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AL-QAEDA, ISIL AND THEIR OFFSPRING

Understanding the Reach and Expansion of Violent Islamist Extremism

Highlights from the workshop

Canada

This report is based on the views expressed during, and short papers contributed by speakers at, a workshop organised by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service as part of its academic outreach program. Offered as a means to support ongoing discussion, the report does not constitute an analytical document, nor does it represent any formal position of the organisations involved. The workshop was conducted under the Chatham House rule; therefore no attributions are made and the identity of speakers and participants is not disclosed.

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Highlights from the workshop
29 February 2016

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The workshop and its objectives

On 29 February 2016, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) hosted a workshop to examine the threat that continues to be posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al-Qaeda. Organised under the CSIS Academic Outreach (AO) program, the event sought to understand the consequences that the evolving rivalry between these two terrorist groups have on the foreign fighters phenomenon.

Held under the Chatham House rule, the workshop was designed around the work of multiple researchers from North America and Europe, as well as on the insights of security practitioners representing a range of domestic and international experiences. The papers presented at the event form the basis of this report. The entirety of this report reflects the views of those independent experts, not those of CSIS.

The AO program at CSIS, established in 2008, aims to promote a dialogue between intelligence practitioners and leading specialists from a wide variety of disciplines and cultural backgrounds working in universities, think-tanks, business and other research institutions in Canada and abroad. It may be that some of our interlocutors hold ideas or promote findings that conflict with the views and analysis of the Service, but it is for this specific reason that there is value to engage in this kind of conversation.

Executive summary

Executive summary

The conflict in Syria and Iraq has partly become a struggle for dominance between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al-Qaeda. This struggle has been affected by the use of air power by the United States, its allies and Russia.

- Five years ago, Al-Qaeda seemed in permanent decline and ISIL had not yet arisen. Now ISIL and Al-Qaeda affiliates are fighting for dominance across the Middle East and in parts of Africa and Asia. Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra is gaining strength in Syria. The dynamic of the Syrian civil war has spread into Iraq, where ISIL originated. Syria is strongly supported by Shia forces contributed by Iran.

- The United States has struggled to stabilise Iraq around a political leadership able to reconcile Sunni and Shia elements, and has helped to train Iraqi national forces. It had hoped to end the Syrian civil war with a peace agreement based on the removal of President Bashar al-Assad, but the current cease-fire does not include it.

- Air power, led by the United States, has reduced the territory held by ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Russian air power has enabled the Assad regime to regain vital territory in western Syria near the coast.

ISIL is the focus of media attention and coalition attacks, but Jabhat al-Nusra is gaining in strength and may be in a better position to dominate the jihadist movement in the long run.

- ISIL has been successful in gaining territory, recruiting fighters and issuing compelling propaganda. Its brutality has hindered its ability to win allies among other jihadist groups.

- ISIL fighters have sustained very high casualty rates. Recruitment is faltering slightly and defections are increasing. Bombing attacks and battlefield losses have undermined part of ISIL's revenue base, allegedly resulting in the salaries of fighters being halved.

- Jabhat al-Nusra has benefitted from the attacks on ISIL, and it has been relatively free to carry on offensive operations. Al-Nusra has thus far rejected the visible brutality of ISIL's methods. It has therefore become more acceptable to local populations, and other groups are more likely to merge or ally with it.

- Both groups are firmly and equally committed to violent jihad. Al-Qaeda has a more explicit policy of attacking the far enemy and ISIL is currently putting less emphasis on distant attacks while it attempts to consolidate the so-called caliphate. An argument can be made for either group eventually achieving supremacy or for a merger between them. It is difficult to see a scenario in which the danger to the West, or the destabilising impact on the Middle East and beyond, diminishes. Jabhat al-Nusra seems best placed to predominate in the longer term.

ISIL has been extremely successful in recruiting foreign fighters. Most come from the Middle East, but a significant number are drawn from Europe. Smaller numbers travel from North America and Asia.

- The religious appeal of ISIL rests on the ideal of a caliphate and a utopian life there, the unity of Sunni Muslims fighting against victimhood and conspiracy, the call to jihad, as well as an apocalyptic vision.

- ISIL recruiters establish one-on-one contact with many recruits through the Internet, using finely tailored psychological appeals which are reinforced by official propaganda outlets.

- Men are recruited with a mixture of instrumentalised religious arguments, the lure of military adventure, sex slaves or wives, personal power and the draw of violence in the service of a just cause. Women are often drawn to an idealised life and union with a warrior hero.

Many foreign fighters die in battle. Others are disillusioned with ISIL and seek to return to their countries of origin.

- The promises of ISIL propaganda are at the root of disillusionment. Instead of finding a 'better' world founded on Islamic brotherhood, many find internecine combat, corruption, excessive brutality, and hypocrisy. Many foreign fighters believe they are being used as cannon fodder.

- Countries of origin seek to take advantage of such disillusionment. Many have de-radicalisation programs targeted at fighters or would-be fighters.

- Parents are the most frequent source of tips indicating that an individual is being radicalised. De-radicalisation interventions are intensive and prolonged; it can take up to nine years for de-radicalised individual to stabilise.

- Recruitment and indoctrination narratives anticipate de-radicalisation attempts, and warn recruits of the tactics that will be used. Many returning fighters remain radicalised and a threat, including some who initially appear open to de-radicalisation.

While the online presence of ISIL receives much attention, even more significant is its total domination of online and offline communications in the territories it controls.

- The ISIL media apparatus is extensive and averages 38 propaganda events a day. It is sophisticated, multilingual and transmedia.

- Within ISIL territory, recruits and the population are subject to unrelenting propaganda to socialise them to the objectives and methods of ISIL. When ISIL establishes a presence within a new area, it removes all alternate sources of information, such as satellite dishes. The relentless propaganda directed to those living within ISIL territory is a means of consolidating absolute power; it will have a long-lasting impact beyond the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

ISIL and Al-Qaeda compete for affiliates abroad. These provide a source of fighters and give the organisations strategic depth and alternatives, should their strongholds come under unrelenting pressure.

- Local factors often determine whether potential local allies pledge allegiance to ISIL or Al-Qaeda.

- ISIL has a foothold in Libya, where it controls Sirte and part of the nearby coastline. Sirte accepted ISIL's presence because, as a former Qaddafi stronghold, it needed protection from the opposition Misrata militias. ISIL seeks to destroy the oil industry, which finances the national government.

- Libya would benefit from a dialogue centred on the security sector, as well as one on governance. Foreign powers seeking to intervene in Libya face a difficult balancing challenge. Unless properly calibrated, outside intervention could worsen the situation and make effective governance and stability even more difficult to achieve.

- Anti-regime rebels in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula constitute an effective fighting force that inflicts a steady casualty rate on the Egyptian army. So far, it remains largely a local force with local objectives. If it became a more ambitious jihadist organisation, the position of the UN's Multinational Force and Observers would become untenable.

- ISIL and Al-Qaeda are competing for the allegiance of groups in Indonesia, and so far ISIL is ascendant. To date, this means Indonesian recruits to jihad are travelling to Syria to fight. However, there are also a number of fighters joining Jabhat al-Nusra who seem more intent on gaining battle experience with a view to strengthening domestic terrorist forces upon their return.

The entry of Russia into the conflict has given Moscow much wider geopolitical significance.

- Russia's bombing campaign prevented the defeat of the Syrian Army and enabled it to re-take much of the heavily populated sector of western Syria. Russia's military

presence and its missile defences have inhibited Turkey from intervening more directly in Syria, and forced the United States to ensure its forces do not come into conflict with those of Russia.

- The Assad regime also owes its survival to Iran, which has supplied forces from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Lebanese Hizballah. Both have played major roles in the fighting. Hizballah is skilled in urban combat. Ground assaults have been coordinated with Russian bombing.

- With its intervention in Syria, Moscow has advanced a geopolitical strategy designed, among other objectives, to undermine NATO. It has rescued its long-time ally, the ruling Assad regime, and protected the future of its base at Tartus, in the eastern Mediterranean, which it may expand. NATO member Turkey now faces a resurgent Syrian regime protected by Russia, with a Kurdish-ruled territory along the border. Peace in Syria is now impossible without Russian participation; the price may be the permanence of the Assad regime. Moscow is accused of weaponising the refugee flows into Europe, creating dissention among the European countries that have applied economic sanctions on Russia because of its aggression in Ukraine.

- While Russia may succeed in securing the western portions of Syria, most vital to its own strategic interests, the outcome for Syria will be its destruction as a viable state. Moderate opponents of the regime will be left with little fighting capacity, while ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra control much of the country.

The impact of war in Syria and Iraq, the resurgence of Al-Qaeda and the rise of ISIL will have a long-term impact on the region and on global politics.

- Terrorism inspired by Al-Qaeda and ISIL has proved to be resilient. The nature of this terrorism may well change again, but the regional and international threat level will remain high for the foreseeable future.

- Even if an enduring peace agreement is reached on Syria, the Syrian Kurds will attempt to secure their territorial gains along the Turkish border, generating long-term conflict. ISIL and al-Nusra will continue to control much of the interior, resulting in further protracted violence.

