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FUTURE OF ISIS:

What Do Experts Think Will Happen Next?

A Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) Analysis

Nicole Peterson
Associate Analyst
NPeterson@NSIteam.com

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www.NSIteam.com

Introduction and Overview

At its zenith in 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) controlled more than 100,000 square kilometers of territory.¹ ISIS seized control over major cities, notably Mosul and Raqqa, which contributed to increasing disorder in the Middle East. As late as 2015, the geographic reach of ISIS appeared to pose serious threats to the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria as well as the physical safety of citizens in the region. Nonetheless, as of June 2017, estimates show that about 90% of Mosul had been liberated as Iraqi forces, in coordination with the Coalition, continued to regain large portions of the western part of the city.² Similarly, a battle to retake Raqqa is in progress. US officials estimate that only around 2,000 ISIS fighters remain in the city,³ while US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Coalition forces total around 55,000 fighters.⁴ Given these developments, ISIS is likely facing the end of its territorial rule.

Subject matter experts'⁵ hypotheses about the future of ISIS have similarly evolved with changes in ISIS's geographic holdings. Two years ago, experts converged on the significance of ISIS as an enduring threat. In contrast, in the present study,⁶ the experts consulted now indicate near certainty that the current geographic expression of ISIS will meet its demise. A question remains, however: What do these experts believe will happen next?

This paper will review subject matter experts' opinions about a post-territorial ISIS to showcase what experts believe the organizational future of ISIS will be and what enduring or emergent threats this creates for the US and its allies. At the broadest level, some experts believe that after ISIS's demise, displaced foreign fighters without allegiance could serve as human resource "kick starters" for other terrorist and insurgency groups, such as Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Other experts instead believe that former ISIS members are more likely to create splinter groups, an altered version of ISIS (an "ISIS 2.0"), or an entirely new organization in unstable areas where citizens' grievances have been left unaddressed. Experts also differ in whether they believe ISIS can effectively evolve into a virtual organization. Some experts speculate that ISIS will manifest into an organization where members gather online, are recruited online, and are encouraged via this medium to carry out terror attacks in their home countries. Others assert that a core component of ISIS as an organization is the ownership of physical territory—and thus an entirely virtual ISIS is unlikely. To best present these various schools of thought about the future of ISIS and what that means with relation to the present-day ISIS, this paper is organized around three central questions:

1. Can ISIS exist without territory?
2. What happens to the fighters after ISIS is dismantled?
3. What can the United States do now to prevent the rise of an "ISIS 2.0" after ISIS 1.0's demise?

¹ Source: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html

² Source: <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/mosul-now-90-percent-liberated-pentagon-says/article/2623920>

³ Source: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/12/politics/us-troops-more-exposed-raqqa-mosul-isis/index.html>

⁴ Source: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/07/politics/syria-raqqa-isis-us/index.html>

⁵ For a list of experts consulted as part of the ViTTa effort, please see Appendix A.

⁶ This report will assess the most commonly mentioned forecasts across a series of nine carefully reviewed documents drafted between June 2016 and March 2017 discussing the future of ISIS. This collection of text, referred to as a corpus, is composed of a wide variety of subject matter experts' opinions based on extensive research in a broad range of academic fields.

Can ISIS Exist Without Territory?

Experts surveyed in general proposed that ISIS—given retention of its existing members, its name, and its foundational ideology—will either physically relocate or become purely virtual.⁷ These two schools of thought will be explored below.

School of Thought 1: ISIS Will Physically Relocate and Control Territory

Thus far, ISIS has founded itself upon the idea that it is a territory-holding organization. By its own original lines of reasoning, if ISIS loses all of its physical territory and becomes a purely virtual organization, then the caliphate that it once advertised is no more. Without an actual caliphate, ISIS may be weakened ideologically, and its recruiting process may suffer. As ISIS continues to lose its territorial strongholds in Syria and Iraq, ISIS thus will have an incentive to evolve and continue pursuing a territory-centered strategy in the Middle East.

In this case, however, ISIS would need to seek out alternative options to secure new territory. Several experts suggest, for example, that former ISIS members will, as Marcin Styszynski of Adam Mickiewicz University described, “relocate to backwoods, or less populated regions, and deserts and mountains.” This transition to a less vulnerable location would allow ISIS members to recuperate, re-organize, and recover after facing the challenges of extended battle and experiencing defeat in major cities like Mosul and Raqqa. ISIS would also have a chance to divert attention away from the major battlefields in Syria and Iraq, bypass media attention, and avoid public scrutiny. This would allow ISIS to regain their secrecy and unpredictability and give them the opportunity to evaluate what their plan will be to ensure the organization’s survival.

