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ISIS' TRANSFORMATION AND NEW CHALLENGES AHEAD

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ANALYSIS

ISIS' TRANSFORMATION AND NEW CHALLENGES AHEAD

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Introduction

Whereas ISIS suffered from serious territorial losses in the last several years and its propaganda machine has experienced a significant loss of visibility, emerging new questions attract more and more attention. There are no fewer than four key challenges ahead:

1-Perceiving the components of ISIS' transformation and how ISIS 2.0 will look like

2-Addressing ISIS' online visibility which significantly diminish but still active and would keep inspiring extremist groups worldwide

3-Detection of returnees and devising proper strategies for them

4-Assessing the post-ISIS 1.0 "competition" over a broad region stretching from the Southeast Asia to sub-Saharan Africa

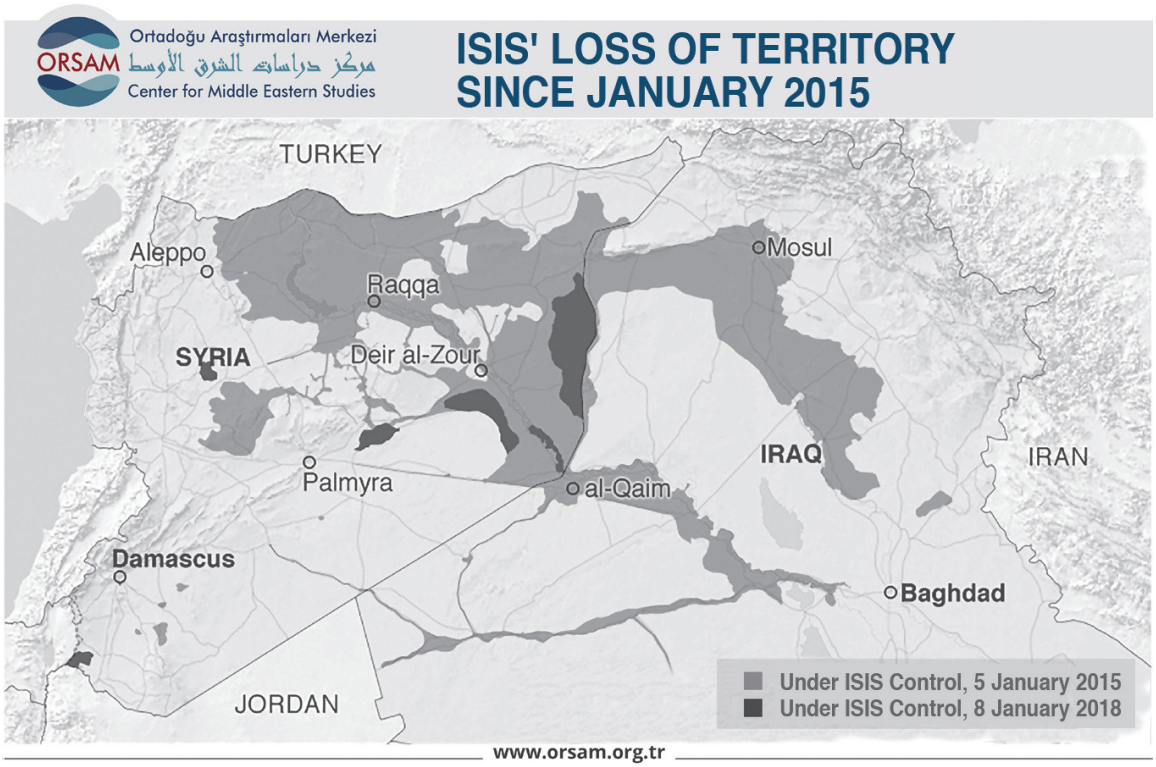
In this study, these four challenges will be looked into in detail. In order to do so, comparisons will be made with the years the group enjoyed the climax of its power. Drawing from these comparisons, how the group and its capabilities changed and transformed and what future changes can be expected will be discussed. This will be done with an eye on providing not only the facts on the ground but also some insights about the future challenges that might both come from the changing capabilities and modus operandi of the group and the new actors that can emerge as well as the possibility of al-Qaeda reclaiming its position as the leading defender of the "cause".

The study would argue that even on the losing side now, ISIS can still pose challenges as a group with a different modus operandi and due to the uncertain outcomes of its fall (which would not lead a complete disappearance in the short-term due to continuing flow of revenues even though quite modest compared to the group's "golden era". Its diminshed human capital which can still make an impact on the ground considering the weak security mechanisms as well as the potential threats posed by returning foreign fighters) and its consequences. Moreover, the group's fall, paving the way for other actors to benefit from its decreased but still unneglectable human capital and the ambitions it once inflamed, requires a careful evaluation of the years and maybe decades ahead of us.

1. Transformation of ISIS and How ISIS 2.0 Might Look Like

In late 2014, ISIS was controlling around 89,000 square kilometres of territory in Iraq and Syria, which further expanded to cover around 138,000 square kilometres in April, 2015, bigger than many countries including Austria, Croatia, Belgium, Denmark, and Israel. Gradual loss of territory, but most importantly the losses of Mosul and Raqqa, made the territorial defeat of the group more visible than ever. This changing physical landscape of the group's presence raised several key questions. One of the most important ones is the new modus operandi of the group since its militants did not vanish overnight after the fall of Mosul or Raqqa and would not do so in the short-term. Once a group, controlling millions of dollars and major cities in Iraq and Syria which allowed it to make effective use of insurgency tactics along with terror tactics would now, in the absence of this capability, is destined to turn to what is left to make an impact; full-fledged terrorism in every region it can reach globally.

