

A PROXY – ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA (ISIS)

ISIS is on the asymmetric back foot, having lost its stranglehold on territory across Iraq and Syria. However the organisation should be understood as a persistent symptom of two inseparable and ongoing issues in the Middle East, writes Tom Spencer.

IRAQI SECTARIANISM

Post US led invasion, a vicious cycle of sectarianism has perpetuated virulent jihadism; recurrent militant insurrection will likely erupt at particular flash points stemming from Al Anbar province. With unsecured borders, vast geographic sparsity and historic Ba'athist Sunni support for Saddam Hussein centre in towns - Fallujah and Ramadi – Al Anbar has twice provided insurgents' freedom of movement to springboard jihad against Iraq's Shia led government.

REGIONAL WAR BY SECTARIAN PROXY

Beyond Iraq, there is a transnational struggle for political-religious hegemony between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, fought via regional proxies; ISIS is merely one faction co-opted into the wider war. As the flash point amidst Iraq's jihadist woes, it is no coincidence that Al Anbar province borders Syria, Jordan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; the spectre of Iran lies to the east. Inversely to Saddam's Iraq regime, Syria's premiership, led ostensibly by President Bashar Al-Assad, relies upon an Alawite religious minority, a branch of Shia Islam, for support.

In Spring 2011, facing a popular and once secular revolt against Syria's government, it was unsurprising that Assad progressively invited Shia Iran and its regional paramilitary proxy Hezbollah, in situ Lebanon, to reinforce his ailing military. An indecisive West feared supporting a revolt that included Wahhabi Sunni extremists; private donors amongst Sunni Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, did not. Western indolence persisted as a loose 'Sunni' jihadist coalition - Al-Nusra Front - grew in dominance as it pooled men and material from across the Gulf. Civil war engulfed Syria. Reaching stalemate with Assad's military prior to Iranian reinforcement, Islamists dismembered secular factions - once 'children of the revolution.'

In 2013, ISIS - a reconstituted Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) - also answered the call to arms of Al-Nusura Front. It later manoeuvred to assume group lead in order to draw more fighters, lay claim to a cross border caliphate and switched fire to exploit Iraq's sectarian resurgence. No longer undecided, a Western led coalition responded militarily in 2014 to ISIS's regional land grab.

Now beaten back, an account of the now widely-dubbed DAESH (ISIS)'s short lived yet rapid trajectory within this proxy war is vital to understanding how it will almost certainly persist.
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INTRODUCTION - A WAR OF WORDS

ISIS, ISIL or DAESH – the West has even disagreed on the name to use for the virulent Jihadist group it has fought in Iraq, Syria and beyond. The derogative DAESH acronym (primarily used in Defence Viewpoints articles), which resembles the Arabic word for "underfoot" or "to trample," was derived from ISIS's Arabic title AL-DAWN AL-ISALMIYA FIL IRAQ AL-SHAM. Importantly, "Al-Sham" is an Arabic endonym describing the historic territories of 7th century Islamic caliphate – a kingdom under Islamic stewardship.

This spanned beyond the Western Mediterranean of Spain's Iberian peninsula to Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Cyprus and the Turkish Hatay province. The region was later referred to in the Western world, as "the region of greater Syria" or "the Levant" - an Italian word for "rising" that first gained notoriety in 13th century vocabulary of maritime commerce. Hence, its usage described land where the sun "rose over" and beyond the Mediterranean to the Middle East. The title "Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant" mirrors "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria." "The Levant" or "Greater Syria" signpost an historic Syria vaster than its 21st century form and one under Islamic rule.

Both titles make explicit the territorial ambitions of insurgents who first waged jihad in Iraq and later invoked the provenance of the ancient Muslim caliphate to rally others to their cause. Daesh also doctored modern history into their 'caliphate' narrative of expelling the West, citing in propaganda how 20th century Franco-British imperialism occupied much of this former Levant. They surreptitiously 'assimilated' Wahhabism Islam, a dominant 3rd century pious interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Strict interpretation judges non-adherents as enemies in

jihad. In pseudo religious terms, ISIS conveniently aligned them with Gulf state foreign fighters they later co-opted for the war in Syria.