Seth Jones of RAND argued that there are several actions that ISIS could engage in, if it is smart, to regain strength in the future. These include reestablishing itself in sanctuaries; switching largely to a guerilla campaign; and focusing on trying to leverage many of the grievances that have not been addressed by the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Jones believes that if the group chooses to go this route, we will see a reemerging threat from ISIS in the future.

School of Thought 2: ISIS Will Become a Purely Virtual, Territory-less Organization

Another possibility presented by experts is that, after losing its territory, ISIS will become a purely virtual organization. Larry Kuznar of NSI stated that ISIS’s high degree of adaptability and resilience will not only enable its transition to a virtual organization, but will also enable ISIS to successfully recruit and spread violence worldwide.

⁷ Of course, there are other possible routes that ISIS could take when deciding whether or not it should strive to own some sort of physical territory; for example, ISIS could own some territory but be primarily based online. However, the corpus used did not include discussions of these alternative options. As such, this study will not discuss them at length.

In this view, a common focus on spectacular, violent resistance is what contributes to ISIS's cohesion. For this strategy of violence to be effective, ISIS requires media circulation, which is a goal that has been well served by the world wide web. Individuals, particularly youths, across the world have already proved to be very susceptible to radical influence online. Consequently, the experts believe that ISIS may be able to effectively spread its ideology and recruit new members solely online, particularly through social media platforms. Doing so would not be a new recruiting strategy for ISIS; however, with a purely virtual Islamic State, members would no longer be encouraged to relocate to a physical territory upon joining ISIS. Removing this requirement reduces the barriers to entry to this organization and to taking up its violent tactics. Styszynski indicated that, with the lack of physical territory, new ISIS members would never see fighting on an actual battlefield. As such, the perceived risk of joining a radical organization such as ISIS would be significantly diminished. The ease of online recruitment may serve as an additional incentive for ISIS to move towards a virtual caliphate.

If ISIS becomes an entirely virtual organization, it would also become increasingly difficult for the US and its allies to monitor and look for susceptible or newly radicalized individuals. Terrorism experts have already encountered this difficulty, especially in the West.

If ISIS is Disbanded, Where Will Former Members Go?

Five of the nine experts mentioned the likely probability of the collapse of ISIS's organizational structure following its loss of primary territories and influence. They further indicated that former ISIS members, with many of their grievances left unresolved and needs unmet, would likely either search for another rising organization to join or seek to create their own pseudo-ISIS faction, particularly if reconciliation efforts prove to be unsuccessful.

School of Thought 1: Former ISIS Members Will Join a Pre-Existing Organization, Such as Al Qaeda or the Taliban

After the Islamic State is territorially defeated, ISIS members will be forced to relocate. Several of the experts asserted that, upon this relocation, former ISIS members would be compelled to join a pre-existing organization due both to their unfulfilled practical needs, as well as their ongoing motivation to pursue radical goals.

Experts such as Joel Day of the University of San Diego underscored that many of the terror groups that have materialized in the Middle East are in fact manifestations or splinter groups of other existing organizations. However, these former ISIS members are most likely to "repopulate with the same vision, just with different constitutions of these different organizational structures they found defective," argued Gina Ligon of the University of Nebraska-Omaha. Whether ex-ISIS specialists start new organizations or strengthen existing ones, these former militants will possess a significant amount of expertise and credibility among the terrorism community. Collectively, these assets, which former ISIS members will bring to their new organizations, could significantly threaten regional and global security.

The most likely Islamist group to absorb former ISIS members and leverage unaddressed grievances, based on experts' opinions, is Al Qaeda. After Osama bin Laden's death, Al Qaeda lost its influential dominance, and al-Baghdadi took over as the "leader" of Islamic extremism. Consequently, Al Qaeda may look for an opportunity to reassert its dominance once al-Baghdadi dies and ISIS collapses. Thus, some experts fear the reactivation of Al Qaeda in the aftermath of ISIS's downfall.

Experts, including Styszynsky, postulate that Al Qaeda is likely to take advantage of ISIS's downfall to implement its updated strategy and activities. Doing so ultimately could raise even more security concerns for the US and its allies, and depending on the strength and determination of the reactivated group as well as its influence and capabilities, the US may face either a more or less dangerous organization.