Fighting for, controlling, and defending cities, which require conventional battles and a serious portion of its human capital concentrated on one place would not continue to be the no.1 item on the group's agenda anymore. Now, in the absence of its capabilities which enabled it to strive for a more state-like organizational and military structure, the group can more ambitiously resort to encouraging attacks in different places which can be carried out by either small pockets/cells or even one or two operatives (either returnees or "homegrown" attackers) and not all of them even need to be directly encouraged or directed by the group. Returning foreign ter-



"Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps", BBC, March 28, 2018.

rorist fighters would also contribute to its global reach unless effective detection and rehabilitation measures are adopted in respective home countries. These returnees can act as masterminds of new attacks or the nucleus of new cells. Plus, they can also act as sources of inspiration and admired "veterans" for the existing cells in the countries where they return.

Territorial losses on the other hand, affects the group's one of the most distinctive features; vast economic resources. ISIS, once able to satisfy around 90-95 percent of its economic needs by its own revenues, had presented a unique case at the peak of its power as an almost completely self-sustainable terrorist organization. The group's oil revenues only were around $40 million a month in 2015. Even though territorial losses resulted in a significant loss here, too, it is estimated that the group can still make $4 million a month even after the loss of control over oil fields in Iraq and Syria, a figure far from ignorable for a terrorist group even though it is at best modest for an insurgency aiming at establishing and sustaining a state-like structure while at the same time fighting at different fronts.[1]

A Possible Change in Modus Operandi in Military and Financial Arenas

Since further gradual loss is expected from oil revenues in time, ISIS' already reported interest in criminal financial activities including drug trade, human smuggling etc. would probably deepen. Considering the fact that some of such activities have already been in the repertoire of the group, making further use of various illicit financial activities would not be a brand new methodology for the group thanks to the already acquired know-how. As a key component of the group's journey to the underground, such methods

are expected to help maintaining cash flow, at least to an extent that allows the group to survive and transfer funds to its operatives and cells as well as its relatively modest propaganda activities.

Nevertheless, criminal financial transactions and networks might also risk a higher possibility of exposure to security agencies, thus, requiring higher levels of caution, use of less detectable means (eg. cryptocurrencies) via less controllable mediums (eg. deep web, darkweb etc.) Considering the fact that several companies including BitcoinFog and DarkWallet endeavour to produce Bitcoin wallets providing complete anonymity, using such financial tools seems getting easier and more advantageous for terrorist groups including ISIS.[2] With an increasing scrutiny about such groups' revenues from charities and donations, the group would possibly make use of such measures more ambitiously. EUROPOL's report in 2015 on the subject underlines the connection between virtual currencies, black market economy, and illegal criminal networks.[3] It is noted in the report that "The trade in illicit goods and the exchange of money will take place in the virtual realm requiring little face-to-face interaction between trading partners and reducing risks of discovery and interception" which emphasises not only the illegal side of the coin but also the difficulty to trace and punish criminals and terrorists.[4] Plus, small arms dealings on the dark web where terrorist groups can find vendors which can easily satisfy ISIS' needs for carrying out sensational attacks with a limited budget using small arms is also a key aspect within this context.[5] Considering the fact that none of ISIS attacks in Europe in the last several years costed more than $30,000,[6] quite small amounts of money seems sufficient to carry out sensational attacks. Since these mediums are more difficult to trace compared to the tools used by ISIS more frequently such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook and Twitter, counter measures should be devised accordingly.

Still, compensating for the oil revenues via these methods seems far from realistic, and thus, a new wave of an insurgency, capable of controlling cities and defying serious military counter operations seems quite an unachievable goal anymore, a mere nostalgia for ISIS for the time being. However, here, the key question is whether downsizing the group to that extent is acceptable for the international security environment which seems highly questionable considering the recent ISIS-linked attacks while the group was experiencing demise on the ground. Thus, the key question here is how to achieve destruction of the group for good which directs us to another challenge; namely destroying a more loosely-organized structure in comparison with the militarily defeating a group which physically controls a certain territorial space with known or more traceable headquarters, training fields etc.

ISIS' military advances enabled the group to pursue a mixed strategy combining both terrorism tactics and guerrilla/insurgency warfare/tactics, latter requiring territorial control and use of this territory as headquarters outside of the "enemy's" area of control. Controlling a certain amount of territory, using them as "liberated zones" and safe havens from which the group can also make revenues, train newcomers, and act as an embodiment of the group's strength is a distant memory now. Whether social, political and economic dynamics and reconstruction difficulties would provide another chance for ISIS or a like-minded group is another question which would also be discussed later on. For the time being though, the challenge is to perceive the new modus operandi of the group lacking such capabilities now.

Even though such a mixture of guerrilla tactics and terror tactics was seen in various occasions in the history of terrorism, ISIS was one of the most effective embodiments of such a mixture in the contemporary world. With the loss of its territorial control to a great extent, the group inevitably destined to focus more on terror tactics, which might offer it more mobility whereas training quality would diminish, meaning smaller pockets/one or two person(s) with much

less military expertise, able to carry out simple but quite sensational bombing-style and vehicular attacks might become a more common phenomenon in the foreseeable future. Along with making use of these new tactics or more focus on the ones which have already been used by the group, ISIS has been expanding its presence in several other countries, too, including Philippines, Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Libya with cell-type structures rather than a more army-like presence as in the peak of its strength in Iraq and Syria. Such diverse and relatively loose mechanisms might thus carry out more sensational and frequent attacks globally compared to a more centralized structure which can focus more on insurgency tactics for and after controlling certain areas. It also makes destruction of the group for good by eliminating its leadership or "core" almost impossible since already quasi-autonomous "cells" can still carry out attacks without waiting for approval from the core leadership. The experience stemming from Al-Qaeda's loss of its safe havens, accompanied by transformation of the group into an umbrella or an inspirational centre for global networks suggests that this post-ISIS 1.0 period and the group's new modus operandi should be closely monitored. The result might possibly be increasing number of terror attacks both carried out by ISIS affiliates and cells in other regions and by returning foreign terrorist fighters if effective measures to tackle them cannot be devised and implemented cautiously.

