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The Year of the Caliphate: What Lies Ahead?

By Shashi Jayakumar

Synopsis

A year ago today, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or simply IS) formally declared the establishment of a worldwide Caliphate, with its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the new Caliph. What has the year of the Caliphate taught us? What are the real threats? How has IS changed? How should we?

Commentary

FOREIGN FIGHTERS do not yet pose the main threat arising from the Islamic State (IS). Across the key geographic theatres, the vast majority of plots, have been conceived by sympathisers inspired by IS ideology - in some cases, empowered by IS calls to carry out attacks in their home countries - but acting independently of IS control.

The plain fact, however, is that we do not know how IS targeting will evolve. IS will likely continue to concentrate on expanding the Caliphate and consolidating the areas it holds, while from time to time prompting its sympathisers to carry out attacks - as it does now. But we cannot discount the over-the-horizon possibility of IS turning its attention outwards and attempting to organise 9/11 style attacks.

Polyphonic Messaging

What has been lacking thus far is the concerted and coordinated thought and effort needed to counteract a messaging that has out-evolved everything thrown at it.

Consider for example the difficulties faced by the Think Again Turn Away campaign, launched in late 2013 by the US State Department's Centre for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC). The campaign degenerated into a shrill debate between the CSCC and IS fanboys. IS was none the worse for it: the online jousting provided its supporters the opportunity and a platform to showcase, and sharpen, its own message.

IS' social media messaging projects a multiplicity of superior aspirations and ideals. Its propaganda, often accompanied by highly stylised visuals, assures people that "sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures" accompanied by striking imagery of Kalashnikov-wielding hooded

individuals contemplating the light-filled path ahead. That this appeals to those with little to lose, to the disenfranchised, is obvious. The Caliphate is a place where people can be redeemed.

What complements the call of IS – and this is critical – is polyphonic messaging that appeals to would-be jihadists, but to many others besides. IS has made it clear that everyone can contribute to building the caliphate: anyone who comes will be looked after, as will their families who come with them.

What should be done

The Caliphate has a master narrative. Opposing IS requires a master narrative too – one going beyond a simple negating of IS' propaganda, encompassing a set of aspirational ideals capable of reaching into the psyche of people looking, more often than not, for confirmation for their own beliefs.

Assembling unofficial brains trusts would be a start. Those recruited should be drawn from all walks - advertising, psychology, experts on youth gangs and delinquents – all complementing the radicalisation experts. Digital natives, too, are needed.

Drawing on real-world initiatives will also be key. Outreach and deradicalisation programmes exist from Minneapolis to Aarhus to Singapore. These tackle the entire gamut from at-risk youths to self-radicalised individuals to returnees, using methods ranging from religious and psychological counselling, family outreach, to societal (re)integration. While some local initiatives report success in staying the hand of people who might have been tempted to join IS (or in deprogramming returnees), many of these are small, context specific, and not easily replicable. More needs to be done by way of sharing best practices: what works, and what doesn't?

Inevitably, as IS evolves, states may have tinker with their security regimes; some may be overhauled altogether. But leaving one's citizens in limbo through revoking citizenship - the route some nations are considering - should be weighed carefully and not used lightly. IS fighters and sympathisers who have committed crimes at home or abroad will of course have to face penalties, or (at the very least) square their accounts with the security services. But it should not be forgotten that many who do come back home are disillusioned. These are people who could bear valuable testament against IS and their voices which should be woven into the master narrative.

Between the kinetic, the pragmatic – and the unthinkable

IS *learns*. It has become more adept at instructing would be fighters how to avoid routes that have become compromised. The short duration of the Caliphate has also seen its fighters and sympathisers become markedly more proficient in the intelligent use of social media, with an increasing use of encryption evidenced. They are migrating to secure forms of communication (think Wickr), or the less well-known platforms (Kik).

In the real world, too, IS is unlikely to disintegrate even as coalition successes against it gather pace. At the tactical level, territory may be retaken, but dealing with an excess of 30,000 IS fighters (two thirds of them "foreign") will not be accomplished easily. Jihadists have always sought out badlands: poorly governed, between borders, where there is instability or the possibility of fomenting and feeding off conflict. Returnees will in various parts of the world therefore pose a security issue for years, if not decades, just as the previous generation of Afghan veterans did.

For the time being, IS is the biggest game in town. Only IS can offer a semblance of local government. IS mouthpieces have tweeted that the nascent state offers subsidised gas, free water and dental care, and many other services besides – almost a municipal promised land. The reality is of course different: shortages of the most basic necessities; grim executions for the merest transgressions.

But this does not mean that the IS state-building enterprise will fail. Governance and provision of services will be a key issue, as will its ability to attract individuals who can run states – civil servants, doctors, engineers, and teachers. The Caliphate has some, but not enough. The IS leadership knows this.

As Richard Barrett, the respected former head of counter-terrorism for MI6 has recently observed, “[IS] offers those living under its rule better governance in some respects than they received from the state before it took over. Corruption is far less prevalent, and justice, albeit brutal, is swift and more evenly applied. The policy challenge is therefore not to seek the destruction of the caliphate so much as to promote its transformation into something that the Syrian and Iraqi people, along with the rest of us, could live with.”

Policymakers, security agencies, and the think tank community should harvest the best insights of scenario planning, horizon scanning and whatever tools they have in an effort to better understand the longer-term implications of this prognosis.

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