Putting aside semantics and a war of words that has gained political currency, it is important to understand how the organisation's name changed as it divorced from Al Qaeda's franchise to exploit Syria's civil war in addition to Iraqi sectarianism. And since then, has the end of a virulent cross borders jihadist campaign ensured Daesh's fall permanently?

POST 2003 - 2008 ORIGINS and JIHAD in Al ANBAR, IRAQ.

Post US-led invasion of Iraq, Al Qaeda in Iraq AQI - ISIS's predecessor - led an insurgency with support in part from the Sunni populace. The militant jihadist Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi had sworn the allegiance of his group Al-Tawhi Wa Jihad to become AQI. In April 2004, he led an insurgency in Al- Anbar province, including Fallujah town, which severely disrupted the US army. His provincial campaign laid claim to a quarter of all US campaign fatalities during the first four years of US operations. In tandem, Zarqawi sought to provoke an internecine war in which Shia and Sunni would be pitted against one another, forcing the latter populace to turn to AQI for protection once his group's attacks on Shia Muslims enraged a collective punishment response from government; his efforts were largely successful.

AQI's stranglehold, particularly in Anbar province, was only defeated when local tribes became alienated by AQI brutality. They volunteered to side with a US led surge and rose up as part of tribal Sawha 'awakening'. The United States of America financed localised contributions concurrent with its successful troop surge in 2007-2008. Though the subject of much conjecture, it is a realistic possibility that the US strike that killed Zarqawi in June 2006 owes some success to a local tip off as a tide of popular support turned against AQI.

JIHADIST RENAISSANCE; 2010 – APR 2013

However by 2011, Sunni tribes had been 'stood down'; Iraq's Shia-led government discontinued US financial backing for this local security contribution. Protest and revolt erupted. Some again sided with a now reorganised AQI - Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). As an active reserve, AQI had formerly established an ISI separate wing. Its members included a little known chief Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, known now as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi - an alias appropriated from the

first leader of 7th century Islamic caliphate - who rose to supreme leadership by 2010.

Baghdadi, who too had been a member of Zarqawi's original militia - Al-Tawhi Wa Jihad - was once unwittingly interned at US Camp Bucca where he met and rallied Saddam's former Ba'athist staff to fight. Released a free man, he restored Zarqawi's Iraqi operations post US surge. In 2013, Baghdadi also rallied ISI to the call of the Al-Nusura Front Jihad alliance in the Syrian civil war. In April he showed his cross border hand when he pursued a force merger, drawing some fighters from Syria, this included other foreign nationals. This move was opposed by Al-Nusura Front leadership.

Post-merger he declared his Jihadist group and intent - Islamic State in Iraq and (greater) Syria (ISIS). Translations of the Arabic "Al-Sham", interpreted by way of western historic semantics, also called it Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

IRAQI SECTARIANISM BECKONS; DECEMBER 2013 - 14

Stalemate on the Syrian front, ISIS/ISIL/Daesh now refocused to exploit a sectarian divide in Iraq that had resurfaced. This time the revolt of disenfranchised Sunnis, not least former Ba'athists intelligencers of Saddam, were goaded into supporting a Jihadist insurgency that had become transnational. Daesh had also divorced its Al-Qaeda franchise, a shift that stemmed from its disobedience; AQI had zealously attacks on Shias and brutalised Sunnis in a bid to provoke sectarian war. Finally, its ISIS reinvention dominated ownership of Syrian Jihad, all policies of which had been increasingly opposed by Al Qaeda's right hand-man Al-Zawahiri. This lead to a divorce by February 2014. With his finger on the pulse of Iraqi political upheaval, Baghdadi's ISIS successfully mobilised support once again in the troublesome Anbar province and town of Fallujah. Having ousted the Iraqi army from key areas, he formally declared a pan-nationalist caliphate December 2014 with his caliph 'Islamic stewardship' at the helm.

How telling were his territorial ambitions; they shared a strikingly peculiarity with pan-nationalist Ba'athists ambitions that sought supranational Arab governance but conveniently were masqueraded under jihadist guises of an historic renaissance of 7th century Islamic caliphate state. These ambitions mirror a caliphate state that existed within a greater Syria and the Middle East.

Whether a popular jihadist front manipulated by a Ba'athists leadership, the inverse or simply a marriage of convenience, it stands an organisation rooted in geographic flash points, where a vicious sectarian circle persists.