Nevertheless, the experience of Al-Qaeda highlights another significant future possibility. Following the fall of a supportive government in Afghanistan and the losses of its territorial safe havens to a great extent, we witnessed a significant decrease in the number of attacks carried out by the group and its affiliates globally.[7] Therefore, along with the possibility of increasing number of attacks carried out by smaller cells we can also expect a simultaneous search for supportive governments especially in the MENA region and fiercer struggle to keep remaining safe havens. We should also remember that Al-Qaeda had lost most of its "veterans" who directly participated in the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan which gave rise to Ayman al-Zawahiri's leading role. Whereas the core went underground, its affiliates in Iraq, Syria and "Maghreb" expanded their presence and significance in the respected regions, which is partly due to the above-mentioned fall of the "veterans" who could have implied a strong control over the affiliates. Consequently, the group, either willingly or not, chose to rely more on its affiliates and adopt a loose structural approach which also provided significant advantages by making the complete destruction of the group almost impossible. Contrarily, in the case of ISIS, there will be many figures who fought in Iraq and Syria as "role models" and "veterans" which can either lead new groups or strive for maintaining ISIS' strength to an extent both in the MENA region and beyond. Thus, we can expect a different picture in the era of ISIS 2.0 compared to al-Qaeda's more recent organizational and operational capabilities.

As another key difference, it should be noted that al-Qaeda, even during its fall, could enjoy an influence over "minds and hearts" of possible recruits and existing fighters through its comparatively much stronger list of scholars justifying its discourse. On the other hand, ISIS, either deliberately or not, chose not to rely on many scholars or could not succeed in doing so, and focus more on operational aspects of the "global resistance". Such a difference enabled al-Qaeda to grow underground even when its strength on the ground is diminished and invest in a "fertile ground" for itself whereas the future of ISIS highly depends on fighters and their fate since consolidation of discursive or ideational power does not seem to be the strongest feature of the group. Therefore, comparisons between the rise and fall of the groups, even though providing some valuable insights, have their limitations even putting aside the fact that each and every violent extremist group have their own unique characteristics and processes.

2. Diminished Visibility in the Cyber World

The internet and more particularly social media changed the very nature of messaging and narrative dissemination globally. While "conventional media" enabled one or only several centres to disseminate messages to many people, with the emergence of "new media" each and every person who is subject to those messages themselves now have the chance to be disseminators, too. Each and every actor, via these tools could make use of unprecedented speed at a quite low cost.[8] It is the case for not only individuals, NGOs, state institutions etc. but also the same logic applies to terrorist propaganda efforts. These groups can enjoy at least partial anonymity for a limited time (due to scrutiny on pro-terrorist content online) and disseminate their messages in seconds to millions of people with almost no cost except mobile internet costs or electricity which are obviously ignorable ones. They also have the advantage of being capable of producing timely content in response to spontaneous or unexpected changes in global affairs which can directly reach their target audience and taking advantage of these changing dynamics for their own agenda.

Within this context, ISIS has been the group used information and communication technologies (ICT) probably most effectively throughout the history of terrorism. Propaganda has long been a key component of ISIS' overall strategy and an area where the group puts a serious emphasis. From messaging and video-streaming tools to online journals and radio programmes, the group carried out a "bombardment" of online content for years. Its effective use of the internet, social media, video-streaming sites, and messaging applications has inspired many insurgent groups all around the world. This "inspiration" has been witnessed by the extensive use of such mediums by various groups with different ideological, ethnic, or religious motivations, even though mostly much less professional compared to ISIS' propaganda materials which included impressively high quality visual and written products. The group has once enjoyed propaganda outcome of 54 media offices around the world.[9] Showing the group's emphasis on the subject, the group was paying around seven times more than ordinary fighters to the people who can take part in the production of such materials such as camera operators, photographers, videographers, and graphic designers.[10]

A key topic here is what the group's key strategies or goals are/were while using these mediums. Several key strategies or goals can be listed such as attacking anti-ISIS scholars and trying to religiously and personally de-legitimize such figures and their counter-narratives, spreading fear by showing the strength of the group on the ground and presenting brutality of the group against its "enemies", presenting an utopia with respect to the areas and people under ISIS control where they claim social services are provided thoroughly and the group can provide what failed or failing state mechanisms could not, making people extremely satisfied with their lives, both religiously and politically legitimizing its "cause" by producing and disseminating propaganda materials, reinforcing the discourse of "victimhood" and showing the "enemy's" atrocities all around the world, planning and claiming attacks, recruitment, and "fundraising" activities for its future attacks.

Nevertheless, the group's demise has been coupled with a decrease in its online presence and propaganda activities. ISIS has suffered from serious damage to its propaganda machine lately. In the summer of 2015, the group's propaganda machine was able to produce "more than 200 videos, radio programmes, magazines and photo reports each week", whereas now, the number diminished so significantly that it is around 20 outputs weekly.[11] According to the graph below, Winter states that whereas the group could produce around 900 online content in August 2015 at the peak of its online propaganda activity, as of late 2017, the number fell as much as around 100.[12]

Additionally, while the group was publishing several e-journals at the peak of its power, including Konstantiniyye (Turkish), Istok (Russian), Dabiq (English), Dar-al Islam (French) and Rumiyah (English), none of them are published anymore including the last "survivor" Dabiq which was ceased to be published after Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operation.

Several key reasons can be named in order to make sense of the group's loss of its once unprecedentedly active propaganda machine and online visibility. An effective propaganda machine depends on an ideal mix of several key components; the message itself, the disseminators who can make the message reaching its target effectively, required funds, time, equipment, and space allowing these people to do so, the audience with a tendency to positively receive the message or the audience that can question his/her state's/ideology's etc. position after receiving it.

It would not be quite unrealistic to argue that the group suffered from losses in each and every of these key components with its demise in the last several years. Its message, contrary to Al-Qaeda or other similar groups which strive for establishing a world caliphate once the circumstances are right, highly depends on and benefitted from the existence of an actual state-like structure with a so-called caliph and from being on the winning side for some time to attract new recruits. Now, neither the group could sustain its "state" nor it is on the winning side anymore.

