

The Islamic State Wilayats & Global Expansion

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Nodirbek Soliev & Mohammed Sinan Siyech



The Middle East

The Middle East continues to be the centre of gravity for conflict and terrorism. While airstrikes from the US-led coalition and Russia have led to significant attrition in the so-called Islamic State (IS)'s infrastructure and hold on territories, continuing IS attacks in the Middle East underscore the insurmountable challenges facing countries in the region. Some of the more recent attacks conducted by IS include the suicide bombing on 21 August 2016 which killed 51 people and injured 69 others in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, as well as a car bomb attack targeting police in eastern Turkey by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that killed five people and injured over 200. In addition, IS has continued to stifle opposition and dissent through executions within its territories in Iraq and Syria.

In Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS capitalised on the on-going civil war and conflict between the government, backed by the Saudi-led coalition, and the Houthi-led opposition. AQAP even managed to seize and control territory when it stormed the port city of Mukalla, which also gave the terrorist group access to the town's financial resources. While some analysts have written off Al Qaeda in the global jihad stage, AQAP's successes in Yemen have effectively established Al Qaeda as a continuing formidable security threat. Although the newly rebranded Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra) has divorced itself from Al Qaeda and its emir Ayman al-Zawahiri, it nevertheless remains dangerous and may continue to serve as Al Qaeda's proxy in the Syrian conflict.

Despite experiencing serious territorial losses on the battleground, IS has its eye on establishing its foothold in other parts of the world where governance is weak. **Rohan Gunaratna and Natasha Hornell-Scott** cast a spotlight on IS' ambitions to establish its caliphate in places beyond the Middle East through wilayats, otherwise known as IS' satellite provinces.

Five years into the Syrian conflict, Syria's opposition groups remain in disunity. This has presented terrorist groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and IS with an opportunity to infiltrate the various groups in the country, to further their vision of the Islamic caliphate. **Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff and NurulHuda Binte Yussof** explain how the competition between anti-Assad opposition groups and the infiltration of terrorist groups into the anti-Assad opposition front portends serious security implications for the region as a whole.

Although IS has made inroads into Yemen, the group has not succeeded in establishing a foothold there, as it has done in Syria, Iraq and Libya. **Mohammed Sinan Siyech** examines the reasons behind why the IS wilayat (governorate) in Yemen has been unable to make major strides and offers a case study of the conquests which AQAP has been making in Yemen.

Nodirbek Soliev and Mohammed Sinan Siyech argue that the decision by a group to claim responsibility for an attack is a rational and calculated move, and that the politics of claiming an attack is by nature strategic. While it benefits IS to take responsibility for the Orlando shooting and Nice attack, IS refrained from doing the same in the case of the attacks in Turkey and Saudi Arabia due to fears that authorities might intensify their attacks on the group in Iraq and Syria and move in to arrest their members and eliminate their network of cells and disrupt their operations in Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

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IS has also justified its actions to establish such wilayats as a means to overcome perceived Western intrusion and liberate oppressed Muslims from the rule of non-believers and apostates.

IS' Wilayats

Unlike in the case of the Ottoman Empire, wilayats are of secondary importance to IS' strategy of establishing its global caliphate. IS has placed priority on the "ad-hoc [global] supporters and sympathisers that are approximated to cross thousands" (Kilcullen 2016). In this case, IS seeks to strengthen its broader governance structures by expanding its membership base through the various wilayats.

While IS continued to rely on wilayats to fulfill its global ambitions, there are certain requirements before a territory is considered as a wilayat. According to Dabiq, IS' official magazine, a group situated in a particular geographical area must first publicly pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. In addition, the group must also have a detailed military or political strategy to counter the West and have a wali or leader (Dabiq 2015).

IS' wilayats govern and conduct attacks in accordance with strategic guidelines set out by IS central. This includes, but is not limited to, targeting Christians, Americans and other groups that are seen to oppose Islamic beliefs (Dabiq 2015). Based on examples of already existing wilayats, there is no specific timeline for the transformation of an IS-linked group holding territory into a wilayat. However, the cases of Wilayats Khorasan, Gharb Iriqiyah and Qawqaz have indicated that IS accepts the pledge of allegiance days after the declaration by the groups.

Since Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate in 2014, multiple terrorist groups worldwide have pledged allegiance to IS. This has effectively transformed their local area of control into a wilayat. The first priority of the newly-created wilayats has been to recruit and train a growing number of fighters. Each wilayat also appears to have certain specialised functions. For instance, Wilayat Khorasan's objective is to promote IS training camps in Afghanistan through mirroring the sophisticated video propaganda of IS central. The wilayats in Libya are responsible for controlling the revenue from certain oil installations. Wilayat Sinai, in turn, focuses on

“ IS' wilayats govern and conduct attacks in accordance with strategic guidelines set out by IS central. ”

chemical engineering for manufacturing weapons, whereas Wilayat Gharb Iriqiyah supports cells across West Africa (Leigh et al. 2016).

