



Question (R3 QL7): *How does Da'esh's transition to insurgency manifest itself in Syria; which other jihadist groups might offer the potential for merger and which areas of ungoverned space are most likely to offer conditions conducive for Da'esh to maintain some form of organizational structure and military effectiveness?*

Contributors: *Dr. Joshua Landis (University of Oklahoma); Vern Liebl (Center for Advanced Operational Culture, USMC); Dr. Sabrina Pagano (NSI, Inc.); Mubin Shaikh (University of Liverpool)*

Executive Summary

Dr. Sabrina Pagano, NSI

Da'esh Transition in Syria

The contributors varied in their discussions of what a Da'esh transition—or the future of Syria more broadly—would look like. Drawing on work by Gelvin, Pagano suggests that three scenarios are most likely for Da'esh's transition in Syria. These include the complete destruction and disappearance of the group and its ideology; transition into an insurgent group capable of conducting limited operations in Syria and/or inspiring attacks abroad; or disintegration into a loose collection of former fighters and free agents conducting attacks, in some cases without organizational support. Finally, University of Oklahoma ME expert, Dr. Joshua Landis, indicated that while it is difficult to generalize, the extreme factionalization that characterized Syria prior to Da'esh's involvement would likely come back into play. As such, we may expect a revived emphasis on the clan or tribe, with ongoing resistance to central government. Landis continued by suggesting that sufficient weakening of Da'esh will eventually enable the Syrian government led by Assad to regain broad control.

The contributors to this Quick Look indicated that we may observe the following for Da'esh in Syria and abroad:

Ongoing actions in Syria

- continued agitation and exploitation of the uncertainty and dysfunction in Syria
- ongoing efforts to be present and to expand

Change in strategy and associated tactics

- reorientation toward increasing attacks abroad
- shift from acquisition and maintenance of territory to insurgent methods aimed at weakening enemies
- increased emphasis on both terrorist and insurgent tactics (e.g., recent attacks in Paris and Brussels)
- movement away from direct attacks toward scorched earth defensive strategy combined with aggressive insurgency tactics
- return to indiscriminate urban violence, using lone wolves and small militant groups

- increased use of two-tiered attacks (first soft civilian targets, then first responders)
- use of “mobile, dispersed, and flexible units” that operate on behalf of Da’esh

Da’esh Alliances

Views among the contributors on the groups with whom Da’esh might align demonstrated some degree of consensus. Both Shaikh and Pagano indicated that a merger or strong alliance between Da’esh and other groups would be highly unlikely. This was due in part to Da’esh’s history of denouncing others as apostates when they failed to conform to its strict rules and interpretations of Islam. Da’esh’s rigid approach has resulted in eventual isolation and the creation of enemies among groups with which it might under different circumstances have allied. Shaikh also emphasized the breadth of the ideological divide between Da’esh and other groups, which would in turn make it difficult for Da’esh to justify any future cooperation with so-called deviant groups. While Pagano cites possible points of Da’esh ideological convergence with either Jabhat Fateh al Sham or the quietest Salafists, the likelihood of collaboration between these groups remains very low. These points of convergence would be dependent on a shift in Da’esh’s goals and subsequent motives as it is faced with the fall of the caliphate, which might make previously unlikely alliances necessary for the sake of survival and future goal pursuit.

Use of “Ungoverned Spaces”

Liebl put forth the view that ‘ungoverned space’ does not truly exist given that formal or informal political institutions will always exist where there are people. Shaikh however focused on likely future contests for “ungoverned” spaces in Syria, suggesting that that the primary competition would be between Da’esh and Al Qaeda given their rivalry and different organizational purpose and approaches. Landis briefly addressed the topic by suggesting that the proportion of ungoverned space in Syria will decrease as Da’esh is weakened, and the Syrian regime retakes the west and parts of eastern Syria. Pagano emphasizes areas of strategic or symbolic importance to Da’esh and the existing or potential loss of these resources. She reviews the status of northern Aleppo province, Raqqa, and Deir el-Zour, as well as the recent retaking of Palmyra, and concludes by briefly listing the conditions under which these spaces would provide the greatest utility or opportunity to Da’esh.