- Turkey's strategic position is weaker. Syria, with Bashar al-Assad in power and supported by Russia and Iran, will be an enduring hostile presence. Turkey, already fighting the Kurds domestically, will have a Kurdish mini-state on its border.

- The United States faces a Middle East dominated by authoritarian regimes and many of those will continue to face constant pressure from terrorists. There are few easy choices in an extremely complex conflict zone.

CHAPTER 1

Dangerous liaisons: Will Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) strike a grand bargain?

Once written off as irrelevant, Al-Qaeda has proven extremely resilient and its offshoot, ISIL, has become an even greater menace. Could the two ultimately merge? Although they appear incompatible, their core objectives and strategies are similar. Both movements call for all Muslims to support their brothers, and both see no possibility of compromise with Western liberal states. They are divided on their use of violence, the current priority of attacking the far enemy and the timing of declaring a caliphate. While there are many obstacles to closer ties, the trajectories of these terrorist organisations have proven unpredictable. Neither side has completely rejected future cooperation. The dangers of an alliance are so dramatic that we must study what the second- and third-order consequences of one would be.

You are pitiful, isolated individuals! You are bankrupts. Your role is played out. Go where you belong from now on—into the dustbin of history![1]

Thus in 1917, Leon Trotsky consigned the Mensheviks to perennial insignificance—a fate from which they never recovered. Many would argue that only five years ago, Al-Qaeda's downfall was similarly imminent. Its founder and leader was dead; a succession of key lieutenants had been eliminated[2], and the transformative events of the Arab Spring that same year appeared to have further solidified this process. Civil protest, it was believed, had achieved what terrorism had manifestly failed to deliver. The longing for democracy and economic reform accordingly had triumphed over terrorism and sectarianism—with Al-Qaeda the big loser[3]. The entire movement, in the words of a contemporaneous US State Department analysis, was "on a path of decline that will be difficult to reverse[4]". As John O. Brennan, then Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counter-terrorism and Assistant to the President, told an audience gathered at a prominent Washington, DC think-tank in April 2012, "For the first time since this fight began, we can look ahead and envision a world in which the Al-Qaeda core is simply no longer relevant[5]". Less than a month later, on the first anniversary of bin Laden's killing,

US President Barack Obama himself proudly proclaimed that, "The goal that I set—to defeat Al-Qaeda and deny it a chance to rebuild—is now within our reach[6]".

How completely and utterly different it all looks today. In early February 2016, Director of US National Intelligence (DNI) James R. Clapper painted a singularly bleak and melancholy picture of a newly resurgent Al-Qaeda alongside an ambitiously expansionist Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in his annual worldwide threat assessment. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "have proven resilient and are positioned to make gains in 2016 (...) They will continue to pose a threat to local, regional, and even possibly global interests (...)". More alarming still was the rise of an even more sanguinary and extreme off-shoot. "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (…)", the DNI explained, "has become the preeminent terrorist threat because of its self-described caliphate in Syria and Iraq, its branches and emerging branches in other countries, and its increasing ability to direct and inspire attacks against a wide range of targets around the world[7]".

If a week is a long time in politics, five years must seem like an eternity in global terrorism, given the depressing turn of events that General Clapper described. The ongoing fixation with the threat posed by ISIL makes it easy to forget that less than two years ago, an 'Islamic State' ruled by that group had not yet come into existence and that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's putative caliphate was nothing more than a self-indulgent reverie. Indeed, the Sykes-Picot boundaries appeared indelible and both President Obama and Vice-President Biden were trumpeting the stabilisation of democracy in Iraq and attendant withdrawal of US military forces as proof that "America's war in Iraq (...) is over[8]".

Given this concatenation of astonishing developments in so short a period of time, is it really inconceivable to imagine, that by 2021, Al-Qaeda and ISIL might re-unite—or at least have entered into some form of alliance or tactical cooperation? Although admittedly unlikely in the near-term, such a rapprochement would no doubt result in a combined terrorist force—and heightened global threat—of epic proportions. One that, according to a particularly knowledgeable US intelligence analyst whom the author queried about such a possibility, "would be an absolute and unprecedented disaster for [the] USG[9] and our allies[10]".

Underpinnings of a possible grand bargain

There often seems to be a collective amnesia when terrorism and counter-terrorism policies are involved. It was only recently that the conventional wisdom inside the proverbial Washington 'Beltway' was that the bloody split between Al-Qaeda and ISIL would consume, neuter and ultimately destroy them both. Instead, as the DNI lamented, we are now faced by two formidable global terrorist movements—and their geographically growing and increasingly diffuse affiliates and acolytes.

As the conventional wisdom on Al-Qaeda has rarely been correct anyway, it is not surprising that this expectation has also proved to be little more than wishful thinking. Indeed, the unflagging overconfidence that has repeatedly, but just as incorrectly, declared victory in the war on terrorism demands, at this time of escalating and multiplying terrorist threats, that we at least explore the reasons why such an unnerving development is not as far-fetched as some hopefully contend.

There are at least four arguments that render this possibility plausible:

- First, the ideological similarities between Al-Qaeda and ISIL are more significant than their differences;

- Second, those differences that do exist are rooted more in an outsized clash of egos, and of tone and style, rather than substance and core beliefs;

- Third, both Al-Qaeda and ISIL embrace the same strategy based on a common ideology—albeit one more faithfully and viciously applied by ISIL; and,

- Fourth, that efforts to re-unite have been a regular feature of the behavior and rhetoric of both sides[11].

Ideological symmetry

Both Al-Qaeda and ISIL fundamentally adhere to the principles first articulated by Abdullah Azzam, three decades ago, that it is an obligation for Muslims everywhere to come to the defence of their brethren wherever they are threatened and endangered. To Azzam's mind—as to bin Laden's, Zawahiri's and Baghdadi's—an aggressive, predatory war is being waged against Islam by its enemies. Those are broadly conceived as infidels and non-believers, including the Western democratic liberal state; corrupt, repressive Western-backed local apostates; the Shia; and, other Muslim minorities. In this inevitable clash of civilisations, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to come to the defence of the *umma* (worldwide Muslim community)[12]. The need for global jihad to defeat these enemies is an integral aspect of Al-Qaeda's as well as ISIL's ideology and mindset.

Both movements, moreover, share the view that the Western liberal state system is inimical to the imposition of sharia, or Islamic law. ISIL, for instance, regularly inveighs against democracy as that "wicked methodology"[13], thus reflecting Al-Qaeda's long-standing view of this system of governance. Like Al-Qaeda, ISIL also rails against the West's control of the Muslims' most precious natural resources—its oil and natural gas fields—and the established order's creation and support of corrupt, compliant local apostate regimes that facilitate continued exploitation and expropriation.

Like Al-Qaeda in years past, ISIL similarly invites Western military intervention in Muslim lands in order to exploit new opportunities for continued enervation of economies and exhaustion of military might. "If you fight us", an ISIL proclamation from 2014 states, "we become stronger and tougher. If you leave us alone, we grow and expand[14]''. ISIL, however, generally behaves as if it is an Al-Qaeda on steroids: not least in its unsparing sectarianism and unmitigated disdain for both the Shia and various Islamic minorities as well as its enslavement of women and sadistic torture and execution of prisoners and hostages.

Personal enmity

Admittedly, despite the symmetry of ideology and shared enemies, the most salient impediment to reconciliation is the strong personal enmity and vicious rivalry between Baghdadi and

Zawahiri. It is patently obvious that they loathe one another. Their dispute, however, seems to be predicated more on timing and process than on any substantive differences. In a nutshell, Zawahiri still argues that the 'far enemy' has to be eliminated and Muslim lands completely cleansed of Western and other corrupt local influences *before* the caliphate can be established. Baghdadi, as the events of June 2014 show, saw no reason to wait for that eventuality and instead decided immediately to take the offensive by attacking 'near enemies' both in Syria and Iraq while losing no time in declaring himself caliph.

Their respective styles also differ. Baghdadi, to an extent not really seen in Al-Qaeda, has created a cult of personality around himself that additionally luxuriates in death and dismemberment: thus reminiscent more of the Khmer Rouge's Pol Pot or the Tamil Tigers' Velupillai Prabhakaran than Azzam, bin Laden or Zawahiri. Baghdadi's megalomania is facilitated by his claims of familial lineage reaching back to the Prophet himself. But this also makes a credible successor more difficult to identify. Accordingly, Baghdadi's elimination as a result of a US airstrike or some other successful military action could throw ISIL's leadership into disarray and provide Al-Qaeda with an ideal opportunity to effect either a voluntary or enforced re-unification. For that matter, either Baghdadi's or Zawahiri's deaths would likely pave the way for a rapprochement, whether involving a consensual reunification or a hostile take-over of one group by the other[15]. The attempted coup that occurred in Raqqa in December 2014 by pro-Al-Qaeda ISIL members, however, suggests a more likely scenario of Al-Qaeda absorbing ISIL rather than the reverse. Regardless, the result would be a combined terrorist force of chilling dimensions.