IS' Wilayats: Weakening Internal Wilayats, Strengthening External Wilayats

IS Losing Strongholds in Syria and Iraq

There are twelve wilayats located in Syria and eleven in Iraq. Within Syria, the largest and most prominent provinces include Raqqa and Aleppo. In Iraq, the significant satellites under IS control have included Mosul and Fallujah, until the latter was taken over by the Iraqi military in June 2016. Wilayat al-Raqqa has been the capital of IS since its capture in January 2014 (Remnick 2015), with IS claiming a total population of two million (Ansar al-Khilafah Media 2016). The loss of Fallujah and other towns and cities indicates that IS strongholds in Syria and Iraq are now receding and becoming weaker. Since July 2016, IS is also estimated to have lost 47 percent of its territorial holdings in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria (Schmitt 2016).

Expanding External Wilayats: Spread of IS' Global Monopoly on Terror

The presence of external wilayats is integral for IS to retain and expand its global monopoly on terror. As of March 2016, the external wilayats exist in nine countries: Libya (Barqa, Fezzan and Tripoli), Egypt (Sinai), Nigeria (Gharb Iriqiyah), Afghanistan and Pakistan (Khorasan), Russian Caucasus (Qawqaz), Yemen (Al-Yemen), Algeria (Al-Jazair) and Saudi Arabia (Najd, Hijaz and Bahrain). It is evident that IS wilayats are formed primarily in conflict zones, characterised by (a) political instability, (b) civil war (c) and the lack of governmental infrastructure. The volatile nature of these conflict zones allows IS to gain access and capture power easily (Masi 2015).

IS' control or entry into parts of these unstable territories has also resulted in the subsequent escalation of attacks and violence. For instance, on 20 March 2015, coordinated suicide strikes on Zaydi Shi'ite mosques in Libya killed 130. On 10 October 2015, explosions at a peace rally in Ankara killed more than 100 people. On 25 March 2016, a suicide bombing attack took place in Baghdad, killing 41 people.

Similarities between IS' Internal and External Wilayats

The administrative structures of the internal and external wilayats are mostly similar. Around 33,000 fighters operate in Syria and Iraq, while the external wilayats have a collective estimate of 24,800 fighters (Rahmani & Tanco 2016). External wilayats act as a safe haven for fighters and recruits who are unable to reach Syria or Iraq. One of the more prominent structures present in both internal and external wilayats is the branch which conducts Islamic outreach, exercises judicial oversight, policing, and manages tribal relations. A structure commonly referred to as the Department of Muslim Services focuses on conducting governance based on the principles of Islamic law, which includes the *Hudud* laws (the fixed punishments in Islam) and *Da'wah* (proselytising or preaching Islam) (Caris and Reynolds 2014).

Most external wilayats, such as Gharb Iriqiyah in Nigeria have a decentralised hierarchical structure and compartmentalise their fighters to minimise communication between different departments. This strategy is particularly advantageous in keeping fighters' knowledge and exposure limited to only those who operate within their cells (Counter Extremism Project 2016). This is to ensure that in the event a group of fighters is captured, the strategy and plans of other groups would not be compromised. The most prominent external wilayats are in Libya, Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria. Each of these wilayats have conducted attacks that have increased IS' reign of terror. Such attacks include the Borno Massacre in Nigeria that killed more than 120 people in 2014, the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians kidnapped from the Libyan city of Sirte in February 2015 and the downing of the Russian jet plane on the Turkey-Syrian border, which killed all 224 people on board in November 2015.

The Libyan and Egyptian branches of IS have grown in significance following the ouster of

“ Other prominent external Wilayats comprise the Khorasan, Qawqaz and Al-Yemen. ”

Gaddafi and Mubarak in 2011. Other prominent external wilayats comprise the Khorasan, Qawqaz and Al-Yemen. The Khorasan group primarily occupies the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. This wilayat aims to rival both the local insurgent group Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda. Wilayat Qawqaz (Caucasus) includes Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, areas which have been a hotbed for jihadist radicalisation since the 1990s due to political struggles for independence and the resulting wars in Chechnya. Al-Yemen is divided into eight smaller branches and operates independently of IS' central command.

Lastly, the wilayats in Saudi Arabia and Algeria are smaller than others, with no discernible leader or professed administrative structure. Although these wilayats are likely to be in the incipient stage, on 5 July 2016, the IS wilayat in Saudi Arabia carried out a number of attacks in the country.

Likely Future Developments

Attacks that have been linked to IS in 2016, such as the Jakarta attacks on 14 January, the bombing at the Istanbul airport on 28 June and the slaughter in Dhaka on 1 July indicate that the IS sphere of influence has expanded. All three attacks correspond with the terrorist groups' public pledge to Baghdadi, indicating that cells and supporters are already operational in these countries. More recently, pledges came from the Philippines, where four groups (Abu Sayyaf, Jund al Tawhid, Ansar al Sharia and Marakah al Ansar) came together.

On 24 June 2016, IS central released a video, where it accepted pledges of allegiances from a number of militant groups based in the Philippines (The Straits Times 2016). These militants are called 'Soldiers of the Khilafah'. In April 2016, the IS weekly newsletter al-Naba

announced the appointment of the IS representative in the Philippines.