SME Input

Comments on Da’esh Transition in Syria

Dr. Joshua Landis
University of Oklahoma

Nusra was a dominant military in much of this area before ISIS took over. There were many other smaller militias in the area as well. Undoubtedly they conformed to local village and tribal structures and factions.

It is hard to make many generalizations other than to suggest that the extreme fragmentation that prevailed in this area before ISIS forced conformity on the tribes and villages is likely to return. This is an area of clans and tribes. It has always resisted central government. Syria always ruled with a combination of force, placating tribal leaders, and patronage.

ISIS has done the same.

I suspect that the regime will eventually be taken back by the Syria government once ISIS is sufficiently weakened by the coalition and once Assad can retake the West of the country.

Comments on Da'esh Transition in Syria

Vern Liebl

Center for Advanced Operational Culture, USMC

There is no such thing as an “ungoverned space.” There is always some kind of political institution in every space inhabited by people. May not be what we recognize or want to recognize, but it is always there. Just look at Somalia.

Comments on Da'esh Transition in Syria

Dr. Sabrina Pagano

NSI, Inc.

Future Manifestations of the Insurgency

Several scenarios for Da'esh's future are possible, though the most likely for its transition are its continued conduct of an insurgency, disappearance, or devolution into a loose collection of former fighters and other free agents staging attacks with or without organizational support (Gelvin, 2016). This question (R3.QL7) takes as its premise the assumption that Da'esh will transition to insurgency, and as such, the response will be centered around that possibility.

Da'esh has steadily lost and will likely continue to lose territory (Almukhtar, Wallace, & Watkins, 2016; Friedman, 2016; Stratfor Enterprises, 2016), and has faced significant decreases in weapons supplies (Abi-Habib & Raydan, 2016) and revenue sources.¹ These losses have been sustained while Da'esh simultaneously faces the ongoing administrative and financial burdens of running a state, for which it may not be well-prepared (Micallef, 2016). The land it does control is resource poor and is lacking in industrial power, and its attempts to expand beyond Sunni areas have been met with strong resistance (Walt, 2015). Together, these facts suggest that Da'esh's time may be limited,² and would require its reinvention to remain viable in some form (though see Arango, 2015; Walt, 2015 for examples of a competing view). By losing territory in Syria and Iraq, Da'esh will no longer be able to claim the status of a caliphate (Wood, 2015). Eradicating the concept of Da'esh may take longer than defeating the physical manifestation of the group, however (Astorino-Courtois et al., 2016; Friedman, 2016). In other words, “the Islamic State ‘brand’ has been established” (Micallef, 2016).

Nonetheless, without claim to territory, Da'esh necessarily loses some of its legitimacy or prestige, given its basis in the acquisition and maintenance of territory (Micallef, 2016; Wood, 2015). Total loss of territory requires Da'esh to shift its narrative to provide an explanation, which may not be

¹ For example, as of summer 2016, Da'esh's oil and gas revenue has decreased 26 percent since the prior year, though totaled approximately \$23 million a month according to IHS (Almukhtar, Wallace, & Watkins, 2016).

² See also Astorino-Courtois et al. (2016). Countering the ISIL fight. SMA/CENTCOM Reach-back Effort. Retrieved from: <http://nsiteam.com/sma-reachback-cell-v7-state-non-state-partners-countering-isil/>: “Based on the balance of actor interests, resolve and capability, the defeat of Islamic State organization seems highly likely (defeat of the ideology is another matter).”

compelling to its existing or potential new adherents. In time, Da'esh's brutality (Cronin, 2015) or the nature of its ideology—which promotes abuses that in other cases such as Yemen and Somalia have led to rejection of jihadist groups—may lead to a similar rejection of Da'esh in Syria (Zelin, 2013). As Zelin indicates, online adherents seem to betray this possibility given their stated concerns about a possible saḥwa in Syria. Such an Awakening is made even more likely if Da'esh pushes its theocratic social agenda further—though Da'esh is prepared for this possibility.