Regarding the people who play the key role of preparing an effective content either in the form of videos, infographics, or e-journals, the group's military failures and loss of some of its human capital on the ground included these people who were once paid around seven times more than a fighter as mentioned earlier. This list includes the so-called "Information Minister" of the group, Wa'il Adel Hasan Salman al-Fayad, or more widely known as Abu Muhammed al-Furqan. Additionally, as discussed earlier, the group's budget is significantly damaged, making quite difficult to channel required funds to the people who was once paid seven times higher than an ordinary fighter and to the required equipment. Highly needed time and space for producing propaganda material has also been lost after territorial losses coupled with battles on several fronts.

Still, the group can both produce a modest amount of material but more importantly, it can inspire many similar groups, regardless of their ideological positioning by its impressive record of online presence. It is no coincidence that the rise of the group's online visibility was followed by rising visibility of other terrorist groups globally from al-Qaeda to YPG and from DHKP-C to far-right extremists. Terrorists have a quite impressive learning curve all around the world and this does not only imply to the tactics used on the ground but also to propaganda strategies and mediums. They can adopt new tactics both in the real and virtual worlds and strive to make effective use of them quite fast. Therefore, we can expect that the "legacy" of ISIS' online "success" will be with us for the following decades. The group's remaining experienced propagandists can carry their know-how to their home countries, they can act as propagandists for new groups in the countries they currently reside, or they can be "employed" by different groups either in the countries such as Iraq and Syria or in their home countries in the West. Even they all disappear all of a sudden, the memory of effective online propaganda of ISIS will be there for other groups.

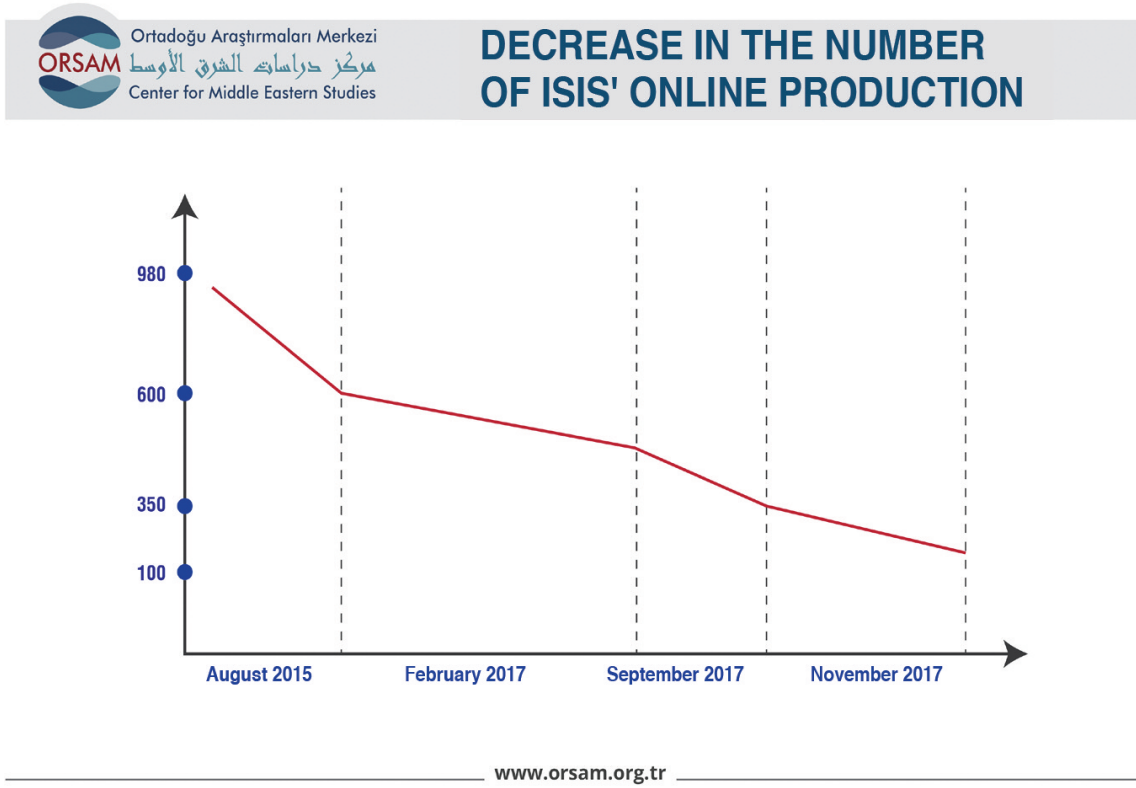
Therefore, a key challenge for both today and in the future is how to cope with this threat coming from the cyber front. No state or company seems to be able to control the vast cyber ocean by itself and even if such an option was possible (which is not), there are important challenges regarding the security vs. liberties dichotomy. Therefore, an effective cooperation between states, NGOs, and companies is at least essential if not obligatory.

As a case of a state-led initiative and its results, the Operation Glowing Symphony presents

a valuable example. The Operation Glowing Symphony, carried out by the US Cyber Command in 2016, targeted ISIS online presence was an important example within this context. For the operation, 35 countries were listed as possibly hosting servers disseminating ISIS-related materials and only 15 of them were notified, raising questions about the international cooperation on the issue and how to approach to the question of states' "cyber boundaries" in the future. With the once secret global campaign, US Cybercom is announced to have removed propaganda material linked to ISIS, accessed accounts of distributors, stole their passwords, and thus prevented them from using their accounts or upload any propaganda materials. Nevertheless, their use of other accounts and/or other social media tools could still be a major area of concern, putting aside the newcomers and their uploads. Plus, even after the operation was exposed, it is striking that no figures or numbers regarding the "success" of the operation was announced which could have shown how effective a state can tackle this challenge and how sustainable such an effort would be, which raises questions about a possible disappointment with the effort.[13]

Cooperation between state agencies and IT firms would play a vital role since the vast ocean of cyber world is almost completely controlled by private firms. In that light, it should be noted that, leading global IT firms including Twitter, Google, and Facebook have their own policies and measures in that respect. These firms were previously sued several times as in the aftermath of Barcelona and San Bernardino attacks for "enabling" ISIS supporters' communication.[14] After this wake up call, they are expected to gear up their efforts to monitor and ban extremist accounts.