However, Philippines is not the only country in Southeast Asia with Islamist extremists supporting IS. In fact, both Indonesian and Malaysian groups have also pledged allegiance. These include the Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and the Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT). As such, it is likely that more local groups will follow suit.

A means to predict the establishment of a wilayat could be through the cities conquered by the Ottomans during their own expansion. Cities such as Mosul, Fallujah and Damascus were all once territories of the Ottomans. It seems that IS is seeking to replicate the 'glory days' of the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, countries like Tunisia and Somalia are also central to IS global expansion claims as they have the highest number of fighters within the group, estimated to be at 5,500 (El Amrani 2016).

Countering the Expansion of IS Wilayats

IS will continue to expand its wilayats unless strong measures are taken to stem this development. Detailed policy plans are needed to counter the formation of wilayats in countries with fragile governments and ungoverned spaces. Foreign interventions to counter the expansion of wilayat remains a sensitive issue and will have to be handled delicately. However, governments that lack significant control in their respective conflict zones would benefit from a joint taskforce or financial support as it will better equip them to counter the threat. Controlling the sources of funding for active terrorist groups will also decrease their financial and operational strength, and prevent them from forming a wilayat. Minimally they should be prevented from having access to the country's financial resources. Another possible means to counter expansion would be for governments to withdraw the citizenship of those who have joined IS. This would prevent fighters from re-entering their country legally and establishing a wilayat at home.

Reports have indicated that the number of IS fighters has declined from 55,000 in 2015 to approximately 33,000 at present (Martinez 2016). Still, it remains critical to come up with novel strategies to prevent the recruitment of more fighters by IS. Otherwise, IS will continue to replenish their manpower losses and sustain its

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An Overview of the Syrian Conflict

Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff and NurulHuda Binte Yussof

Apart from the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, there is also an ongoing intra-war between anti-Assad opposition groups for dominance. Terrorist groups such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra) and the so-called Islamic State (IS) have exploited the instability caused by sectarian divisions, civil conflicts, and political decay, to further their political vision of creating their own so-called Islamic caliphates.

Introduction

On 26 July 2016, the United Nations envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, announced that a new round of intra-Syrian peace talks would re-start towards the end of August (UN News Centre 2016). Countless attempts at arriving at a political solution in Syria have proven futile, even though international organisations, such as the United Nations, Arab League, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, have attempted to take the lead in the peace talks. These talks have mainly either failed or collapsed mid-way. Calls to cease hostilities have also been made redundant, due to the failure of or rejection by the parties and groups involved in abiding by the stated rules. Disunity among the anti-Assad opposition groups, combined with foreign players with vested interests have also transformed Syria into a geo-political battle for dominance. This has complicated efforts towards a resolution of the conflict.

Disunity among Syrian Opposition Groups

Syria's opposition fronts have been in disunity throughout the conflict, as highlighted by the recent infightings in the Eastern Ghouta region, northwest of Damascus. Two key opposition groups, Faylaq Al-Rahman and Jaish Al-Islam, are fighting against each other to establish territorial and ideological dominance over this region.

Faylaq Al-Rahman (FAR) is the second largest opposition faction in the region supported by the Qatari-backed Jaish Al-Fustat – a coalition that includes the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat Al-Nusra. The collaboration between Faylaq Al-Rahman and Jaish Al-Fustat poses a threat to the largest faction, Jaish Al-Islam (JAI). Supported by Saudi Arabia, JAI is a member of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC). Since 28 April 2016, JAI and FAR have clashed with one another, resulting in at least 500 deaths, with some reports suggesting 700 (Barrington and Perry 2016) (Bishara 2016).

JAI succeeded in controlling territories until the death of its leader, Zahran Alloush, a dominant and influential figure, who was killed in an airstrike claimed by the Syrian government (Aljazeera 2015). Alloush exerted great control over the opposition forces in his home region of Eastern Ghouta. His bold leadership was marred by accusations of nepotism and corrupt practices. Although Alloush portrayed himself as being a fierce opponent of the Islamic State (IS) and a moderate leader of the opposition, he was a sectarian Islamist who was against the Shiites (Mamouri 2016).

Following his death, support for his faction crumbled and weakened the opposition front's political standing. The situation has severely compromised the opposition's campaign against the Assad regime. The Eastern Ghouta territory has been a strategic stronghold of the two groups, as it is used as a launch pad for rocket and mortar attacks on regime-controlled Damascus. Due to the infighting between JAI and FAR, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) was able to seize the opportunity to retake the opposition-held areas. Especially damaging to the opposition factions was the SAA's capture of Syrian army bases and air defences (Bala Al-Kadhim and Marj Al-Sultan) in Eastern Ghouta that were held previously by JAI (Tomson 2016).