Even in the absence of a state, however, Da'esh can reorient toward increasing attacks abroad as well as exploiting the uncertainty and political dysfunction currently characterizing Syria (Friedman, 2016). According to William McCants of the Brookings Institution, Da'esh likely will continue its agitation in Syria, waiting for its opportunity to re-emerge (McCants, as interviewed in Friedman, 2016). Ongoing Sunni Arab marginalization may provide the fuel that is required for this eventual re-emergence (Friedman, 2016; Jenkins, 2015; Stratfor Enterprises, 2016), or render attempts to defeat Da'esh ineffective (Arango, 2015)—particularly if the Syrian government itself remains an undesirable alternative.

In the meantime, Da'esh's goal will shift from the acquisition and maintenance of territory to using insurgent methods to weaken its enemies. In its weakened state, Da'esh is likely to increase its emphasis on both terrorist and insurgent tactics, ensuring that it maintains some level of threat (Almukhtar et al., 2016; Stratfor Enterprises, 2016). Coughlin suggests that this shift is clearly evident in the recent attacks in Istanbul and Baghdad, which appear related to the pressures that

Da'esh confronts in the face of the weakening of the caliphate both in Iraq and Syria (Coughlin, 2017). Mironova noted a change in tactics signaled by the recent terror attacks in Paris and Brussels, and Micallef similarly suggests that Da'esh's recent pattern of attacks in Europe and North America are suggestive of a new strategy (Micallef, 2016; Mironova, 2016). As Micallef details, Da'esh has moved away from direct attacks on Syrian military forces toward increasing use of scorched earth defensive strategy combined with the use of aggressive insurgency tactics (Micallef, 2016).³

In just the past year, even while under near continuous bombardment by the American-led coalition, the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for more than three dozen attacks, stretching across 16 countries on four continents.

– Worth, 2016

Micallef goes on to indicate that Da'esh has also revisited its early (2003-2007) strategy of indiscriminate urban violence, including its application in Europe. This strategy invokes the use of so-called lone wolves, along with small (5-10 person) militant groups armed with IEDs and automatic weapons. Following this strategy, Da'esh is also increasingly likely to use two-tiered attacks, in which soft civilian targets, and then first responders, are killed.

Though Da'esh uses terrorist tactics, Cronin previously argued that Da'esh is not a terrorist organization given its significant number of fighters, control of territory, endogenous funding, control of lines of communication, and extent and sophistication of military capabilities and operations (Cronin, 2015). However, given Da'esh's more recent and significant loss of fighters, loss of territory and its accompanying capability for funding, and a strong but nonetheless outmatched military capability, it seems that a reclassification may be imminent.

³ Micallef also indicates another form of adaption Da'esh has and would likely take if it were to lose a majority or all of its territory (Micallef, 2016). He emphasizes Da'esh's expanding footprint in Europe, which has grown considerably since 2014. This includes both an increase in jihadist cells and its involvement in European criminal activities. These activities furthermore may serve to offset the financial losses associated with loss of territory.

Terrorist attacks ultimately will have a much lower resource burden for Da'esh than would ongoing control of territory, which will enable it to remain dangerous long after the loss of its territory (Stratfor Enterprises, 2016). These attacks may invoke the use of "mobile, dispersed, and flexible units" that operate on behalf of Da'esh (Stratfor Enterprises, 2016). For the time being at least, Da'esh continues in its ability to inspire others to engage in violent acts of terrorism (The Economist Data Team, 2016), though this influence may dissipate over time (for example, see Gelvin, 2016).