Same strategy

Given the deep ideological commonalities between ISIL and Al-Qaeda, it is not surprising that their strategies are similar—to the point that it appears as if ISIL has arrogated for itself Al-Qaeda's own decade-old strategy. Indeed, it is Baghdadi's adherence to this same strategy that, as explicated below, arguably accounts for his rush in June 2014 to declare the resurrection of the caliphate and establishment of the 'Islamic State'.

That ISIL patently thinks and acts strategically is evidenced by its apparent adoption of the same seven-stage strategy to victory

promulgated by Al-Qaeda's operational chief, Saif al-Adl, in 2005. ISIL is currently at the fifth stage[16] along this path. This clearly illuminates Baghdadi's preemptive declaration of the caliphate[17].

> *...Baghdadi's elimination ... could throw ISIL's leadership into disarray and provide Al-Qaeda with an ideal opportunity to effect either a voluntary or enforced re-unification...*

It is disturbing to map the accuracy of this strategic trajectory dating from 2005 to the present and to realise that, from ISIL's vantage point, the movement is right on schedule in having declared the Caliphate in June 2014.

Similarly, the apocalyptic elements of the seventh and final stage—where the Caliphate is expected to triumph over the rest of the world—are clearly evident in ISIL's ideology and strategy. Its vision ineluctably entails an eventual epic clash between Islam and the infidels prophesised to occur in Dabiq, Syria, the name chosen by the group for its online magazine. As previously noted, like Al-Qaeda, ISIL sees itself and its fighters defending the Sunni *umma* against an array of aggressive predators, including apostate Iraqi and Lebanese Shia, Iran, the United State and the rest of the West. This alone ensures that ISIL's aims are not exclusively local, as is frequently argued, but like Al-Qaeda's, are global in ambition given the inevitability of this impending clash.

Mutual efforts to re-unite

ISIL portrays itself as the most faithful embodiment and effective agent of bin Laden's core goals and vision and asserts that Al-Qaeda, under Zawahiri, has deviated from its historical mission and the grand ambitions it was once on the verge of achieving. In this respect, it is therefore not surprising that ISIL's propaganda is profoundly reverential of bin Laden and deeply respectful of Al-Qaeda (though not Zawahiri): it refers to its soldiers, emirs and sheikhs in a positive manner and continues to glorify bin Laden's accomplishments.

For his part, Zawahiri has been very careful in his publicly released statements to hold out the prospect of reconciliation. This is clearly

evidenced in his statement from September 2015 when the Al-Qaeda leader declared,

> I here confirm clearly and unequivocally that if there is fighting between the Crusaders, the Safavids, and the secularists, with any group from the Muslims and the mujahideen, including the group of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and those with him, then our only choice is to stand with the Muslim mujahideen, even if they are unjust to us and have slandered us and broke the covenants and stole from the Ummah and the mujahideen their right to consultation and selecting their Caliph, and evaded to be ruled by the Shariah in disputes[18].

That these overtures are not exclusively rhetorical is evidenced by past serious attempts to achieve some *modus vivendi*. On at least three occasions in the second half of 2014, for instance, the elements required for some form of alliance or tactical cooperation had nearly coalesced: the attempted rapprochement in September shortly after US and coalition airstrikes against ISIL began in earnest; the similar efforts that followed in November after Baghdadi was incapacitated during a US bombing run[19]; and the aforementioned failed internal coup staged in Raqqa that December by Al-Qaeda supporters within ISIL[20].

Conclusion

For almost a decade and a half, Al-Qaeda and the Salafist-jihadist terrorist network that it spawned have defied our efforts to bring this struggle to any kind of meaningful conclusion. Its longevity is as much a history of our missteps and misreading of the threat as it is our adversaries' enormous capacity for change, adaptation and regeneration. That we now face an enemy that has transcended terrorist tactics to evidence credible conventional military capabilities in the cases of ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, as well as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, is testament to a challenge that has only become more variegated, diffuse and complex—and, quite simply, exponentially more difficult to defeat.

The US-led efforts against terrorism have now lasted longer than direct US military involvement in Indochina fifty years ago. The insistent claims since approximately 2011 that Al-Qaeda was on the brink of strategic defeat now surpass the time that it took Western

Allies to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. It is difficult to imagine a worse constellation of terrorist threats than that currently posed by both ISIL and Al-Qaeda, as well as their piebald affiliates, associates, franchises and provinces. Any kind of coordination of terrorist operations, much less a more formal *modus vivendi*, would have profound and far-reaching consequences for international security.

That likelihood is no less plausible than a Salafist-jihadist movement that today exercises sovereignty over large (but fortunately non-contiguous) swatches of territory and populations stretching from North Africa to South Africa. It is also no less plausible than a movement that has thus far withstood the greatest onslaught directed against a terrorist foe from the most technologically and doctrinally sophisticated military in the history of humankind. That this clash has consistently thwarted previous expectations of triumph with new tragedies, like the November 2015 Paris and March 2016 Brussels attacks, is reason alone to seriously study both the impact and second- and third-order effects of a potential ISIL-Al-Qaeda alliance.

CHAPTER 2

Schism or spat? The future relationship between Al-Qaeda and ISIL

The history of violence among elements of the jihadist movement suggests that the split between ISIL and Al-Qaeda core is the norm and not the exception. Al-Qaeda was dominant after the attacks of 9/11. It had funding, control of training camps, the charismatic leadership of bin Laden, the prestige of successful attacks, as well as the desire for unity among jihadist forces. These advantages have largely disappeared, and sharp differences have emerged between the two forces. Al-Qaeda rejects ISIL's immediate focus on a caliphate, its violence and persecution of minorities and its apocalyptic vision. Al-Qaeda would go after the distant enemy sooner and is open to alliances with groups with compatible aims. At present ISIL is ascendant, but advances by Al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jahbat al-Nusra could restore the competitive balance.

Divisions have always plagued the modern jihadist movement. Rival jihadists probably were behind the 1989 assassination of Abdullah Azzam, the pied piper of the Afghan Arab movement, and other jihadists repeatedly tried to kill Osama bin Laden himself during his time in Sudan. Al-Qaeda emerged as a splinter movement from the broader Arab Afghan cause and it often had difficulty working with, let alone controlling, fellow jihadists. Indeed, given the overall jihadist movement's bloody track record of internecine violence, the 2014 split between the Al-Qaeda core and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is more norm than exception.

During the late 1990s and immediately after the attacks of 11 September 2001, Al-Qaeda managed to bring together many strands of the modern jihadist movement. Several factors explain this relative degree of unity:

- First, Al-Qaeda often had access to considerable *funding*, allowing it to incentivise groups to work together and otherwise reward collaborative behaviour;

- Second, Al-Qaeda controlled access to *training camps* in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even groups that did not share its vision wanted to improve the proficiency of their members. Control of training camps enabled Al-Qaeda to direct recruits to their preferred clients, enabling a like-minded group within a country to become stronger and to proselytise when they were there, mobilising groups around a shared vision;

- Third, bin Laden's philosophy and *personality* were unusual. He was a charismatic yet humble man. He did not demand adulation but inspired those around him: an ideal combination to unify a movement filled with strong and zealous personalities;

- Fourth, Al-Qaeda over time gained considerable *prestige* through its attacks on the United States and other deeds. This stature expanded, enabling the group to attract more and better recruits and funding, thus ensuring even more power in the future;

- Finally, after the 2001 attacks, US and allied counter-terrorism efforts, which understandably lumped various strands of the jihadist movement together given their many shared goals and training, drove the external apparati together for self-preservation (especially those located in Afghanistan and Pakistan).

Al-Qaeda itself is now on the defensive, and many—but not all—of these factors have diminished. Al-Qaeda probably still has training camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but Pakistani military efforts and the drone campaign make these a shadow of what the group had established in the pre-9/11 era. Similarly, its access to funding and recruits are both diminished. Zawahiri lacks bin Laden's charisma and conciliatory personality, and under his charge the group's overall prestige has diminished: the core's operational accomplishments in the last five years are close to nil.

Not everything has changed, however. The whole movement is bound by numerous personal ties, often based on shared fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq and other theatres of jihad. Many of the individuals involved, particularly outside the Iraq and Syria core, see themselves as brothers-in-arms and are not eager to choose

sides. In addition, both Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are reaching for the same funding sources and recruits, giving them an incentive to pursue similar paths.

Nevertheless, in the author's judgment the split between the two movements is profound and based on fundamental differences in ideology and strategy:

- Although both Al-Qaeda and ISIL share a basic long-term vision of a world governed under Islamic law, they differ dramatically on priorities. ISIL leader al-Baghdadi prioritises building a state, to which most other goals are subordinated. Zawahiri, in contrast, still prioritises the 'far enemy' and is leery of establishing a state before conditions are ripe;

- In areas in which it rules, Al-Qaeda guides its affiliates like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Jabhat al-Nusra to treat minorities well and in general to be a friend of the people: ISIL emphasises religious purity and the use of terror to impose its will;

- Al-Qaeda and ISIL differ on whether to emphasise the war on the Shia and how much to cooperate with non-jihadist groups;

- Finally, some in ISIL embrace apocalypticism, which Al-Qaeda views with disdain.