The two areas were the stronghold of the Syrian air and ground troops. The SAA continues to seize control of territories in the southern parts of Eastern Ghouta in the campaign against the opposition factions (Hanna 2016). This combination of opposition disunity and weakened anti-Assad offensives is increasingly common across Syria. The opposition disunity can be explained by the constant emergence of new coalitions and splinter groups due to infightings and debacles. The most well-known and largest umbrella opposition group – the Free Syrian

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Army – has also been unsuccessful in uniting the opposition factions due to (a) the increasing number of opposition members and (b) the splintering of these members from their parent factions as a result of ideological differences over Islamic-based governance.

Al Qaeda and Jabhat Al-Nusra

The infightings between groups in the Syrian conflict have been exacerbated by the dominance of extremist and terrorist groups. Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN), an Al Qaeda (AQ)-linked group and other groups which associate themselves with JN, have established a foothold in many parts of Syria, across much of the Idlib governorate, Aleppo's southern countryside, northern Hama and in parts of northern Latakia. JN and AQ also operate in other areas, albeit on a smaller scale (Lister 2016). This has raised concerns by the international community that in their support for the opposition groups, they might unwittingly be supporting a terrorist group directly.

The deteriorating political scene in Syria and divisions within the opposition groups has provided AQ with an opportunity to dominate and champion its goal of establishing an emirate. Their political vision is currently manifested in their involvement of civil affairs and local governance.

JN governs territories they hold and establishes institutions such as courts, schools and training camps. It is alleged to have manipulated the supplies of basic services such as food and electricity in territories which it has seized (Cafarella 2014). To appease the local community, JN's strategy has been to project itself as being aligned with the Syrian opposition. It is known to have fighters with good fighting skills and uses them to support opposition groups' offensives, building trust and confidence among the fighters. In this regard, JN has managed to establish itself as a major player. Due to JN's operational capabilities and lack of better alternatives, other opposition groups collaborate with JN in their fight against Assad. JN has effectively convinced the Syrian people that they are the ones defending them and willing to fight alongside with them.

JN is also known for using terrorism tactics to instil fear and to dominate the Syrian opposition groups. JN has used force on any group that defies them, arresting and assassinating supporters and leaders of opposing groups. When confronted with protests, JN has responded with heavy fire, killing and injuring scores of protesters. Some Syrian opposition groups reject JN not merely because JN is a terror group, but also because JN's Salafi jihadi doctrines and practices are dissimilar to the values of Syria's mainstream community. For example, they reject JN's practice of *takfiri* (excommunication) and harsh religious rulings. Despite the rejection, the opposition groups found that they still needed JN because of its strength and capabilities in fighting Assad's forces.

The different religious or ideological orientations have therefore not prevented groups from aligning themselves with JN. In 2013, the Yarmouk Brigade, a unit of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) banded together with JN to take control of the Daraa border crossing to Jordan (Roggio 2013). FSA is considered a secular and moderate nationalist group. In 2014, Liwa Al Ummah of the FSA conducted a joint operation with JN to fight against the Syrian army in Idlib (Roggio 2014). The collaborative effort between JN and other moderate and nationalist groups continues to exist until today, in part due to their strategic approach to stay relevant in the protracted conflict.

In a strategic turn, JN decided to formally end its ties with Al Qaeda in an announcement made in

“ The infightings between groups in the Syrian conflict have been exacerbated by the dominance of extremist and terrorist groups. ”

its video posted on 29 July 2016. JN changed its name to “Jabhat Fath Al-Sham”, claiming that it is fighting independently without any external support. The latest development by the group does not change the terrorism landscape as JN's political vision remains the same as Al Qaeda's. It's decision to change its name is a deceptive move to win over critics who oppose its links with Al Qaeda. JN's operational capability, resonance amongst the population and its ability to bring together the various opposition groups therefore poses a continuing threat to Syria.

IS

IS has been quick to exploit the political opportunity presented by the disunity among the Syrian opposition. This was amply displayed when it took control of supply lines in Aleppo. IS expansion plans, however, is being challenged by the increasing number of military airstrikes targeting the group and the loss of territory.

Nonetheless, even with military setbacks and territorial losses, IS-inspired individuals will continue to create cells and groups within the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria as well as beyond the Middle East. The persistence of sectarian divisions, civil conflicts, and worsening political situation, as well as IS' ideological appeal, present radical extremist elements with ample opportunities to exploit.

Going Forward

There appears to be no easy resolution in sight to the Syrian conflict. The events in Syria however indicate that there is an increasing need to focus attention on the presence of terrorist and

extremist elements such as IS, AQ and JN and their penetration of Syrian opposition groups.

It is too early to make any positive assessment of JN's apparent split from Al Qaeda central. The possibility of JN being Al Qaeda's proxy cannot be ruled out as they both share the same ideology. The Syrian conflict will therefore have to be closely watched not only because terrorist groups are involved but also because thousands of foreigners from the East and West have joined the fighting; their eventual return to their countries of origin will be a major security issue to be dealt with.

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A Comparative Analysis of 'Islamic State' & Al Qaeda in Yemen

Mohammed Sinan Siyech

The civil war in Yemen and the collapse of state institutions have provided space for the so-called Islamic State (IS) to exploit the security vacuum to expand its reach and appeal. However, unlike in Syria, Iraq and Libya, where IS has captured large swathes of territory, IS has been unable to gain a foothold in Yemen.

