence of the Islamic State is primarily due to the fact that Iraq and Syria lack comprehensive national projects. When the sectarian regimes in Iraq and Syria collapse, the Islamic State will inevitably lose its most important source of support because these regimes provide justification for the Islamic State's existence in the region. Iraqis are aware of this, but they are still bound by numerous constraints. Even so, among both Sunnis and Shiites there is a growing rejection of Iranian-style sectarian divisions. There are protests in Baghdad; Iraqis are speaking up and demanding that the corrupt be held accountable, and this is just the beginning. The same is true for Syria. Everyone is certain that a real solution will begin with the dissolution of the current regime, and the establishment of a national government that responds to the interests of all the people. If this change happens, the Islamic State will lose the most crucial justification of its existence, and that is an important step towards its dissolution.

This paper examined the most significant factors contributing to the decline and ultimate end of the Islamic State. Regardless of how many of these factors are present, however, it will not fade until the unusual situation in which it was born and developed also comes to an end. The Islamic State is an unusual phenomenon that was born under American occupation, but will not disappear under increasing Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria; it is taking advantage of Assad's injustice, and will not disappear as long as he remains in power. Only if a just authority upholds people's right to freedom and acts in their interests, abandoning the constraints of an antiquated, regional-based, sectarian system of divisions, will the factors discussed above guarantee the Islamic State will inevitably end.

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ABOUT ARI

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