Personal rivalries and violence have exacerbated these differences. Since 2014, the propaganda war has been intense, with senior Al-Qaeda ideologues denouncing ISIL as bloody and foolish, and ISIL blasting Al-Qaeda for its (quite real) relationship with Iran, among other sins. The fighting in Syria between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL has been exacting, with thousands dying. Outside the Levant, commanders embracing ISIL have challenged Al-Qaeda or its allies in Afghanistan, the Caucasus, North Africa, Yemen and elsewhere.

In the short-term, however, many jihadists—particularly those not attached to established groups that have declared loyalty to one side or another—are likely to work together or go from one group to another depending on which is more prestigious. The *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, for example, primarily involved gunmen

linked to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), but Amedy Coulibaly—who pledged loyalty to ISIL—carried out simultaneous attacks and was in contact with the core group of shooters. In 2015 in San Bernadino, California, the two perpetrators were radicalised by AQAP ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki and only over time did they shift their loyalty to the ISIL.

In the long term, one group may eclipse the other. Right now ISIL appears ascendant, and continued Al-Qaeda inaction, combined with possible ISIL advances, could foster a cycle that leads to defections and a loss of funding for Al-Qaeda that would eventually cripple it. The death of Zawahiri, who has no obvious successor, would make this even more likely. Al-Qaeda's collapse would probably not be absolute, but it would transform it into a minor player in the global jihadist universe. Conversely, a renewal of Al-Qaeda core advances by prominent affiliates such as AQAP or Jabhat al-Nusra, might restore the balance between the two groups. Although ISIL is currently stronger in general, the focus of Al-Qaeda on terrorism and the West should make Zawahiri and his followers a continued concern for US, Canadian and European counter-terrorism officials.

In the end, however, the jihadist movement as a whole is likely to remain strong. Although it has had different shapes over the last twenty-five years, it has fed off different wars and other calamities and is now far more influential and powerful than it was when it began.

CHAPTER 3

The enduring footprint of ISIL and Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria and Iraq

No comprehensive resolution of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq is in sight. ISIL is under pressure but remains strong as it prepares to defend Mosul. In Syria, allied forces seek to shrink ISIL's geographic and financial base, but the contradictory objectives of its opponents work in its favour. Kurdish advances under the Kurdish People's Defence Unit (YPG) are aimed at consolidating a Kurdish zone along Syria's northern border with Turkey and have provoked Turkish interventions. In the midst of this complexity, Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has emerged as an assertive actor. It is constantly seeking a wider alliance with jihadist forces outside ISIL and appears equipped to persist as an anti-Assad military or guerilla force.

Although the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is under more pressure now than at any time since the so-called caliphate was proclaimed in late June 2014, it remains a formidable military force in control of a significant amount of strategically valuable territory. Coalition efforts against the group in Iraq and Syria have borne fruit, but progress is painfully slow and has yet to challenge the group's key power centres in the cities of Mosul and Raqqa, as well as in Syria's eastern Deir ez-Zour. Progress in that respect has been heavily restricted by limitations in local force capabilities and, in Syria, by the chaotic fall-out following Russia's military intervention.

In Iraq, the December 2015 recapture of Ramadi illustrated what Iraqi security forces were capable of achieving with US support. However, destruction has been vast, with nearly 2,000 buildings destroyed and 3,700 more badly damaged[21]. Two months later, the Iraqi government has yet to declare the city safe for civilian habitation.

With much attention focused on preparing the path towards a battle for Mosul, expectations must necessarily be restrained. The city is three times larger than Ramadi, with a civilian population of at least 750,000[22]. Continuing disagreements over the weighting of local forces, the role of Turkey and Kurds, as well as determining post-conflict delineations of power and influence in the city itself

suggest much needs to be done before even preparatory clearing operations can begin. As US Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart declared on 9 February 2016, "securing or taking Mosul is an extensive operation and not something I see [happening] in the next year or so[23]''.

In Syria, efforts by the US-led coalition against ISIL appear to have slowed following Russia's military intervention on behalf of the regime of Bashar al-Assad that began on 30 September 2015. All international actors now seem to be reviewing their approach since a cease-fire was agreed in winter 2016. In large part due to its partnership with the Syrian Kurdish People's Defence Unit (YPG)—the Syrian wing of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK)—the coalition has forced ISIL out of large parts of northeastern Syria, securing key border crossings and paving the way towards the so-called caliphate's 'capital', Raqqa.

However, the YPG has reached the limits of how far into Arab territory its forces can reach. The formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015 by combining YPG forces with Assyrian, Arab, Armenian and Turkmen militias is a step in the right direction in expanding coalition anti-ISIL capabilities, but as it does in the west, the YPG dominates SDF operations east of the Euphrates. To the west, conflict dynamics have been significantly complicated by Russian-facilitated regime gains north of Aleppo; effective Russian outreach to the SDF; and a subsequent SDF offensive eastwards from the Kurdish stronghold of Efrin towards opposition positions north of the city in mid-February 2016. Under Russian air cover, the SDF advances have appeared increasingly in sync with those led by Hizballah and pro-Assad forces as little as 5 kilometres south of Aleppo.

Kurdish problems

Although too late to reverse, the US-led coalition might learn from its failure to develop partnerships with a broader set of local Syrian allies on the ground. The spectacular failure of the USD 500 million "Train & Equip" program was the result of a poor understanding of fundamental, conflict-driving dynamics, and it left the coalition partnered overwhelmingly with the controversial YPG. Although the US State Department has designated the PKK as a terrorist organisation, it has consistently refused to acknowledge that the YPG, and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) meet

the same standard. This despite the fact that the PYD was specifically established by the PKK in 2003[24], while the YPG was founded by famed PKK commanders like Xebat Derik and Polat Can. Today, the YPG retains a strict adherence to PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's teachings, and its fighters are self-identified veterans of other PKK fronts in Turkey, Iran and Iraq[25].

Despite its demonstrated success in fighting ISIL with US air support, empowering the YPG at the expense of the conventional opposition—rather than coordinating with both, equally—has directly encouraged the Kurdish movement to seek its own territorial objectives. According to a map hung in the office of the PYD's new diplomatic mission in Moscow, these stretch from opposition-controlled northwestern Idlib to the far northeastern corner of Hasakah. With Russian support for its western fronts, a YPG advance on opposition-controlled towns in northern Aleppo Province has sparked Turkish military intervention, thus opening another conflict front inside Syria. Unfortunately, US policy has empowered two sides of armed groups in Syria that explicitly oppose each other's very reasons for being, thereby creating potentially intractable conflicts beyond the one involving the Assad regime. Such complexity fuels the very conditions that groups like ISIL thrive in.

Countering ISIL finance

Beyond direct operations, coalition efforts to counter ISIL finance have expanded in recent months to include the targeting of cash and gold reserves, the group's financial leadership and its oil operations. The impact of the killing of ISIL finance minister Abu Salah in late November 2015[26] appears to have been compounded by further economic losses, as ISIL fighter salaries reportedly were halved in mid January 2016[27]. Whilst this represents important progress, ISIL differs from traditional terrorist adversaries in that it remains almost entirely financially independent. Its greatest source of income does not come from targetable assets like oil, but from taxation and extortion activities practiced *within* its 'state' territory amounting to roughly USD 600 million per year[28]. Therefore, the only truly durable mechanism for countering ISIL finance is taking back its territory, which requires effective and crucially representative local partner forces.

While progress against ISIL in Iraq will clearly take time, efforts appear to be on the right track. Meanwhile, coalition efforts in Iraq should continue to focus on consolidating gains made against ISIL and maintaining the time-consuming and resource-intensive process of building security force capacity, especially Sunni Arab tribal forces around Mosul and the extremely effective Counter-Terrorism Service.

The Syrian chaos

In sharp contrast, Syria appears to have now entered a period of unimaginable complexity during which an effective, comprehensive and unitary strategy against ISIL seems only a distant possibility. De-escalating broader conflict dynamics is an important priority so as to prevent the consequences of Western inaction from becoming irreversible. Opposition armed factions in Aleppo, long supported by the US and its regional allies, require significant supplementary assistance to prevent the establishment of a comprehensive east-to-west Kurdish zone of control, which would open a full-scale conflict with Turkey and ensure years of future hostilities. Meanwhile, a Russian-led 'scorched earth' strategy to enforce a siege of Aleppo looks set to spark refugee flows that could eclipse those seen in 2015. In the first six weeks of 2016, 374 Syrians drowned off the Greek coast, which is 50 per cent of the total for all of 2015[29]. The first 10 days of February 2016 alone saw 100,000 people flee Syria[30].