ISIS's "violence seekers" will be particularly drawn to joining another strong group like Al Qaeda, according to Ligon. These individuals have "battle-hardened reputations," are accustomed to the lifestyle that accompanies being in constant battle, and will be dependent on an established organization like Al Qaeda to provide them with credibility in the region. Ligon proposes that, to prevent some of these violence seekers from continuing to pursue their radical goals and being drawn to terror organizations like Al Qaeda, the US needs to help countries like Iraq and Syria discourage and demotivate them by recasting the territorial collapse of ISIS as a major failure.

Several experts also propose that former ISIS members may seek to join the Afghan Taliban. According to Ligon, the Taliban poses a significant threat to the US and its allies because there is a rumor that they have tried to recruit members of the Afghan government to either join them (become a leader) or to cooperate with them. These include ISIS "pragmatics" who, as Ligon indicates, could make the group's organizational structure "incredibly effective" because they have proven to be competent leaders in the past. ISIS "hasn't to date had pragmatics in their ranks or strong leadership," so gaining a pragmatic leader could prove to be dangerous in the eyes of the coalition. These "pragmatics" engage in extremism to attain specific secular, tangible goals or outcomes that are of interest to them rather than for the sake of violence or ideological motives. Since these pragmatists are neither ideologically nor methodologically (i.e., violence) wedded, they will be open to different avenues of pursuing and attaining their goals. As such, following ISIS's collapse, they may be attracted to joining another organization such as the Taliban or Al Qaeda, as long as their needs are met. Pragmatics may be particularly useful to Al Qaeda, as this group's past leaders generally have been self-serving and unable to see the big picture. Securing a more pragmatic leader who "has a vision for the organization beyond his place in it" would ultimately make them more effective and, thus, more dangerous.

Jones in fact claims that most of the former ISIS fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan already have joined the Taliban. This adaptation not only demonstrates that the loss of territorial control will not necessarily result in the fighters giving up and disappearing, but that the Taliban in particular appears to be a likely future threat.

School of Thought 2: Former ISIS Members Will Return to Their Respective Hometowns and Create Separate Factions of ISIS or an Entirely New Organization

Another option presented by several of the experts for former ISIS members after the organization is territorially defeated is to return to their home countries. In their home countries, these fighters will have the opportunity to create smaller sub-divisions of ISIS or recreate ISIS to incorporate their own ideals. Foreign fighters may return to their hometowns with the goal of providing materials, tactics, intel, and talent to other radical movements or groups that have pledged their allegiance to ISIS. Experts fear the return of foreign fighters because doing so ultimately could spread ISIS's influence across the globe and make it harder for countries trying to moderate ISIS's activities to keep track of all members. Monitoring would be especially difficult if the members took actions to more fully assimilate into the local populations, as Christine van den Toorn of the American University of Iraq indicates.

Some experts suggest, however, that there is a feasible solution to preventing former ISIS members from stirring up trouble in their hometowns. Preparations by international and police services could keep former ISIS members from spreading their ideology, posing the threat, and carrying out future attacks. Middle Eastern countries and even Western countries that are expecting a large influx of former ISIS members should thus aim to be prepared. Styszynski suggested that intelligence agencies and law enforcement do this by establishing some sort of application and monitoring system for citizens holding Syrian and Iraqi passports. Overall, there will be a need for better border control, better intelligence, and much better information sharing.

School of Thought 3: Successful Reintegration and Reconciliation

A third potential option for ISIS members after ISIS's territorial collapse is the successful reintegration of former ISIS members back into society. The experts think that reintegration is unlikely but possible. If the Coalition can assist in developing an efficient aid program, former ISIS members could be successfully reintegrated into their home communities and leave behind their extremist past.

What Can the United States Do to Directly or Indirectly Prevent the Reemergence of ISIS?

Despite the ongoing threat that ISIS is likely to pose in the future, experts propose a number of recommendations for what the United States can do to prevent the reemergence of an influential terror group in Syria, Iraq, and other fragile states.

Recommendation 1: Aiding in Reconstruction and Directly Providing Assistance

One pathway presented to prevent re-emergence is directly aiding in reconstruction and assisting former ISIS territories to rebuild their organizational structure, regain stability, and be prepared for both the returning displaced and resident populations. One approach for doing so presented by Ligon is to establish a similar structure to some of the governance structures that have gained popular support in the region.