The bad news is that shorn of those holdings the Islamic State may be an even more formidable opponent, one against which the offensive arsenal of modern nations will be far less applicable while their ability to kill the innocent will be no less diminished.
– Micallef, 2016

(Lack of) Historical and Potential Future Da'esh Alliances

Historically, Da'esh has operated apart from other groups, denouncing potentially like-minded groups based on their lack of adherence to Da'esh's rigid set of rules. Da'esh's interests have included consolidation and expansion of the caliphate, along with cleansing of the faith (including both Shia and Sunni "infidels"), and maintenance of its fighting force (Astorino-Courtois & NSI Team, 2016). Its inflexible emphasis on the establishment of the caliphate and its declaration of others who do not ally with it as apostates has served to reinforce its isolation and even turn potential allies into enemies (Gelvin, 2016). In Syria, Da'esh has been fighting both Assad's army as well as other rebel groups opposed to Assad's rule (Rosen, 2015). Da'esh's potential partnerships in Syria thus are limited, though it does draw support in Syria from three groups that have pledged their allegiance to it (IntelCenter, 2016). These include Jaish al-Sahabah in the Levant, Martyrs of al-Yarmouk Brigade, and a faction of Katibat al-Imam Bukhari.

We can, however, examine the broad question of potential Da'esh alliances by focusing on overlapping ideology or motivations. Given Da'esh's flagging control in Syria, its motivation to align itself with groups with whom it shares a common set of interests may be increased. The establishment, maintenance, and expansion of territorial holding by Da'esh was a major factor distinguishing it from Al Qaeda and similar groups (Gelvin, 2016). As Gelvin notes, if this distinguishing factor were eliminated, Da'esh would effectively become indistinguishable from Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fateh al Sham), whose goal is focused on defeating the Syrian government and establishing an Islamic regime. Glenn notes that Al Qaeda has a similar objective to Da'esh in propagating a hardline Islamist ideology, but differs from Da'esh in strategy (Glenn, 2015).

Similarly, Da'esh shares with 'quietest' Salafists (i.e., those that do not engage in direct political action) similar "theological DNA." McCants and Olidort indicate that Salafis and jihadists also share a focus on addressing the humanitarian problem in Syria, which is viewed as resulting from the Shiite faith of the Assad regime. However, these groups have traditionally differed widely in the methods and nature of their involvement in issues of interest to them. The civil war in Syria, along with other events in the Middle East, has more recently encouraged a shift among these 'quietest' Salafis to political engagement, and even taking up of arms (McCants & Olidort, 2015).

They base themselves on texts and concepts developed over centuries by communities of established Muslim scholars. Indeed, this is a crucial component of the Salafi claim to authenticity. It is therefore not a big conceptual leap to go from quietism to jihadism.
– McCants & Olidort, 2015

Given Da'esh's transition to insurgency, it is possible that it might converge with Jabhat Fateh al Sham or the quietest Salafists, or may more generally find it necessary to change its tactics regarding its alliances. Given its long history of pointed separation and rivalry with al Qaeda and other jihadist groups, and the traditional clashing of its tactics with those of the quietest Salafists, this possibility seems unlikely.

In the meantime, other opposition groups have banded together, even despite seeming contradictions in ideology (e.g., jihadist and non-Islamists), as a function of necessity, given that no solitary group has the power to defeat regime forces (Zelin, 2013). Groups such as Al Qaeda, for example, have developed approaches to interacting with their competitors, including Al-Nusra's embedding within the Syrian insurgency (Friedman, 2016).

Control Over Strategic Territory and Ungoverned Space⁴

You want the terrorist fighting for his own survival rather than (having) the space to plot against us. ... Isolating them plus applying pressure equals the less chance they have for striking out beyond the border.

– US Official, in Windrem, 2014

As of summer 2016, Da'esh had lost 56 pieces of territory including five major cities (all in Iraq) since the beginning of its advances across Iraq and Syria in 2014 (Almukhtar et al., 2016). While many of its major losses have been sustained in Iraq, these forfeitures more generally degrade Da'esh's power, in turn influencing its actions in Syria.

Da'esh's core areas of control include northern Aleppo province around al Bab, Raqqa, and Deir el-Zour (Stratfor Enterprises, 2016), and yet these areas have been under threat. Northern Aleppo comprises a densely populated area, and given its border with Turkey, is a strategic passageway for supplies, weapons, and foreign fighters. As of December 2016, al Bab, the last urban stronghold for Da'esh in the northern Aleppo area, was being advanced upon as part of the Euphrates Shield operation led by Turkmen and Arab rebels and backed by Turkey and the US (Karadeniz, 2016). Also in this area, Dabiq—Daesh's alleged site of an apocalyptic battle with the West (or "Roman" enemies)—held symbolic importance for Da'esh, but fell to Turkish-backed Syrian rebels (supported by US Special Forces) in October 2016 (Luck, 2016).