The scale and intensity of this proliferating chaos provides ISIL with some temporary space to prepare for future attacks, whether by pro-Assad regime forces or those working with the US-led coalition. Of equal if not more importance, however, is how Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, adapts to operate on this increasingly challenging and complex battlefield. Although it has spent the past three-and-a-half years embedding itself within opposition revolutionary dynamics in Syria through a policy of controlled pragmatism—limiting the extent to which it reveals its true Al-Qaeda colours—Jabhat al-Nusra has emerged as an increasingly self-confident and assertive jihadist actor in recent months. Its lead role in securing major strategic opposition gains in Idlib governorate throughout much of 2015 saw it steadily consolidate its stranglehold over what is now, in effect, Al-Qaeda's safe haven in Syria.

Amid chaos, potential opportunities

Russia's intervention posed a challenge to Jabhat al-Nusra, but a far greater one to the conventional opposition, which was present in greater numbers in the regime's sensitive zones in Homs, Aleppo, Deraa and northern Hama. Although it has faced many airstrikes in Idlib, Jabhat al-Nusra's territorial domination there has not been confronted by the ground offensives seen elsewhere in Syria. As the opposition struggled against the might of Russian airpower and ground forces composed of the Syrian Army and National Defence Force, as well as Hizballah and dozens of Shia militias, it was also coerced into engaging with an internationally-backed political process, beginning in Geneva in early-February 2016. Jabhat al-Nusra, meanwhile, maintained the consistent position that such a process would end in failure and that involvement in it equated treason[31].

As the political process struggled to take off and Jabhat al-Nusra's principal Syrian ally, Ahrar al-Sham, withdrew from it altogether, Al-Qaeda's affiliate pounced. According to multiple Islamist sources with unique insight on the subject, a series of secret meetings centred principally around Idlib's Jaish al-Fateh Coalition were called in early January 2016, at which Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership proposed a grand merger. The proposal: any and all groups could unite behind a single Islamic banner under which Jabhat al-Nusra would be willing to cede its name and its leadership. Talks initially stalled when Ahrar al-Sham insisted Jabhat al-Nusra break all ties to Al-Qaeda, but internal deliberation within Jabhat al-Nusra's Majlis al-Shura in early February 2016 saw that issue tabled as something under consideration[32]. As of mid February, discussions were continuing on the subject.

> *...Jabhat al-Nusra's leadership proposed a grand merger.*

Although still unlikely to be agreed, the fact that Jabhat al-Nusra's highest levels of leadership are now willing seriously to discuss breaking allegiance to Al-Qaeda in order to take advantage of the opposition's desperate situation speaks to the scope of its strategic ambitions. As such, Russia's intervention is both a potential threat and opportunity to Al-Qaeda's long-term objectives in Syria. In the months prior to Russia's intervention, Syria's opposition had begun questioning the true purpose of Jabhat al-Nusra's presence in Syria,

but the threat posed by Russia's air power has clouded such concerns. The extent to which they still exist may come to define how Jabhat al-Nusra adapts to face the year ahead.

Outlook

ISIL has evolved into a truly international movement since its declaration of a Caliphate in the summer of 2014. This provides it with invaluable strategic depth with which to defend itself in case of existential losses in Iraq and Syria. ISIL's expansion in Libya, the Sinai and possibly also in Afghanistan point to a future containing multiple, highly-capable ISIL affiliates, or 'states'. The battle against the group in Iraq looks set to be a slow one, while its core territories in Syria may yet escape a concerted coalition attack for longer than expected. Should pro-Assad forces take on ISIL in Raqqa or Deir ez-Zour, popular opposition to a regime return may see communities siding with ISIL as the lesser of two evils—akin to dynamics in Iraq in mid-2014.

Al-Qaeda, meanwhile, has strategically adapted to root itself into local conflict and in weak states, thereby exploiting existing rebellious forces in support of its long-term jihadist ambitions. While previous attempts at this slow-game approach failed in Yemen (2011-2012) and in Mali (in 2012), Jabhat al-Nusra appears to have mastered the art of 'controlled jihadist pragmatism'. Whatever the eventual outcome of the conflict in Syria, there appears to be no scenario in which Jabhat al-Nusra is militarily defeated or disappears from Syria. Even if Syria's opposition is one day forced from the majority of its territory, Jabhat al-Nusra appears ideally suited to embrace a guerrilla-style war.

CHAPTER 4

The impact of the Russian strikes on the creation of an al-Nusra Front

The Western attacks on ISIL, as well as the Russian military support of the Assad regime against moderate opposition forces, have allowed Jahbat al-Nusra to consolidate popular support with the Syrian population and other anti-regime militias. The group has become critical to the survival of the anti-regime resistance and smaller militias are increasingly merging with it to survive. Al-Nusra is an Al-Qaeda affiliate and is steadily transforming the ideology of opposition forces and the civilian population. It is committed to Al-Qaeda's global ambitions and is close to achieving a *de facto* Islamic emirate in northwestern Syria. If the Syrian regime makes further advances, the principal remaining Islamist hold-out, Ahrar al-Sham, could well ally formally with Jabhat al-Nusra. The consolidation of a geographic base would give the latter a platform for attacks against the West.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is neither the only nor the most dangerous jihadist threat the West faces today. Al-Qaeda remains strong and continues to grow globally, benefiting from an international fixation on ISIL[33]. The West's focus on a narrowly defined anti-ISIL mission provides Al-Qaeda with time and freedom to generate local support to lead the global jihadist movement after ISIL's defeat. Syria is an important test case for this dangerous future. Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, is cultivating deep relationships with Syrian populations and armed opposition groups fighting against the Syrian regime. It does intend to lead future attacks against the West, but only once it has achieved local support that the West cannot easily reclaim[34]. Jabhat al-Nusra's deep intertwinement with a dependent and increasingly loyal support base in Syria makes it more dangerous than ISIL, which rules by force and does not enjoy the same popularity[35]. Jabhat al-Nusra will use this durable support base to facilitate attacks against the West in the future. Western initiatives to work with Russia against ISIL in Syria both overlook Jabhat al-Nusra and ignore the impact of Russia's intervention in Syria, which is generating support for Jabhat al-Nusra and acceptance of Al-Qaeda's intent to wage global jihad.

Jabhat al-Nusra is one of Al-Qaeda's strongest affiliates and intends to create an Islamic emirate in Syria as a component of a future global Al-Qaeda caliphate[36]. By early 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra had achieved significant momentum towards this objective in northwestern Syria by using its own highly skilled fighting force to provide military support to the Syrian armed opposition and secure terrain within which the opposition can govern. In the absence of Western assistance, Jabhat al-Nusra's support is critical to the survival of the Syrian opposition in many areas, especially under the heightened strain of Russia's air campaign, examined more fully below. Jabhat al-Nusra translates its military alliances with Syrian opposition groups into the transformation of Syrian society, using governance structures and expansive religious outreach to transform the ideology of the Syrian opposition and Syrian civilians over time[37]. Its primary source of strength is therefore its intertwinement with the Syrian opposition and civil society, which enables its transformational agenda. It maintains a Syrian face to legitimise its presence, but has foreign-fighter contingents and carefully maintains relationships with global Al-Qaeda networks[38]. It is exploiting the opposition's reliance on it to transform its base in Syria into a staging ground for global jihad, as this report will demonstrate.

> *Jabhat al-Nusra's deep intertwinement with a dependent and increasingly loyal support base in Syria makes it more dangerous than ISIL...*

Russia claims to be fighting Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL in Syria, but in reality it is supporting the Assad regime against the Syrian opposition. Russia's strategic objective in Syria is to preserve its client regime by defeating Syrian opposition forces and forcing the US to agree to a negotiated settlement that preserves the regime. Russia advertises its Syrian campaign as one aligned with Western interests by claiming it targets "terrorists", but an examination of Russia's airstrikes since October 2015 proves that Russia is clearly targeting Syrian opposition groups, including groups that receive limited US support. Russia is not meaningfully targeting ISIL. Its aerial campaign has instead enabled the regime to recapture key terrain from the opposition at the entrance to the Alawite coastal heartland in Latakia Province and to position for the encirclement of opposition forces inside the city of Aleppo[39].

Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra's methodology positions it to rise as the Syrian opposition fragments under Russian pressure. The group plays a large role against Russian-enabled operations by the Syrian regime alongside other Syrian Salafist-jihadist groups. It has deployed significant reinforcements to Aleppo while maintaining strong support for opposition defences in Latakia Province[40]. The Syrian Salafist-jihadist group Ahrar al-Sham, an ally of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, also offers combat power and command-and-control capabilities to more mainstream opposition groups in northern Syria. The contributions and relative strength of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham encourage smaller opposition groups to merge under their leadership in order to survive the mounting military pressure. Three foreign-fighter groups based in northern Syria immediately pledged allegiance to Jabhat al-Nusra as Russia entered Syria in late 2015[41]. Two long-standing opposition groups in Aleppo also quickly merged under Ahrar al-Sham[42]. Numerous other opposition groups in the province received US support and still remained independent from Jabhat al-Nusra as of February 2016, but face a siege in the city of Aleppo that they may not survive[43]. Additional mergers under Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham are likely if the opposition in Aleppo does not receive international support. Eight groups in Aleppo Province agreed to unite under the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham's former leader Hashim al-Sheikh on 16 February 2016, demonstrating continued momentum towards the group's consolidation of power in the province. Ahrar al-Sham will almost certainly help Jahbat al-Nusra rise because they are allies and share the desire to unite the opposition under joint leadership. Even if they compete, Ahrar al-Sham's strength is a victory for Al-Qaeda because Ahrar al-Sham pursues a theocracy in Syria that will be vulnerable to penetration by Al-Qaeda religious scholars in the long term.