For instance, Twitter suspended 1,2 million accounts since August 2015.[15] Facebook, on the other hand, announced only in the first quarter



Charlie Winter, "Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine", Wired, 20 Aralık,

of 2018, the company took action on 1.9 million such content, 99 percent of them was flagged by artificial intelligence (AI).[16] Google announced it will increase the number of Trusted Flaggers who are independent experts who also report such content, use targeted online advertising for potential extremist recruits, redirecting them to the content that can act as counter-narrative and counter-messaging, and AI could so far succeed in removing more than 75 percent of videos for violating YouTube's policies prior to human monitoring. Moreover, the company would also provide $5 million innovation fund o researchers and organizations to combat hate speech and extremist propaganda.[17] With the addition of Microsoft, the four firms then teamed up to tackle with extremist content online. They decided to have a shared database of digital fingerprints ("hashes") to identify the people disseminating such material in the cyber realm.[18]

Still the question is even with a quite weakened propaganda machine, the group enjoys a quite valuable know-how and still has a modest visibility. The group's know-how and propaganda methods can be learned by different extremist groups, the ex-ISIS affiliates can "teach" such methods in the case of their journey to participate in other groups rising on the legacy of ISIS 1.0, continuing visibility can provide the group with a discourse of being beaten but not lost the war yet and thus contribute to a hope for a future "come back". Moreover, the group's online know-how, aside from propaganda purposes, can help maintain a modest budget for some time through previously mentioned illicit financial activities online. Each and every attempt to cope with the group's online activities, however, would raise questions about the relationship between security and liberties, which would further complicate states' efforts to counter terrorist use of information and communication technologies (ICT) worldwide and thus requires cautious and comprehensive solutions in the cyber world. Whom to trace, how to do so, whether privacy and freedom of expression would be violated, and how long the stored data will be kept are only a few questions from a long list in that respect.

3. The Threat Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters

Along with the question of remaining human capital of ISIS in general which can well be utilised by Al-Qaeda and future ISIS-like groups unless the deep socio-economic and political drivers are addressed on the ground, how countries would deal with their own citizens who fought in Syria and Iraq for terrorist groups and more particularly for ISIS and now trying to make their way back home stands out as a challenging aspect of the group's human capital.

With the loss of its "state", ISIS has been producing a significant amount of returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) considering the fact that at its peak, the number of FTFs fighting for the group reached around 40,000.[19]

Disappointment with the gap between what is promised and what is the actual situation under ISIS' control, cessation of the once attractive financial flow, destruction of the "prestigious" image of being a "solider" of a "right and winning cause" and the "caliphate", falsification of the group's discourse about its much propagated images of "unbeatable caliphate" and "capability to win forever", acceptance of the fact that the group will hardly survive this process are some of the reasons behind the tendency to return. However, it is also possible that in response to this "fall", many FTFs would also return to their countries to carry the war with them to the "heart of the enemy" which played important roles in the destruction of the embodiment of his/her "cause". Thus it is not necessary that returnees would bring disengaged, de-radicalized mind-sets with them, on the contrary, the other way around is at best equally possible. Whereas for the first group, the challenge is devising and implementing successful rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) and disengagement and de-radicalization (D&D) strategies, for the latter, there is another major challenge involving security

mechanisms, inter-agency cooperation, legal amendments, revision of prison systems and tracking in the offline and online worlds.

Returning FTFs provide such groups with a quite cheap way of disseminating its discourse through direct human contact and by spreading its militarily experienced and indoctrinated militants globally. As discussed earlier, in contrast with al-Qaeda's loss of many "veterans", significant number of ISIS-linked FTFs, considering the fact that most of them are between the ages of 18 and 35 can pose challenges for decades. These people can also act as masterminds, ideologues, propagators and radicalizers. Even though the Council of the European Union adopted new rules in 2017 within this context in line with the UNSC 2178 of 2014,[20] the member states of neither European Union nor the United Nations have come up with common strategies so far, let alone joint ones among all member states.

More than 1500 of the European foreign terrorist fighters in a total of around 5000 returned to their home countries including more than half of the foreign fighters originated from Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Consequently, terror-related prosecutions experience a significant rise as in the case of Germany of which around 33 percent of FTFs returned their country[21] where only in 2017, a fourfold increase resulted in around 800 cases.[22] Here, it is also important to note that around 17 percent of FTFs are female according to an ICCT study published in 2016, highlighting the women's understudied active role in such groups.[23]

Even though INTERPOL and EUROPOL geared up their efforts to monitor and prosecute FTFs by establishing databases and sharing them with other countries, the success rate of these efforts on the subject needs medium to long-term measurements to be assessed.[24] Considering the need for significant financial resources for continuous monitoring, for up-to-date revisions in law-enforcement measures and potential social implications of tracing and prosecuting and/or rehabilitating and reintegrating FTFs will continue to be a key priority in the global agenda. Without a meaningful international cooperation, future attacks planned or directly carried out by FTFs cannot be prevented. Brussels and Paris attacks where warnings were made by Turkish security agencies to their counterparts are important examples of this risk where the respected countries failed to give timely responses to those warning and take necessary measures.