Introduction

The declaration of the caliphate by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in June 2014 changed the terrorism landscape globally. Several militant groups in different regions pledged allegiance to IS, which directed and inspired attacks from its nucleus in Syria and Iraq to France, Nigeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and the Philippines, among others. IS has even managed to declare Wilayats (governorates) in different countries in Africa, Middle East, the Caucasus, South Asia and Southeast Asia (Watts 2016). The common thread that has allowed IS to operate in different countries is the poor governance exercised by local governments, coupled with the socioeconomic grievances of the populace. This produces a security vacuum, which has created space for militant groups to exploit (Galula 1964).

Yemen: a Brief Introduction

Yemen was ruled by Abdullah Ali Saleh for over 30 years till the Arab Spring in 2011, which forced him to step down as President. His exit was facilitated in a power sharing deal supported by the Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia (Carlstorm 2011). His successor, the incumbent President Abdur Rabi Hadi al Mansour, has found it difficult to deal with the socioeconomic problems of the country, resulting in rising protests from people who had high expectations from the new administration (Siyech 2015).

Aggravating the situation was the rise to power of the Houthis, a tribe that adheres to the Zaydi Shia Islam which comprise 40% of Yemen's total population (Orkaby 2015). The Houthis had launched many wars against the Yemeni government under Saleh between 2004 and 2009. They initially entered the Yemeni political scene by demanding economic rights but soon decided to take over power in the country. By April 2014, they took over many key areas in Yemen, resulting in a civil war with Abdur Rabi Hadi al Mansour on one side and the Houthis, backed by Saleh in his bid to regain power, on the other (Schmitz 2015). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Egypt also formed a military coalition to help Hadi defeat the Houthis (Siyech 2015). The conflict has exacerbated the poor security situation in Yemen, enabling IS to exploit the situation.

Evaluating IS' and AQAP's progress in Yemen

IS in Yemen: Failure to Capture Territory

The very first attack that was carried out by IS in Yemen was on 20 March 2015. A suicide blast occurred in two Houthi mosques in Sana'a, which killed more than 150 people and injured around 300. On 24 September 2015, the second IS attack took place in another Houthi mosque during Eid prayers. This attack was claimed by IS as an attack carried out in revenge for the atrocities and damage inflicted by the Houthis on the Sunnis in Yemen. The third attack, on 6 October 2015, was against the UAE and Saudi forces that were fighting the Houthis. This attack signified a shift in the strategy of the group from attacking Houthis to attacking members of the government and its supporters too (Zimmerman 2016).

On 20 November 2015, IS claimed another attack at two security checkpoints in the region of Hadramout. The targets of this attack were members of Hadi's government. Another significant attack claimed by IS was the killing of the governor of the city of Aden, one of the most important bastions of Hadi's administration. The governor was an experienced war veteran whose war efforts were crucial to secure a victory. His death led to the weakening of government forces' efforts to secure the city of Aden (Zimmerman 2016). On 28 June 2016, IS also claimed responsibility for the suicide attack, which killed more than 40 soldiers of the coalition in the city of Mukalla (Mortimer 2016).

“ Interestingly, while IS has been steadily increasing its attacks and intensity, it has failed to capture any territory like it did in Libya... ”

Interestingly, while IS has been steadily increasing its attacks and intensity, it has failed to capture any territory like it did in Libya or like AQAP did in Yemen.

AQAP in Yemen: Control over Vast Resources

AQAP is the dominant terrorist group in the country. The group has taken many steps to strengthen its presence, which includes forging local connections by intermarrying within the tribes of Yemen. This is especially relevant in a country where the tribal system is quite influential in maintaining law and order in areas where the government does not have a strong reach (Swift 2011). The alliance with the local tribes is one of the reasons why AQAP has been careful not to conduct attacks that would alienate the local population. In 2013, for example, the then second-in-command, Qasim al Raymi, publicly apologised for AQAP's role in a bombing conducted at a hospital (Al Jazeera America). It is also what led the group to rebrand itself as the 'Sons of Hadramouth' when it came to control the port city of Mukalla (Ayisha Amr 2015).

AQAP took control of Mukalla in April 2015, in the midst of the civil war fought mainly in the north. This allowed AQAP to draw in two million U.S. dollars in revenue from port taxes and oil production. It then seized five other cities and towns across Yemen and controlled this territory for a whole year. During this period, the group undertook many administrative duties, such as repairing roads and bridges and paying salaries to hospital workers. Apart from public works and provision of services, AQAP was also instrumental in evacuating the population of Mukalla when they were beset by a cyclone in November 2015.

To appease the local population further, AQAP involved the locals of Mukalla in the city's governance. The group also reduced the number of punishments for miscreants and criminals, an issue IS does not compromise on (Siyech 2016). Indeed this specific step was severely criticised by IS in its propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*, which alleged that AQAP did not implement the law of God (*Dabiq* 2015).