Despite its stated intent, Russia's intervention is helping Jabhat al-Nusra transform the Syrian opposition and establish a base for attacks on the West. Jabhat al-Nusra and Syrian Salafist-jihadist groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, initially began to broadcast messages calling for emigration into Syria in June 2015 after seizing the provincial capital of Idlib from the Syrian regime. They used a new social media outlet titled *al-Muhajirun*, or "emmigrants", to call on foreign fighters to come fight the Syrian regime while advertising a high quality of life in opposition-held Idlib Province[44]. A related English-language magazine also began to showcase foreign-fighter groups that contributed to military operations in

Idlib Province and to advertise the intent of these groups to return to their home countries to fight in the future[45]. The distribution of propaganda featuring foreign fighters with global ambitions normalises the concept of future global operations by Al-Qaeda from Syria. Russia's air campaign has accelerated Jabhat al-Nusra's ability to propagate this narrative by degrading the opposition to an extent that has led Syrians originally opposed to outside intervention to support calls for foreign fighters. Media outlets and Sharia bodies linked to Jabhat al-Nusra and Syrian Salafist-jihadist groups now describe the war against the Assad regime as a religious obligation for Sunni Muslims. Jabhat al-Nusra and even non-Salafist Syrian opposition groups have also begun to broadcast calls for mass mobilisation of Sunnis globally to fight in Syria under the slogan "Syria is in need of men". Jabhat al-Nusra will continue to leverage its role in battles against the Assad regime in order to legitimise the transformation of Idlib Province into a support zone for future global jihad as long as the Russian air campaign continues.

> *The distribution of propaganda featuring foreign fighters with global ambitions normalises the concept of future global operations by Al-Qaeda from Syria.*

Conclusion

Jabhat al-Nusra's success places it within reach of an Islamic emirate in northwestern Syria in the near term. It likely will not declare an emirate directly, as doing so would encourage Western action against it, but conditions are set for the emergence of one in all but name. Jabhat al-Nusra reportedly called for a full merger of opposition groups in Idlib Province in early February 2016, indicating that it believes it is close to achieving its objectives in northern Syria. According to unconfirmed reports, Ahrar al-Sham resisted the merger, likely in order to continue to build its own strength. It is unclear how long Ahrar al-Sham will continue to resist Jabhat al-Nusra's efforts to consolidate the opposition under one jihadist banner, however. The fall of the city of Aleppo to pro-regime forces could be sufficient to prompt Ahrar al-Sham to accept a merger in both Idlib and Aleppo Provinces in order to prevent a full defeat of opposition forces in northern Syria. Such an outcome would place Al-Qaeda at the helm of the Syrian revolution

in northern Syria and greatly accelerate the success of its religious agenda.

There are still mainstream opposition groups that remain independent of Jabhat al-Nusra in northern Syria. Current trend lines point to the disappearance of these groups, however, and the consolidation of power by Jabhat al-Nusra and its close allies. By allowing Russia to continue its air campaign and refusing to intervene to bolster the strength of Syrian opposition groups in northern Syria, the Western countries may be passively assisting Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies build an emirate for Al-Qaeda and a base for future attacks against the West. The outcome is potentially more dangerous than a temporary stagnation of the anti-ISIL campaign.

CHAPTER 5

From one global war to another

The US occupation of Iraq stimulated the creation of a domestic jihadist movement which evolved into the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Under the leadership of cleric Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIL refused to pledge allegiance to Al-Qaeda. When the Iraqi prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, moved to disband Sunni militias, ISIL transferred to Syria, first forming part of the anti-Assad opposition and then manoeuvering to control it. ISIL claimed to assume the role of protector of the Syrian population against the Assad regime and the neglect of the United States. Finally, it overran Iraq, capturing Mosul. Russia's entry into the conflict intensified the conflict further. The Syrian opposition was weakened considerably, leaving the Assad regime and ISIL as the principal combatants.

The "global war on terror" started by the George W. Bush administration following 9/11 diverged from its initial target, Al-Qaeda, and became embroiled in the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. A self-fulfilling prophecy was unleashed when, as part of this descent into disaster, a jihadist presence emerged as a form of resistance against the US presence in the very heart of the Middle East, where none had existed previously: Monotheism and Jihad (*Tawhid wal Jihad*) led by the Jordanian Abu Mus'ib al-Zarqawi, which became Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, it became known as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) under the dual leadership of the self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (a former police officer under Saddam Hussein's regime), and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (an Egyptian political emissary sent by Al-Qaeda's central leadership to regain control of a group that was becoming dangerously independent).

The United States became very successful in its efforts against ISI after it abandoned the rhetoric of the "global war" and its variations and concentrated its efforts in Iraq strictly on Al-Qaeda. Consequently, General David Petraeus encouraged the creation of anti-jihadist Sunni militias, together known as the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement, which included insurgents who, until recently, had been fighting against the United States. This re-alignment of battle lines against Al-Qaeda and ISI quickly bore

fruit, first in Baghdad, and then in the western province of Anbar, traditionally a jihadist stronghold.

Kurdish militias, however, resisted the deployment of *Sahwa* militias in Mosul in the hope of preserving their chances of controlling that city, as they had Kirkuk. This power vacuum in Mosul opened the way for ISI to establish a foothold in the area under the auspices of the Sufi order *Naqshabandiyya*, which comprised many former Baathist leaders. The merger of Iraqi Baathist terror techniques and those of Al-Qaeda explains, in part, some of the resilience of ISI, whose leaders and militants studied the teachings of Abu Bakr Naji, in the "Management of Savagery" (*idârat al-tawahhush)*.

The simultaneous elimination of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir in April 2010 dealt a serious blow to ISI. Senior Iraqi leaders, most of whom were veterans of Saddam Hussein's regime, exploited the opportunity in order to loosen the already fragile ties with Al-Qaeda's central leadership by appointing as their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a Salafist imam from Samarra. In 2004, Baghdadi had been detained for a few months by the US at Camp Bucca. It is very unlikely that the new ISI emir was then given full operational responsibility. However, because of his religious baggage (he had a degree in sharia acquired in Baghdad), he was able to prevail quite easily over the self-taught Osama bin Laden, who had never completed his management studies, and Ayman Zawahiri, a medical doctor.

When bin Laden was killed in May 2011, Baghdadi refused to swear allegiance to Zawahiri, thereby formalising ISI's complete break with Al-Qaeda. At the same time, ISI was spreading murderous propaganda in the wake of democratic uprisings in the Arab world, while Zawahiri was trying to make gains from the wave of dissent. Baghdadi also benefited from the extreme-sectarian politics of Irak's Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia fundamentalist who disbanded the *Sahwa* militias and went after their members. In addition, ISI leveraged its previous collaboration with Assad's intelligence services: the group was able to gain a foothold in Syria as a result of the 2011 revolution and the government's willingness to "jihadise" the conflict in order to stoke internal dissent and discredit its opposition.

In March 2013, a tenuous coalition of anti-Assad militias gained control of the city of Raqqa, a Syrian provincial capital on the banks of the Euphrates River—an unprecedented breakthrough. One month later, Baghdadi expelled and eliminated his former allies and proclaimed the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known under its Arabic acronym, Daesh. Paradoxically, this proclamation was rejected by Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of ISI, which severed ties with Daesh and, to consolidate the move, pledged its allegiance to Al-Qaeda. As a result of this schism in the jihadist camp, the majority of foreign volunteers rallied around Daesh the "internationalist" and abandoned Jabhat al-Nusra, which has a very strong Syrian identity.

Daesh's foreign fighters had been recruited mostly from the Arab world, until the West backpedalled in August 2013 when US President Barak Obama ultimately refused to authorise strikes against Assad in Syria; this despite the red line that the White House had drawn and the fact that the Syrian despot was dropping chemical weapons on Damascus. Jihadist propaganda accused the West and Russia of being complicit in abandoning the Syrian people to their executioner. A "humanitarian" jihad, in which volunteers claimed to rescue the Syrians who had been abandoned by everyone, was added to the revenge-focused jihad that resonated with Al-Qaeda's foreign recruits who migrated to ISIL. This rhetoric also hit home with young girls—and this was a first.

There came a second wave of jihad in the summer of 2014, primarily driven by Daesh's lightning-quick capture of Mosul in Iraq despite a report of a daunting preponderance of government forces. This triumphant discourse boosted recruitment, much as Baghdadi's proclamation of a caliphate allowed him to launch an aggressive global jihad. Barack Obama failed to react to the fall of Mosul or to the massacre of Christians, let alone that of Yazidis; he did, however, launch retaliatory air strikes after a US hostage was executed. Such half-hearted policies played into the hands of jihadists and their recruiting sentinels.