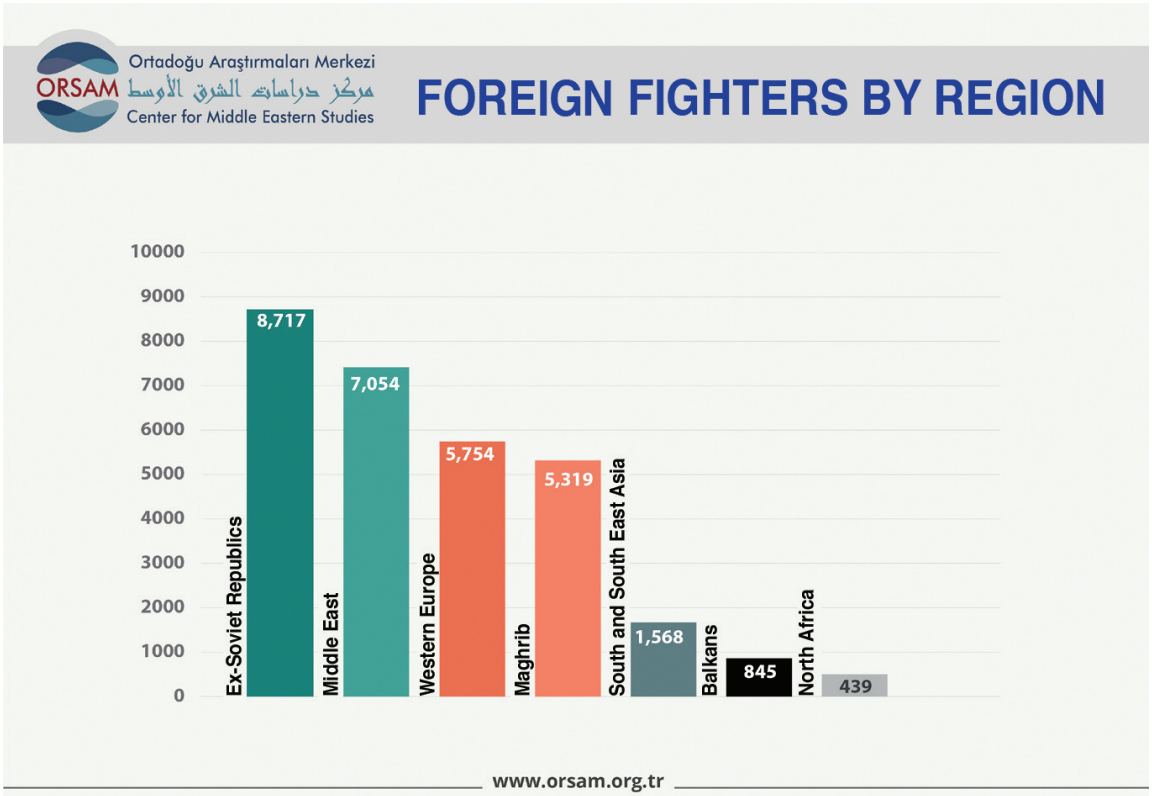
The question of FTFs also forces authorities to design and implement effective de-radicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration measures (D&D and R&R). These four concepts refer to particular phases within the context of the "lifecycle of radicalization" and differences among them are indeed quite important.

De-radicalization is a cognitive process aiming at "winning hearts and souls" of the radical or violent extremist groups' target audience back. Disengagement is the process of persuading the individual to abandon the active militant organization where he/she might or might not actively take part in violent acts. Thus, whereas de-radicalization mainly refers to an ideational or cognitive change, disengagement requires behavioural change. Neither of these two processes automatically or even necessarily trigger the other. An individual who refrain from taking part in the active militant branch of an organization can still follow the radical and extremist discourse of that organization. Similarly, an individual who is not anymore a follower of the discourse, can continue being part of the active organization due to the feelings of revenge for their former "comrades" or "brothers", fear of prosecution, or because of social pressure from his/her social community. Rehabilitation is again a cognitive process which, in most cases, requires social and cultural intervention, too in order to "fix" the cognitive world of the individual which had previously caused him/her to adhere to the particular discourse of a radical or violent extremist group. Rehabilitation is also a process with an eye on the next phase within the context of the

lifecycle of radicalization, namely reintegration. At the final stage, the goal is making the individual who withdrawn from the active organization (if he/she was ever a part of it) and abandon its discourse, re-join the society. Since this final stage requires not only the willingness of that particular individual but also of the society, the measures should be directed at both the individual himself/herself and society in order for the society to accept him/her as a part of itself once again.

Even if effective measures which can tackle with the returnees question are taken, which seems far from a realistic short-term objective, "homegrown" attackers would keep challenging states, especially in the countries where the drivers of radicalization keep working. FTFs can inspire such people either through direct human contact or through online and offline propaganda.

In that context, another key challenge is how to revise prison systems for returnees and potential recruits in a way that re-radicalization, propaganda and recruitment would not occur. Whether each and every home country can undertake such revisions is also a major question due to financial and legal constraints as well as the need for significant physical space for isolated or cell-type prison systems for each and every returnee. Prisons, therefore, can act as fertile grounds for these people to reunite, recruit new people, and re-radicalize to a greater extent if proper R&R and D&D strategies are not devised and implemented. For this, however, a detailed and comprehensive research on different groups and people are needed since human stories, organizational characters, ideological leanings, approaches to violent acts etc. mostly points to uniqueness of each and every case.



Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees", The Soufan Center, October 2017, p.11.

4. Post-ISIS 1.0 Competition

While ISIS has been losing territory, suffering from financial losses, and from damages to its propaganda machine, another key question is the possible inheritors of its human and financial capital as well as its discourse. Since it is far from realistic to see ISIS fading away with all its capabilities and militants, the question of whether Al-Qaeda can fill the vacuum to a certain extent not only in the region but globally and "re-take" its "emirate" in the region or other groups can share the remnants of the group also complicates the emerging atmosphere, let alone the possibility of both. Within this context a key dimension to be analysed is the already fierce competition between Al-Qaeda and ISIS. In order to understand this tension, the process that transformed Al-Qaeda in Iraq into ISIS needs to be discussed briefly.