Raqqa, Da'esh's effective capital, has inherent symbolic value, as well as practical value in a number of ways. These include its strategic location on the Euphrates River, role in controlling critical highways, large population, economic centrality, and utility as a major hub for people and supplies (Stratfor Enterprises, 2016). As of late December 2016, the Syrian Democratic Forces (including the Kurdish component, the YPG) have continued moving toward Raqqa, capturing villages and land along the way as part of isolation campaign Euphrates Anger [sic] (Said, 2016). However, a plan for a full offensive does not exist, and thus will present a near-term challenge for the incoming Trump administration (Sly, 2016).

At present, a vast majority of Deir el-Zour province is still under the control of Da'esh, though there have been ongoing U.S. airstrikes over the past year and targeted attacks conducted by U.S. special forces (CBS News, 2017). The Syrian government is also involved in the fight to remove Da'esh from this area (Almukhtar et al., 2016). As Almukhtar et al. note, if Da'esh loses Deir el-Zour, it stands to lose a key connection between its Raqqa stronghold and Mosul, further decreasing its ability to defend territory. Da'esh suffered a significant loss in the multiple

⁴ For the purposes of this response, "ungoverned space" is considered as any area to which the writ of the state is not formally extended or is ineffective.

offensives that took back the land along the Syrian-Turkish border, given the area's strategic importance (similar to Northern Aleppo) as a passageway for foreign recruits⁵ and supplies (Abi-Habib & Raydan, 2016).

Despite its territorial setbacks, Da'esh retook Palmyra in December 2016 (Abi-Habib & Raydan, 2016), creating an impediment for the Syrian government's troops and their Russian supporters. This Da'esh offensive may have been undertaken to combat against more general perceptions that it was losing the battle for territory (Abi-Habib & Raydan, 2016).

Generally speaking, the ungoverned spaces that will provide the greatest opportunity to Da'esh will be those in which Da'esh is the only or the best potential provider of security, political grievances, economic growth, and effective governance (Blanchard & Humud, 2016).

Comments on Da'esh Transition in Syria

Mubin Shaikh

First, DAESH will continue to attempt being present and also expansive, in Syria. However, as it does indeed continue to suffer significant setbacks, as well as the campaigns and Mosul and Raqqah, it will lose a lot of its forward motion in this regard.

Secondly, while some analysts suggest that there could be mergers between DAESH and other groups, for those analysts like myself who pay attention to the ideology that motivates and sustains these groups, it is very unlikely for such mergers to form considering how great the ideological divide is. DAESH will not be able to publicly explain why they would work with a group previously declared as deviant and the merging group would not be able to save face, if they came forward saying they had repented from their deviance.

Third, the greater ability for mergers to exist will, from the Salafist and Islamist groups. It is these groups will maintain organizational structure and military effectiveness because of the larger network from which they can draw on resources and potential allies especially those that are trained armed and supported by state backers. These groups, will continue to compete and fight with DAESH and the Assad regime, simultaneously. They will also begin to turn their invective on Russia and specters of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the necessity to fight them, is already proliferating. This may cause tension between groups supported by Turkish assets, however may find significant support among its private Gulf backers.

Finally, the competition for ungoverned spaces will continue to be between DAESH and Al Qaeda, the latter which will be seeking to expand its network among Islamist groups, and in this sense, may well share in the governance of previously ungoverned spaces by groups of aspiring to be players in the Syrian national context.

References (Pagano)

⁵ Of approximately 20,000 foreign fighters from the Middle East and West (by one estimate) that joined Da'esh at the height of its power, a large majority entered through the Turkish border (Abi-Habib & Raydan, 2016).