Daesh drafted a global apocalyptic narrative, translated into all the world's languages, that positions them at the forefront of the End of Time, a battle in which Baghdadi's stalwart supporters—the only absolute true Muslims—will surely prevail. It is not clear whether the leaders of Daesh buy into such prognostications, but they seem compelled by apocalyptic opportunism to create a narrative

designed to stimulate recruitment. Russia's direct intervention in Syria in September 2015, after years spent providing massive support to the Assad regime, feeds the apocalyptic narrative whereby the *Rûm*—the orthodoxy (not the Romans)—will confront the "Muslims" in northern Syria.

> *Daesh drafted a global apocalyptic narrative, translated into all the world's languages, that positions them at the forefront of the End of Time...*

However, Russian President Vladimir Putin's own "global war on terror" could be the linchpin that catapults the jihadist threat—a threat that has already reached unprecedented levels—into the stratosphere. George W. Bush's self-fulfilling prophecy allowed a jihadist presence to develop where none had existed before, and the subsequent emergence of jihadism ultimately fulfilled the very prophecy that brought it to life. That same perverse logic sees Putin, whose offensive has had only a marginal effect on Daesh, realise his own prophecy of a Syria whose revolution will have been expunged, leaving only Assad's and Baghdadi's zealots to carry on.

CHAPTER 6

Challenges to containing ISIL's expansion in Libya

ISIL has established a growing presence in Libya. It controls Sirte and 322 kilometres of the nearby coast, and has a presence in several other centres. ISIL is seeking to undermine the government by destroying the oil infrastructure that generates revenues, using extortion and looting for its own income. It attempts to expand its presence wherever it can, helped by the inclination of other militias to stay on their home turf and avoid confrontation. Even if Libyan security actors recognised the danger and decided to confront ISIL, they would need to develop a coordination capacity that does not currently exist. Western countries are looking at military strategies, but may need to calibrate their actions to avoid making the current chaos even more difficult to resolve.

Five years after the 2011 intervention against the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi, Libya is politically divided between two rival governments and parliaments; military coalitions are fighting each other; and UN attempts to forge a government of national unity are making no visible progress. The collapse of state institutions, combined with the country's state of chaos and internal fragmentation over the past five years have provided opportunities for Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) affiliates to grow stronger and gain some control over territory in Libya. Fearing that ISIL could use Libya as its new staging ground, regional actors and Western capitals are beginning to discuss possible military strategies to confront the group in Libya. No matter how alarming its recent advances in Libya are, it remains that careful analysis will be required to avoid unpredictable results and make the Libyan conflict harder to resolve ultimately. Such analysis must address the drivers propelling ISIL forward in North Africa, the territory it controls in Libya, the number of followers it commands, and tactics.

ISIL affiliates in Libya control the former Qaddafi stronghold of Sirte, where they have been able to establish themselves and carry out their gruesome practices, including public crucifixions and beheadings. They also dominate a 200-kilometre stretch of coast running east from Sirte to Ben Jawwad and have carried out attacks

on oil terminals further east. ISIL also has a presence (but does not control territory) in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, where it has been conducting guerrilla warfare in some neighbourhoods in which it enjoys an alliance of convenience with other armed groups fighting against a common enemy, the so-called Libyan National Army. Until June 2015, ISIL affiliates also had a significant presence in Derna, an eastern hub of radical Islamist activity, but they were expelled by a rival Islamist alliance ideologically closer to Al-Qaeda. Finally, ISIL has a proven ability to carry out hit-and-run operations in both eastern, and especially western Libya, through a network of cells, including in Tripoli, Sabratha, Bani Walid and Jufra.

Estimates differ wildly as to the group's membership, ranging for example from 2,000-3,000 (UN) to 5000-6,000 (US). The lower end of that scale appears more realistic, if only because there is a tendency to inflate numbers, not least by ISIL itself. After all, the group has made its Libyan expansion an important part of its propaganda message since October 2015, conjuring the spectre of the country as a jump-off point into the Maghreb, the Sahel and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Europe.

In the Libyan context, ISIL's rate of growth is alarming, as there were probably fewer than 1,000 followers in Libya in mid-2014. Fundamental to understanding its apparent success in Libya is the question of how it grew, both numerically and spatially.

Its initial growth in 2014-2015 appeared chiefly driven by the ideological boost the group received from its success in the Levant. This allowed ISIL's fledgling Libyan affiliates to attract new followers from the many other armed groups, Islamist or not, that exist in the country. It was most successful in drawing members from Ansar al-Sharia, in part because it assassinated leaders of the group who refused to pledge allegiance to it. In the chaos and militarily fragmented landscape of post–2011 Libya—and especially after civil war broke out in summer 2014, dividing the country into two rival camps—the budding ISIL brand found fertile soil.

Local chaos and a security vacuum also help explain its apparent success. ISIL's biggest success to date in Libya, the control of Sirte and surrounding towns since February 2015, came not so much as a result of ISIL's strength but rather was the by-product of weakness and resentment which the residents harboured towards other groups with greater military might. Dominated by tribes that

mostly remained loyal to the former regime (it is Qaddafi's birthplace), Sirte was neglected by the new Libyan authorities after 2011 despite the extensive destruction it suffered during the war. Not only was it left to its own devices, but revolutionary armed forces from Misrata repeatedly rounded up Sirte residents that they accused of being Qaddafi collaborators. Locals sought the protection of the local branch of Ansar al-Sharia, which ISIL later incorporated, as a means to protect themselves against Misratan arbitrary detention. They did it willingly.

Local rivalries between non-Islamist security forces was another factor that contributed to ISIL's rise in Sirte. Throughout 2013 and 2014, Misratan forces, attempting to control Sirte and use it as a launching pad to attack their rivals further east, attacked and gradually annihilated the Zawiya Martyrs' brigade, which until 2014 was the main army-affiliated unit operating on the outskirt of Sirte.

Similar dynamics explain ISIL's expansion into neighbouring small towns such as Harawa, which surrendered in an agreement brokered by town elders to avoid a bloody battle. ISIL's take-over of Ben Jawwad was even more emblematic of how the security vacuum in Libya enabled its penetration: from their nearby base in Nawfiliya, ISIL militants simply began occasionally to drive patrols into Ben Jawwad without facing any local resistance, until they declared it part of their territory in January 2016. ISIL-affiliated militias were thus able to capture several locales in the Gulf of Sirte with only a few hundred men and practically no fighting.

Conflicting domestic narratives about ISIL contributed to undermining efforts to confront the group in Libya. Following the political crisis of summer 2014, Tripoli authorities and their military allies belittled the budding presence of ISIL in Sirte and constantly referred to "the ISIL-lookalike in Sirte" as the fabrication of Qaddafi loyalists in exile. Conversely, groups allied to the internationally-recognised government in al-Bayda believed that it was their political foes in Tripoli and Misrata who were behind the attacks carried out by the militants in Sirte. On both sides of Libya's institutional divide political infighting overshadowed the fight against ISIL.

The arrival of foreign ISIL emissaries[46] after the summer of 2015 changed the manner in which ISIL governed its territory. Over time, ISIL affiliates imposed more draconian rule in the areas they

controlled. For example, compared to their relatively peaceful presence in Harawa and Ben Jawwad throughout 2015, since early 2016 ISIL has become more brutal: in Ben Jawwad and at the checkpoints on the road they control, ISIL affiliates arrest all those identified as being members of the police, army or local armed groups. They also round up oil company employees and anyone working for the government. In Sirte, public executions have increased.

ISIL affiliates have also increased their targeted attacks on the oil and gas infrastructure in the Sidra area, just east of the territory they control. In January 2016 alone, they managed to destroy seven crude oil tanks at the Sidra and Ras Lanuf oil terminals. They launched a suicide attack on a checkpoint controlled by the Petroleum Facilities Guards (PFG) in Sidra and beheaded some of its members. Although Libya's oil and gas infrastructure continues to be an important target of ISIL attacks, there is no evidence ISIL affiliates in Libya are currently able to tap into oil sales as a source of funding. Instead, their sources of funding appear to be local taxation (including smuggling), extortion, the looting of banks, kidnapping and contributions from wealthy sponsors. According to ISIL public messaging, the purpose of the group's attacks on Libya's oil and gas infrastructure is to deprive the current Libyan state of revenues. By doing so, it hopes to accelerate the collapse of the Libyan state (and governments), which it considers ruled by apostates. By shutting down export lines from Libya, they also hope to create economic turmoil in those countries that depend on crude oil imports from Libya.

The increased violence that ISIL affiliates in Libya have displayed since early 2016 and the simultaneous optimistic rhetoric voiced by the United Nations Special Envoy to Libya, Martin Kobler, regarding the imminent creation of a Government of National Accord have led many foreign capitals to believe that Libya is moving towards the formation of a united Libyan polity and, as a result, a united military front against ISIL.