TURNING BACK THE TIDE - TO DATE

Since 2014 a US-led coalition air campaign and combined host nations ground offensives has forced ISIS's to concede principally all ground and key urban areas it captured in Iraq and Syria.

November 2017 marked the end of Daesh's once tangible pursuit of regional Islamic statehood. Fighting culminated in the liberation of the last remaining towns of note in Syria and Iraq. In particular, the border town of Al Qa'im, North-West Al Anbar province, Iraq was retaken. Al Qa'im was once vital ground, allowing Daesh's movement of men and material, notably oil from Northern Iraq - a financial backbone of its operations. Syria's army also liberated Abu Kamal, considered Daesh's last urban stronghold in Syria. With prior liberation of the Syrian town Deir Ez Zour, a wider December offensive in the province denied Daesh freedom of movement. Towards the western bank of the River Euphrates, the Syrian army, albeit with help from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hash'd Al-Sha'abi - an Iraqi Shia paramilitary - fixed Daesh within a 5000 km² pocket. This area of open desert ground lies between Deir Ez Zour and Homs province, south eastern Syria.

Daesh can no longer exploit a porous border. Its rise led it to resemble something of a conventional light infantry, capable of dominating ground. It is now on the back foot – characterised with decentralised command, below the confines of platoon towards sections of men – and so a guerrilla low profile is almost certain.

Daesh did however fight bitterly to delay advances and particularly in the case of Mosul, Northern Iraq, sought to deny an Iraqi Army offensive by means of attrition and unrelenting war crimes:

The cost of liberation has been high. In its bid to hold ground Daesh visited great brutality on civilians, some of whom once turned to or tacitly supported jihadist insurrection as the lesser of two evils amidst sectarian divide. Populations have been exploited as human shields; dissenters executed. Despite the sectarian narrative, it is wrong to overstate passive support for Daesh. In

August 2017, at Al Qa-im, three brothers, all of whom were under the ages of 15, refused Dash conscription. They were beheaded. Atrocities committed have been inexhaustible.

Yet it remains a recurrent theme that Al Anbar - a large Sunni province Saddam could reply upon for broad base support - and Northern Iraq, in situ of Mosul, have revolted in support against Shia dominance.

FULL CIRCLE?

Much like the US troop surge of 2007, localised anarchy in Iraq necessitated a coalition against a new AQI – ISIS. The fundamental difference faced has been a cross border problem that has drawn a rag-tag coalition of nations and paramilitaries. Yet the Iraqi elephant in the room, both active and passive localised support for the trajectory of an ever extreme group remains. It is highly likely that ISIS's operations will focus on complex guerrilla attacks, vehicle born suicide bombing combined with small arms. This is in order to exploit concealment within the urban areas, notably in situ of Al-Anbar province, where it is likely to enjoy residual sectarian support. Equally, as a regionally ambitious organisation, it is almost certain to exploit ill governed areas and sparsely inhabited regions in order to retrain, notably North Africa and the Sinai.

Post US invasion of Iraq embittered Ba'athists found a common cause in AQI and later, in its reconstitution, ISIS. Jihadists have twice co-opted this military skill set and drawn support of a broader Sunni populace by posturing as the lesser of two evils amidst sectarian divide whilst goading government into heavy handed liberations of key towns.

Now in retreat, will a now asymmetric insurgency be whittled away domestically for good, or will these grievances thrice underpin an Iraqi jihadist renaissance?

LESSONS

- A cycle of Iraqi sectarianism has perpetuated virulent, recurrent jihadism; Al Anbar province is a recurrent flash point; any future Iraqi insurrection will likely begin in its vicinity:

- Sunnis can be reinvested in Iraqi security in order to degrade insurgents' man power, wider support and urban dominance; alienated by violence, Sunni tribes turned to support the US troop surge in 2007 and when these communities attempted to flee incessant ISIS barbarity that turned ever inward post 2014.

- Transnational jihadist networks are vulnerable to leadership feuds; AQI's sectarian war and subsequent Syrian campaigns, led Osama Bin Laden's right hand man Al-Zawahiri to oppose it in 2005 and finally disavow it in 2014.

- Daesh will almost certainly reorganise as an asymmetric insurgency, and exploit any resurgence of sectarianism, unemployed military skill set and unsecured borders.

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