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Author Biographies

Vern Liebl

Vernie Liebl is an analyst currently sitting as the Middle East Desk Officer in the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL). Mr Liebl retired from the Marine Corps and has a background in intelligence, specifically focused on the Middle East and South Asia.

Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improvised Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME, and before that with Booz Allen Hamilton as a Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2.

Mr Liebl has a Bachelors degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Masters degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Masters degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with “Highest Distinction” and focused on Islamic Economics).

Dr. Joshua Landis

Joshua Landis is Director of the Center for Middle East Studies and Professor at the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

He writes “SyriaComment.com,” a daily newsletter on Syrian politics that attracts over 100,000 readers a month.

Dr. Landis is a frequent analyst on TV, radio, and in print, He has appeared recently on the PBS News Hour, the Charlie Rose Show, and Front Line. He is a regular on NPR and the BBC. He frequently publishes in leading Foreign Policy journals.

He has served as the Syrian Studies Association, won the best teacher prize at his university, and received three Fulbright grants, an SSRC and other prestigious awards to support his research.

He has lived for 4 years in Syria and 14 in the Middle East. He is married and has two boys.

He was educated at Swarthmore (BA), Harvard (MA), and Princeton (PhD).

Dr. Sabrina Pagano



Dr. Sabrina Pagano is an experienced project leader and principal investigator, with almost 15 years of experience leading teams and projects both in academia and industry. She earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology (minor in Statistics) from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a dual BA with highest honors in Psychology and Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has led and been an active contributor to work in both the government and commercial domains. Though supporting a wide variety of projects and proposals, her work at NSI has focused in three main areas, including serving as the Principal Investigator and Project Manager for a multi-year contract investigating progress in conflict environments, providing project oversight as the project manager for two AAA titles at a top gaming company, and as one of two developers of a corporate offering focused on enhancing dignity in interactions with customers and employees. Prior to NSI, she served as the Director (Acting) of a growing behavioral sciences program, as well as a Faculty Fellow Researcher and Lecturer at UCLA. Dr. Pagano's work has spanned a wide variety of topics, with particular depth in intergroup relations, injustice, basic and moral emotions (e.g., empathy, moral outrage), and prosocial/antisocial behavior. She maintains an active knowledge base in the broad field of social psychology, and knowledge that spans multiple fields given over a decade of experience and leadership specifically on multidisciplinary projects.

Mubin Shaikh



Born and raised in Canada, **Mubin Shaikh** grew up with two conflicting and competing cultures. At the age of 19, he went to India and Pakistan where he had a chance encounter with the Taliban prior to their takeover of Afghanistan in 1995. Mubin became fully radicalized as a supporter of the global Jihadist culture, recruiting others and establishing his network in the extremist milieu. He was affected by the 9/11 attacks which forced to him reconsider his views. He then spent 2 years in Syria, continuing his study of Arabic and Islamic Studies. Rejecting terrorism from Islam, he would go through a period of full deradicalization.

Returning to Canada in 2004, he became an undercover operator with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and worked several CLASSIFIED infiltration operations on the internet and on the ground. In late 2005, one of those intelligence files moved to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) for investigation. The "Toronto 18" terrorism case resulted in the conviction of 11 aspiring violent extremists after Mubin testified over 4 years and 5 legal hearings in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice.

He now has a Master of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (MPICT) and is a PhD candidate in Psychological Sciences studying radicalization, deradicalization and violent extremism at the University of Liverpool, Tactical Decision Making Research Group. Mr. Shaikh is considered a SME (Subject Matter Expert) in radicalization, violent extremism and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) to: United Nations Center for Counter Terrorism, Interpol, Europol, Hedayah Center, U.S. Department of State - Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, National Counterterrorism Center, U.S. DOD Strategic Multilayer Assessment Team, U.S. Central Command - Special Operations Command (as an expert on ISIS), International Special Training Center, NATO (Defence Against Terrorism) and many others. He has appeared on multiple U.S., British and Canadian media outlets as a commentator and is extensively involved with the ISIS Social Media and Foreign Fighter file. He is also co-author of the acclaimed book, *Undercover Jihadi*.