Ayman al-Zawahiri's controversial letter of 2005 to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the then emir of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) who had declared himself as the "emir" of Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004, were already signalling of disagreements were already there between the core Al-Qaeda and AQI. Putting aside Zawahiri's encouragements, highlighting the importance of the war in Iraq for the ummah as a whole, and harsh criticism about the rulers of Muslim countries ruling their countries in un-Islamic ways, the criticisms mentioned in Zawahiri's letter might help us better understand the process leading to the split and the emergence of ISIS. Zawahiri emphasises three criticisms: "The indiscriminate massacre of Shia and desecration of their mosques, the very structure of the jihadi movement as a movement led by non-Iraqis, and the public beheadings of hostages."[25] Here we can see that even in 2005, in terms of the targets, methods, and leadership, there was a certain amount of disagreement which would surface more obviously than ever with the gradual rise of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to the leadership and his broadening of the focus of his organization in a way that also includes Syria. Even for Al-Qaeda leadership, Zarqawi's methods and the scope and ruthlessness of his attacks were not totally acceptable. Moreover, regarding an issue with the broader objective, whereas Zarqawi was in favour of fighting the "near enemy" referring to countries such as Israel and an important ally of the United States, the Jordanian regime, Al-Qaeda leadership wanted to focus on the "far enemy", the United States. Thus, when Zarqawi was killed in an American airstrike in 2006, the question was what kind of a path the new leader would follow in the face of such disagreements.

The following period under Abu Ayyub al-Masri was some sort of a transition between being a direct Al-Qaeda affiliate and turn into an independent entity. The group started to be known as Islamic State of Iraq in that period, along with its more widely known name, AQI. However, Masri, in line with Zawahiri's criticism, installed an Iraqi, namely Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, as the head of the organization. Both Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was killed in an American airstrike in 2010, which paved the way for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's (real name Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri) leadership. 2013 was a turning point for the group. In order to take advantage of the circumstances in Syria and use the country as a training ground and a possible area of influence, Baghdadi moved to Syria and changed the name of the group to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. This move faced criticism from Zawahiri, who warned Baghdadi to limit his operations to Iraq, a criticism publicly rejected by Baghdadi in the mid-2013. After failed attempts to push him back to Iraq and reconcile his group and Nusra front as Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Al-Qaeda renounced any connection with the group in February, 2014. In the same month, Baghdadi broke his allegiance to Al-Qaeda, too. In a very short span of time, the group, due to occupations, kidnappings, smuggling etc. became almost a self-funded terror group, quite a rare occurrence in the history of terrorism. Coupled with increasing number of foreign fighters joining the group and this financial picture along with significant military advances both in Iraq and

Syria especially in 2014, the group declared itself as the Islamic State, and Baghdadi as the Caliph. Over time, newly emerging groups as well as some of the former Al-Qaeda affiliates around the globe from the Central Asia to Africa started to pledge allegiance to this "rising power".

Unless a quite fast introduction of working economic, social and political structures in the countries where ISIS once controlled an important amount of territory, which is, especially considering the Afghan and Iraqi experiences, far from a realistic goal, similar patterns and discourses could continue attracting people. Al-Qaeda and/or other future groups with similar discourses can take advantage of such potential.

Still, there is another possibility of the emergence of new local groups benefiting from ISIS' already established networks and human capital which cannot be completely controlled by the group anymore while it transforms itself. Considering the fact that the rule of law, functioning economies, political and economic participation regardless of ethnic, religious, or sectarian backgrounds, equal access to education and job opportunities etc. could not be provided overnight in the countries ISIS once had "liberated zones" such as Iraq and Syria, the impact of such a possibility is far from negligible.

In such a picture though, even newly emerging groups might look for more powerful allies somewhere to gain from its prestige and to demand support, which can end up in four possibilities; namely, 1) Al-Qaeda's control over the former ISIS-linked groups, 2) Rise of various smaller local groups striving to get what they can from ISIS' previous capabilities, maintained to an extent even after the fall of the group 3) Emergence of another group with global reach, gathering non-Al-Qaeda affiliated groups as well as the remnants of ISIS 1.0 4) ISIS' strive to maintain a less ambitious profile with much less new recruits and financial capabilities with a comparatively limited capability to encourage and support attacks globally.

The best candidate for the time being might be Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups, especially the former Nusra front. As the former AQI, if ISIS' fall continues and its organizational and functional capabilities diminish further, Iraqi ISIS members might found a more reliable umbrella in Al-Qaeda once again. Regarding Syria, the former Nusra front might do the same function as the key Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Here, it is important to note the changing dynamics of competition between ISIS and Al-Qaeda stretches from Africa to Central Asia, since some of the ISIS-affiliates were previous Al-Qaeda-affiliates and vice versa. Since these smaller groups would need to cooperate with the leading umbrella organization fighting for the "cause" in order to gain prestige, support and to contribute to the achievements of the group which can make comparatively more progress, allegiances are quite changeable. The fall of ISIS might, therefore, provide new cases of shifting allegiances and provide Al-Qaeda with a valuable chance of making a comeback as a more influential actor and enjoying deeper and broader global engagement with significantly higher human capital and experience. During the global fight against ISIS, the group could succeed in finding a valuable chance to increase its influence and grow especially in the conflict zones, also by utilizing the international attention primarily focused on ISIS. The group, according to Hoffman, rebuilt and rebranded itself in the meantime.[26] However, in the absence of any "successful" international attack in more than a decade since the London bombings,[27] coupled with relatively low military expertise of its militants compared to both ISIS and the level of expertise within the group itself back in the late 1990s, time will show how it took advantage of that window of opportunity and to what extent it can make use of it in the coming years. Therefore, to what extent Al-Qaeda can absorb, persuade, or merge with previously ISIS-affiliated groups stands out as a key question within that context. While bin Laden's death provided ISIS with a valuable chance of presenting itself as

the most effective group fighting for the "cause" back in time, Al-Qaeda might now have found the chance to reclaim its previous status and even more, as the umbrella bringing together a loose structure of groups from various countries and regions. This can either be in the form of ISIS affiliates' switching allegiances or in the form of Al-Qaeda affiliates' absorption of ISIS affiliates deprived of previous levels of prestige and support. Al-Qaeda with stronger roots and a longer historical background as well as the close link to Taliban could take such a course of action more easily compared to any other actor. Here, it should also be noted that Al-Qaeda had already took action in the face of ISIS' demise and Ayman al-Zawahiri send an envoy to Syria to call remaining ISIS fighters to defect and join Al-Qaeda's ranks. Possibly in response, al-Baghdadi's tape after this included messages to the fighters of the group about not to "retreat, run away, negotiate, or surrender". Moreover, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, ISIS' spokesperson, had called the group's fighters to be ready for the coming insurgency and not to disperse.[28]