Although AQAP was ousted from Mukalla by the coalition forces in April 2016, it has been considered as a tactical retreat by the group and not a defeat. The group still has control of vast resources, including money and weapons, which were not completely confiscated by the government (Siyech 2016). It is telling then that while the same conditions existed in Yemen for both AQAP and IS, IS' progress was only marginal, signalling inherent weakness in the group's organisation and leadership.

IS' Success in Libya

Unlike its branch in Yemen, IS has operated quite successfully in the country's security vacuum. Just like Yemen, Libya has also been experiencing civil war since the ousting and death of its leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Here too multiple players fighting each other for power are playing a role in precipitating the chaos. In November 2014, IS took advantage of the mayhem and sent its commanders to secure pledges from the militant groups operating in Libya. IS established three different wilayats in the country and took control of oil facilities in Derna and Misrata, and eventually the port city of Sirte. This was in stark contrast to their group in Yemen which is still struggling to gain territory. Sirte became the first IS controlled territory outside of Syria and Iraq (Ghambir 2016).

Libya is an important transit point for most fighters travelling to Syria. A number of recruits, especially from the neighbouring countries of Chad, Mali, Senegal, Algeria and Tunisia, cross into Libya (Messi 2015). However, this is counter-balanced by the action of local militia groups, resulting in significant losses to IS (Estelle 2016).

Analysing the Weaknesses of IS in Yemen

The poor performance of IS in Yemen can be attributed to many factors. IS relies on its ability to attract different groups already present in a country to pledge allegiance to it. Thus, a group pledging allegiance to IS becomes the Islamic

“ Unlike its branch in Yemen, IS has operated quite successfully in Libya's security vacuum. ”

State's extended arm in the country. By relying on the local group's contacts and network, IS avoids the process of starting a branch from scratch. This strategy was used to imbibe the strength of groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines (Haworth 2016, Barkindo 2016).

In Yemen, however, this strategy did not work when AQAP, under the directives of its present leader and the then second-in-command, Qasim Al Raymi, refused to merge with IS in 2014. This was a significant blow to IS' long-term aspirations of expanding in the peninsula (Siyech 2015). Moreover, while AQAP attended to the local population, IS does not pay heed to local nuances and wishes of the people. In addition, many IS fighters had also complained to the central command about the local Yemeni IS leader. They criticised him for not paying attention to demands of the group members, such as supplies of essential items to fighters.

These organisational and leadership weaknesses hampered IS efforts and are some of the reasons why IS has no foothold in the country. Without a significant group allegiance in Yemen, IS has been unable to get many people to join the group. Some AQAP members did switch allegiance initially because of better salaries offered by IS, its global brand, and disgruntlement with the capacity of AQAP to launch more attacks against the different factions present in the war (Zimmerman 2016). Nevertheless, AQAP's past successes served to limit the number of its members joining IS. AQAP's co-optation of the local population and its self-imposed restraints on the use of violence also gave it greater legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens. IS, on the other hand, uses excessive violence and refuses to share power with the locals.

It is also seen as a group comprising foreigners and not locals with most of its top commanders being Saudi nationals, not Yemenis. However, AQAP's ousting from Mukalla may cause some members to become disoriented by the loss of territory, leading to increased defection of AQAP members to IS (Stewart and Spetalnick 2016).

With the lack of local fighters filling up the ranks of IS in Yemen, the group will be forced to turn outwards to look for prospective recruits. However, this will not work out that well for the group either. Unlike Libya, which receives the bulk of its foreign fighters from neighbouring Tunisia and Algeria, there is a shortage of foreign fighters who can make it to Yemen from its neighbouring countries. Yemen is surrounded by Oman on one side, Saudi Arabia on another and the sea to the south. This limits the ease of access into the country and minimises the inflow of foreign recruits. The intake of foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia has also been limited due to the kingdom's effective counter-terrorism policies (Swift 2011). Moreover, except for Somalia, the rest of the countries on the other side of the Gulf of Aden do not contribute terrorist recruits.

Conclusion

Chaotic political and security situations have often provided space for terrorist groups to operate. IS has exploited this to expand itself outside of Iraq and Syria and used already existing groups, as well as disgruntled citizens, to swell up its ranks. This strategy, however, has not worked in Yemen. Its presence and attacks in Yemen have been much weaker than that of its counterparts in other countries, as well as its opponents in Yemen.

With the recent losses suffered by its opponent AQAP, there is a possibility that IS may seek to raise its profile. Still, as long as its strategy is to implement its own myopic view of religion onto the Yemenis without taking into consideration the ground level factors, it will likely fail to gain traction among the local population.

To prevent terrorist entities from gaining foothold, there is an urgent need to bring an end to the conflict. As difficult as it may be, especially with the failure of the most recent peace talks in Kuwait, the anti-IS and anti-AQAP efforts will be ineffective if the civil war continues. Second, the government and its backers will have to concentrate on providing essential services to the southern regions. As already pointed out, the

“ Chaotic political and security situations have often provided space for terrorist groups to operate. ”

lamentable economic situation of Yemen provided recruitment opportunities to terrorist entities. Only through these soft approaches will the government be able to capitalise on the kinetic efforts against the groups operating in the country.