For example, the Education Council is a critical piece of the ISIS governing structure and serves many functions including security, communication via its highly efficient and successful publishing house and guidance literature, and governance via its classroom training where youths learn paramilitary activities and practical skills. The US could then help fill structures like the Education Council (or the Central Office for Investigating Grievances) with individuals with similar attributes to the ones that are currently in office. By doing so, the US would have a say in who is in charge, and the population would also likely be satisfied with the improved governance structure.

Another important way in which the US could directly help formerly occupied Syrian and Iraqi territories post-ISIS is with the distribution of reconstruction funds, which must be managed properly in order for reconstruction to be achievable. The US will need to see the importance in identifying key areas of focus, where the funds are going to be distributed, and how these funds will be allocated (van den Toorn). This fiscal accountability will also be critical to divert potential corruption and to more rapidly push forward reconstruction funds.

Recommendation 2: Encouraging (But Not Getting Directly Involved In) the Formation of a Deal Between Conflicting Groups

Despite the US's wishes to help eliminate the threat of a re-emergent ISIS or an ISIS 2.0, some experts believe that it is not the US's place to get directly involved in negotiations between conflicting groups in the Middle East. For example, van den Toorn argues that, rather than directly getting involved, the US should encourage from the sidelines negotiations and talks between local groups that appear to be open to discussion. She asserts that the US should not pressure or force groups to meet that are unwilling to cooperate or make a deal with another group. Moreover, there are some deals that can be made that do not necessarily need to be American-made deals; they instead should be made by a neutral actor. This is speculative and unfortunately due to the fact that the United States is no longer seen as acting without an agenda.

Conclusion

Overall, the experts were in agreement that the current manifestation of ISIS (i.e., one oriented around the holding of territory in Syria and Iraq) will dissolve. However, there were varying opinions on what will happen next. The experts were divided as to whether displaced ISIS members would seek to join a pre-existing organization such as Al Qaeda or the Afghan Taliban, create separate factions of ISIS, or even forge an entirely new organization. Similarly, experts' opinions vary on whether ISIS will own physical territory in the future, as well as both how and whether the US can directly assist in reconstruction efforts.

ISIS's territorial demise is imminent, as Coalition forces push ISIS out of its final territorial holdings. To adequately plan for the next phase, it is critical that the coalition understands the variety of potential futures for ISIS, as proposed by experts and synthesized in this report. Regardless of which future path ISIS's members take, according to the experts in this study, it is almost certain that their dedication to extremism will not fade. Being informed of these potential futures enables the community of interest—

including military operators and analysts—to develop corresponding contingencies to adequately address the continuing threats posed by these individuals, regardless of whether the coalition meets its adversary in the physical or in the cyber domain.

Appendix A: Resources Used

This research paper incorporates the contents from transcribed audio files of Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) speaker sessions presented between June 2016 and January 2017 and a paper titled 'The Stability of the Islamic State (IS) Narrative: Implications for the Future' written by Dr. Lawrence Kuznar (NSI). All of the speaker series sessions and the paper cited in this report specifically addressed the issue of what will happen to the organization of ISIS in the future.

Name	Type of Resource	Organization	Title	Date
Christine van den Toorn	SMA Speaker Series	CENTCOM	Iraq Post-ISIL	10/25/2016
Gina Ligon	SMA Speaker Series	CENTCOM	The Social Innovation of the Da'esh Organization: Implications for Replacement Governing Structures	12/19/2016
Howard Shatz	SMA Speaker Series	SOCCENT	The Foundations of the Islamic State and What Its Past Can Tell Us About the Future	6/1/2016
Joel Day	SMA Speaker Series	SOCCENT	ISIS Allies: A New Global Terrorism Threat	6/7/2016
Kim Cragin	SMA Speaker Series	SOCCENT	Day After Daesh: What Happens to the Foreign Fighters?	7/23/2016
Lawrence Kuznar		Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict Journal	The Stability of the Islamic State (IS) Narrative: Implications for the Future	3/9/2017
Marcin Styszynski	SMA Speaker Series	CENTCOM	Post-ISIL and Future Jihadist Threats	1/19/2017
Seth Jones	SMA Speaker Series	CENTCOM	Rolling Back the Islamic State	12/9/2016
Spencer Meredith	SMA Speaker Series	CENTCOM	Nightmare Scenarios, Dreams of Hope: Post-ISIL Syria/Iraq and Threatened Regions Beyond	1/25/2017