The problem with the fourth possibility is that as opposed to Al-Qaeda which could once find "liberated areas" to loosely control its affiliates and to act as a safe haven for its "Core", ISIS, after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, lacks this kind of "headquarter" to run such a network if it could not successfully transfer its "Core" to another country in a short span of time. Nevertheless. the group, to some extent cloned itself in Libya before its demise in Iraq and Syria, and strive for more presence in Central and Southeast Asia. Still, one should not forget the fact that AQI, the group for years, lacked such territorial, communicational, and economic capabilities but still made its shocking rise after the summer of 2014. Therefore, as long as socio-political and socio-economic factors keep acting as drivers for alienation, marginalization, and radicalization of particular groups without proper measures to address them, even this possibility cannot be off the table. Considering the fact that the key countries and regions ISIS operates does not really offer a bright prospect in the short to medium-run but even a darker one in some aspects with infighting among numerous groups with different ethnic, religious, sectarian, ideological backgrounds, failing/failed economies and security structures, hardly working state mechanisms, widely circulated "revenge" discourses, absence of life prospects for youth, problems with law enforcement agencies, interrogation techniques, trials and judiciary, and the lack of required political and economic will and capabilities for the re-construction of politically, socially, psychologically, and economically devastated areas and their residents, the group can easily find ways to play with the problems on the ground and consolidate its new status, and even rise again.

This ideal fertile ground can be equally taken advantage of the actors mentioned in other possibilities. Social and economic marginalization, existence of various non-state armed actors, ethnic and religious tensions, lack of universal political participation, lack of the sense of belonging, memories of atrocities and oppression, and absence of equal job and education opportunities all can contribute to the rise of similar groups again and again. As long as battles continue to be funded much more ambitiously compared to re-construction efforts, this risk would keep threatening regional and international security.

Putting aside the significant security-related implications of each possibility mentioned above, a major risk not to be overlooked here is to see several of the above-mentioned possibilities came true simultaneously.

Conclusion

During the transformation of ISIS, a comprehensive toolkit of measures is needed against not only terrorism but also guerrilla or insurgency tactics since bigger pockets still exist in several countries striving for controlling smaller areas compared to the vast geography controlled by the group.[29] Some significant military campaigns can and do make major impacts on this bigger pockets. A clear case of this was Turkey's Euphrates Shield Operation which not only dealt a major blow to the group's presence in Northern Syria but also reconstruction of the areas cleared by the group would engender medium to long-term consequences by improving social, economic and security environment in the region. Security measures, accompanied by reconstruction efforts, thus, would keep playing an important role in dealing with bigger pockets in failing or failed states.

Besides, ongoing online fight needs to be geared up in a way that does not provide such groups with a similar volume of activity even though it seems impossible to achieve a complete control over the cyber world. Since ISIS provided a case of inspiration for similar groups and increasing use of the cyber area by violent extremist groups and individuals worldwide has already been witnessed, ISIS' demise in the physical and virtual world does not mean the end of the cyber struggle at all.

Both now and in the future, however, an equally important area of focus would be to design and implement effective de-radicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation, and re-integration strategies. Such measures are needed to be devised for each and every case due to their unique character, making the implementation phase highly time and resource-demanding. Since they also require the society's willingness to accept previously radicalized individuals at some point, implementation phase would pose challenges not only to the concerned agencies and the person him/herself, but also to the society. Effective strategies, therefore, are required to make society ready to accept these people, too, again as their neighbours, employees, colleagues, spouses etc.

Another key challenge is the group's already existing capabilities and how to prevent this potential from enabling a "come back" for the group. As mentioned, the group can still enjoy unprecedented levels of human resources as well as financial assets. With a treasury of around $2 billion and 20,000 fighters,[30] the group would not only be able to have a global reach outside of Iraq and Syria, but also to maintain smaller pockets of operational units to look for each and every opportunity to seize strategic areas financially or politically to compensate for the loss of its prestige over the last several years. Previously acquired know-how in planning and carrying out attacks as well as more recently increasing expertise on illegal financial activities through less traceable cyber instruments might allow these smaller pockets or cells to keep carrying out sensational attacks.

Lastly, the demise of the group needs a focus not only on the group and its transformation but also on the possibilities with respect to the aftermath of this fall since both new actors and Al-Qaeda would be more than willing to benefit from the group's capabilities and assets and to take advantage of the ambitions the group could disseminate among its militants as well as sympathisers for years. Reconstruction in the countries where the group once enjoyed territorial control, coupled with broader political and economic participation and elimination of racial, ethnic, and sectarian violence and tensions would thus play a key role within this context. Otherwise, a fertile ground could be provided for like-minded groups to benefit from and inherit the "legacy" of the group both in terms of discourse and its human resources.

All in all, the era after the fall of ISIS 1.0 poses new and quite challenging questions for the future. International cooperation, effective strategies and measures that are coordinated in-

ternationally, too, and careful planning for the years ahead are essential in order not to experience the wake-up call in the summer of 2014 once again in the future. Analysing ISIS 2.0 would therefore require an analytical position between a false euphoria about the complete disappearance of the group and/or the threat it posed and an unrealistic drawing of the group as getting significantly stronger in spite of its losses. The battle might seem to be won for the time being but assuming that the war would not continue could result in new "wake-up calls" and the need for more and more resources to tackle with the possible newcomers along with ISIS 2.0.

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Notes

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