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Terrorist Attacks: The Politics of Claiming Responsibility

Nodirbek Soliev & Mohammed Sinan Siyech

While the so-called Islamic State (IS) has rushed to claim credit for terrorist attacks across the world, especially in Western countries, it has been rather cautious in claiming responsibility for those conducted in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. This variation in respect of claiming credit is largely influenced by the strategic goal pursued by IS towards a particular country or region.

Introduction

Since June 2016, there has been a surge in terrorist operations attributed to IS around the world. IS' militants and supporters were responsible for dozens of attacks in several countries including the U.S., Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, France and most recently in Germany, Pakistan and Afghanistan, killing and injuring several hundred people.

Although IS has claimed credit for most of these attacks, it has been reluctant to accept responsibility for the attacks in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Given the strategic value of a successful terrorist attack, especially amidst significant military setbacks, it is worthwhile to explore IS' selective approach towards claiming responsibility as it will provide some insights into IS' strategic thinking, calculations and objectives.

Attacks in Turkey and Saudi Arabia

The suicide attacks at the Istanbul Airport on 28 June 2016 and three attacks in Saudi Arabia on 4 July 2016 bore all the hallmarks of those carried out by IS in Belgium and France (Reuters 2016). While IS was quick to claim responsibility for the attacks in Belgium and France, it has not done so for Turkey or Saudi Arabia. The nature of the attacks, the tactics used, target selection, scale, timing, and post-attack investigations and arrests indicate

both attacks in Turkey and Saudi Arabia to be the work of IS.

The Istanbul Airport attack was a coordinated suicide operation against civilians and security personnel that killed at least 44 people and wounded 238 others. The Turkish government has pointed the finger at IS. The attackers were reported to be members of a “special unit” sent directly from Raqqa, IS’ stronghold in Syria, and part of a semi-autonomous clandestine IS cell operating in Turkey. According to the Turkish government, it was a seven-person cell under the command of Akhmed Chataev, a Russian citizen of Chechen origin, who is believed to be one of IS key Chechen commanders and leader of its cell in Istanbul. The suicide attackers were reported to be nationals of Russia (Osman Vadinov, from Russia’s Dagestan Republic), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and/or Uzbekistan (IS claims to have “covert units” in a number of countries including Turkey and Saudi Arabia). The timing of the attack is also revealing as it coincided with the second anniversary of IS’ announcement of its so-called caliphate on 29 June 2014.

Most recently, on 21 August 2016, another suicide bombing in the Turkish city of Gaziantep killed more than 51 people, mainly Kurdish civilians attending a wedding, and injured nearly 70 others. This attack also points quite strongly to IS involvement even though there has been no claim of responsibility. The Turkish government and the Kurdish political parties have named IS as the perpetrator of this attack. The Kurdish armed groups, which are also conducting attacks on the Turkish government, has been cleared of responsibility as the civilians killed in this attack were supporters of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic party (HDP) (Yeginsu 2016). IS is known to have an extensive network in Gaziantep, which is 29 miles (46km) north of the Syrian border. The attack can also be interpreted as IS’ way of taking revenge against the Kurdish offensives in Syria, where Kurdish militias have been gaining victories against IS. It may also indicate IS’ aims of exploiting ethnic fault lines between Kurdish and Turkish people (Letsch 2016).

In Saudi Arabia, three attacks took place towards the end of Ramadan, shortly before the Eid celebrations. The first was at a mosque in the Qatif area which is largely Shia, the second at a US consulate in Jeddah and the third at security guards stationed next to the mosque of the

“ The targets, nature and timings of the attacks all point to IS’ involvement, a hypothesis supported by various security officials. ”

Prophet Mohammed – the second holiest site in Islam, after Makkah (David 2016). This is not the first time that Saudi Arabia has been attacked by the group. There have been many attacks that took place over the last two years targeted mainly at Shia mosques and worshippers or the security forces of the country (Saab 2015). Other targets include security agents, foreign workers and diplomatic buildings (Khayat 2016).

The targets, nature and timings of the attacks all point to IS’ involvement, a hypothesis supported by various security officials (Reuters 2016). The attack on the mosque in Qatif area also rules out the possibility of Al Qaeda’s involvement due to its refusal to attack innocent Shias (Byman 2015). However, like in Turkey, none of these three blasts have been claimed by IS.

Other Prominent Attacks

The two other prominent attacks that have been claimed by IS are the mass shootout in a gay night club in Orlando on 12 June 2016 and the attack carried out in Nice, France on 14 July 2016. The Orlando attack which killed more than 50 people was carried out by a man of Afghan descent who was believed to have no direct links to IS. Many reports have claimed that he was mentally unstable, a closet homosexual and a racist. His final act was to call the authorities and pledge allegiance to IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and Hezbollah – all enemies of one another.

The attack in Nice was carried out by a Tunisian who drove a 19-tonne truck into a large crowd celebrating the Bastille Day holiday, killing 84 people. Here too, the perpetrator is said to be mentally unstable and a drug addict. The

attacker was also not connected in any way to IS which makes this an IS-inspired attack at best. This was enough however for IS to claim credit for this major attack soon after (O Toole 2016). Although these two attacks were carried out by people 'inspired' by IS ideology but with no direct operational links to the group, IS' eagerness to claim responsibility raises questions about its motives in doing so. It is reasonable to assume that IS' claim of responsibility for the attacks in the Western countries came as part of its strategy to strike terror and work towards deepening the divides between Muslims and non-Muslims in the US and Europe.

By quickly publicising its "involvement" in such attacks, IS seeks to inspire other vulnerable individuals within diaspora communities in the West to initiate similar attacks. This strategy appears to have worked. For instance, IS' claim of responsibility for the Orlando shootings seemed to have set off a chain of similar acts of violence in Nice, and most recently in Germany, when a 17-year-old Afghan refugee carried out an axe-and-knife assault on a train on 18 July 2016.

'Benefits' of Claiming Credit

IS' selectiveness in claiming credit for attacks could be multiple and context-based. There are costs as well as benefits in claiming responsibility (Lynn Rorie 2008) which is typically issued after the successful accomplishment of a terrorist operation and publicised by the group and its affiliates. It adds significance to terrorist attacks, which is often described by scholars as a "strategic and communicative act" (Eric Min 2013). For the perpetrator, it is one of the easiest and most reliable ways to differentiate himself from other potential perpetrators operating in a particular arena (Hoffman 2010). By acknowledging its responsibility publicly, the group sends a political message to the targeted audience about its motives and identities.

In democratic countries like the U.S. and France, taking credit gives IS added advantages. The free press in these countries could be counted upon to play up the threat of Islamist terrorism and in the process, arouse distrust and anger towards Muslim communities and refugees. This is evident from the significant rise in Islamophobic attacks in countries like the U.S., UK, France and elsewhere in the wake of the Paris attacks in November 2015 (Jenkins 2016) and now, after Orlando, Nice and Germany. In

“ By quickly publicising its “involvement” in such attacks, IS seeks to inspire other vulnerable individuals within diaspora communities in the West to initiate similar attacks. ”

addition, the increased official scrutiny of diaspora communities as a result of the terrorist attacks would in turn arouse disenchantment among Muslims. The backlash against Muslims increases the risk of radicalisation and plays directly into IS' game plan of fomenting communal discord and recruiting Muslims disillusioned with Western governments and societies for future attacks.

Absence of Claims: A Strategic Move

For IS, the above 'benefits' would not apply to Muslim majority countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, IS would not want to incur bad publicity by claiming an attack on the second holiest site of the very same religion they purport to fight for; the strong condemnations made by Muslims around the world show that IS was shrewd enough to stay silent on the attack (Hume 2016). This holds true for Turkey too, a country considered as a secure bastion of Islam in a tumultuous region. The high number of casualties in the Istanbul Airport attack also drew strong criticisms from Turks as well as Muslims worldwide.

Another reason IS did not claim responsibility could be that it did not want to alienate sympathisers and potential recruits who might be turned off by the killing of fellow Muslims (The New York Times 2016). Another possible rationale could be that it is afraid of decisive retaliatory strikes by Turkish and Saudi governments. An increased involvement of the two key regional powers in active fighting against

IS in Syria and Iraq might threaten its core terrain.

By being less accountable, IS also hopes to avoid heavy retaliation against IS cells in these countries which would be less restrained than Western countries in terms of arrests, incarcerations, elimination of cells and disruption of operations. IS would want to avoid such an eventuality in Turkey where it has many human networks that help to smuggle people and goods in and out of Syria (Gingeras 2016). A large number of arrests would eliminate their cells and disrupt their operations. This is especially relevant to Saudi Arabia where previously more than 400 arrests were made on a government clampdown in July 2015 (Gander 2016).

Claiming responsibility for terrorist attacks selectively is a strategic move by IS leadership to further its agenda in the specific countries. Given its reasons for staying silent, it would be worthwhile for authorities in these countries to fully expose IS' duplicity and hold it responsible for the attacks so that it would attract the full opprobrium of the Muslim world. More than that, Turkey and Saudi Arabia should take strong and decisive police action against IS cells and rings of supporters within their borders before they cause more harm to life and property and undermine social and political stability in the country.

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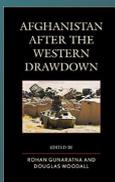
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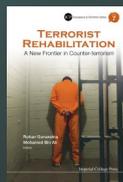


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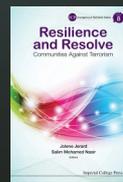
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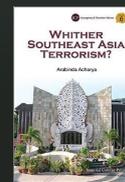
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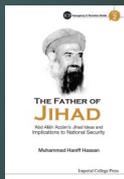
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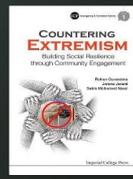
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