For now, the West's hope for a united Libyan response to ISIL remains wishful. This is in part because mainstream Libyan militias tend to avoid generally outright confrontation, especially if there is a risk of tribal escalation of violence. Libyan leaders are chiefly interested in controlling their own territory and hesitate to stray too far from their home turf. They have also been suspicious, ever

since ISIL appeared, that entanglement with it would weaken their defence against their conventional enemies. Finally, even if they have come to recognise that ISIL represents a serious long-term threat, the dialogue and coordination that would be necessary among rival security actors is practically non-existent.

CHAPTER 7

ISIL and the Indonesian dynamic

Local factors are a prominent motivation for Indonesians joining the ranks of Syrian jihadists. The apocalyptic end-of-time narrative is a popular topic, anti-Shia hostility is strong and many still hope that Indonesia will become an Islamist state like ISIL. Domestic terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) has shifted its emphasis from jihad to education. ISIL-linked organisations send the largest number of fighters to Syria. Domestic organisations supporting Jahbat al-Nusra want recruits to return to Indonesia with military capabilities. Competition among jihadist groups could lead to clashes within Indonesia, possibly with an emphasis on radical brutality. Santoso, the leader of Mjuahedin Indonesia Timur (MIT), may decide to enhance his ISIL links and personal stature by declaring his Poso Mountain stronghold a province of ISIL.

The first Indonesians travelled to Syria to join the jihad in 2012. Many of these were students who made use of their relative geographic proximity, such as Riza Fardi, who was studying in Yemen[47], Wildan Mukhollad, who attended Al-Azhar University in Cairo[48], or Yazid Ulwan Falahuddin and Wijangga Bagus Panulat, who both pursued technical studies in Turkey until 2013[49]. They were followed by a steady stream of Indonesians departing from Indonesia itself. Estimates on the number of Indonesians in Syria vary greatly. In August 2015, Indonesia's counter-terror unit Densus 88 had a list of 166 verified by Indonesians in Syria. The estimate by the Indonesian National Intelligence Organisation (BIN) stood at 500, but this number had not changed over the past two years. In December 2015, Security Minister Luhut Panjaitan claimed the number of Indonesians in Syria was as high as 800[50].

Going to Syria: Motivations and local dynamics

The motivations of Indonesians going to Syria broadly resemble those of other foreign volunteers: to help fellow Muslims; to fight the Assad regime; to join jihad; to fight the Shia; to be part of the battle ushering in the 'End of Time'; and to live in the so-called Caliphate. The relative ranking of these motivations, of course,

differs from individual to individual. In the case of the Indonesians, it is also heavily influenced by local dynamics in Indonesia itself.

Joining the jihad—This was not just driven by the sense that this was a 'just war'[51] but by a lively debate among Indonesian jihadists since 2009, when Jemaah Islamiyya (JI) shifted from military to preaching and educational activities. This debate, which revolved around the legitimacy of jihad in Indonesia, the effectiveness of local jihadist efforts and how to fulfil the obligation of jihad, fractured the community and led to the formation of new militant groups[52]. The Syrian civil war provided Indonesian jihadists with a way to fulfil what they saw as the obligation of jihad, irrespective of whether they deemed the time to be right for militant jihad in Indonesia.

The 'End of Time'—This idea attracted considerable attention among Indonesian Islamists and indeed became one of the key reasons to travel to Syria in 2013 and 2014 because it stoked already increased popular interest in the subject among Indonesian Muslims. The enthusiasm for this concept led to a proliferation of books and debates about whether the increase in natural disasters in Indonesia, as well as a solar and lunar eclipse during Ramadan, constituted the apocalyptic signs of the 'End of Time'. Indeed, it was not unusual for Muslim news websites to have a dedicated section on the 'End of Time'. Some activists from Majles Mujahedin Indonesia (MMI) even went as far as establishing a committee to welcome the Mahdi[53]. The Syrian conflict reinvigorated the apocalyptic mood at home while at the same time providing a way to be part of the imminent 'final battle' between good and evil on the plain of Dabiq, as prophesied in Islamic eschatology[54]. Interestingly, in 2015, apocalyptic notions became less central to the motivations for going to Syria. This was partially due to a shift in interest from the 'End of Time' to the Caliphate itself, as well as a realisation that the 'last hour' was not as imminent as previously assumed.

Fighting Shia heresy—The sectarian rift resonated loudly as it drew upon and reinforced already existing hostility against Indonesian Shia. This hostility resulted from ongoing efforts by Indonesian Sunni Muslim organisations to redefine what it means to be Muslim in Indonesia since the fall of Suharto in 1998. This process of redefinition was driven by fatwas, hostility and violence towards those perceived as heretics: liberal Muslims, Ahmadis, and Shia[55].

The assault by the Assad regime on the Syrian Sunnis provided further proof of the heretical nature of Shia Islam in this local debate, while also offering an opportunity to take the battle to the heart of Shia Islam as represented by the Assad-Hizballah-Iran alliance.

Living in the caliphate—Once declared in June 2014, the caliphate became a magnet drawing in those Indonesians who had come to the conclusion that, despite repeated efforts to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia since the 1948-1965 Darul Islam rebellions, it was probably not going to happen any time soon. So those who wanted to live in a 'true' Islamic state started to depart for Syria. They comprised whole families who sold all their possessions in Indonesia, signalling clearly that they had no intention to return. Many of these included the wives and children of Indonesian mujahedin already in Syria.

Indonesians in Syria: Channels and organisation

In 2012 and 2013, Indonesian volunteers were spread across a variety of jihadist groups including Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Izz, Katibat al-Muhajirin, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and ISIL. From 2014 onwards, however, they almost exclusively joined JN and ISIL, with the majority of them going to ISIL. This reflected not only ideological preferences but also the channels they took to go to Syria. The early emigrants comprised Indonesians living abroad who made their own way to Syria and joined the organisation of their choice. But the majority of Indonesians who departed from Indonesia used channels that were linked to existing local jihadist networks. In 2014 and 2015, there were three important such channels: the MMI channel, the JI channel, and the ISIL channel. The MMI and JI channels were not open to people outside those organisations. They also had strict vetting procedures for those among their members who wanted to go for either humanitarian work or to gain military training and experience. Both MMI and JI directed their members to JN and it is estimated that between 20 and 40 Indonesians have so far been involved with JN[56]. The fact that both fighters and humanitarian aid workers intended to go for limited time periods, are not accompanied by wives and children, and that participation in martyrdom operations is discouraged, suggests that JI and MMI are still pursuing the long-term objective of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia and are using the

Syrian jihad much in the way that the first generation of JI used the Afghan jihad, namely to build military capacity.

The ISIL channel, in contrast, has been more open to 'outsiders' without prior jihadist credentials who may have been radicalised through Islamic study sessions and subsequently approached in person by recruiters from within the ISIL network in Indonesia. This network comprises a range of groups including Tawhid wal-Jihad, Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), Mujahedin Timur Indonesia (MIT), Mujahedin West Indonesia (MIB), the Bima Group, Ring Banten, Laskar Jundullah, the Islamic Sharia Activists Forum (FAKSI), as well as the Student Movement for Islamic Sharia (Gema Salam)[57]. Several of these organisations to some degree have their own channel to ISIL in Syria, have pursued recruitment independently, and, depending on the numbers of their recruits, have either sent them as a separate group or together with recruits from other networked organisations. Since late 2015, there has been even further fragmentation with the emergence of channels directly linked to the three main Indonesian figures in Syria involved in a power-struggle: Bahrumsyah, Abu Jandal and Bahrun Naim[58].

This increasing fragmentation of Indonesian ISIL supporters is also reflected on the ground in Syria. In September 2014, Indonesian and Malaysian foreign fighters established the Malay Islamic Archipelago Unit for the Islamic State, or *Katibah Nusantara lid Daulah Islamiyya*, based in Ash-Shadadi[59]. Katibah Nusantara is under the command of Bahrumsyah, who left for Syria in May 2014 and appeared in the ISIL video 'Join the Ranks' two months later. The unit's organisational structure includes 'departments' for combat fighters, snipers, heavy weapons, tactics and strategy, as well as military management[60]. It aims to provide Southeast Asian volunteers with military, Arabic and ideological training before "they join ISIL forces in roles ranging from front-line soldiers and suicide bombers to guards and administrators[61]".

Katibah Nusantara's size is currently estimated to be around several dozen but was previously believed to have been around 100[62]. The decline in the number of fighters can partially be explained by the heavy toll it took spearheading the battle against the Kurdish forces at Tel Tamr in April 2015[63]. It may also be explained through the increasing factionalisation which led to Abu Jandal organising his own unit, Katibah Masyaarik, in Homs.

Bahrum Naim and followers also left Ash-Shadadi, moving first to Raqqa and then to Manbij.

ISIL in Indonesia: Aman Abdurahman and Santoso

At the heart of the ISIL network in Indonesia is the cleric Aman Abdurrahman, who established Tawhid wal-Jihad in 2004. Aman Abdurahman held court on the extreme margins of the jihadist community where he advanced many of the ideas of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, whose jihadist and takfiri tracts he translated into Indonesian. The centrality of many of those ideas, as well as the attraction ISIL had for Indonesian mujahedin due to its territorial gains and military successes, allowed Aman Abdurrahman to outflank other Indonesian radicals. This was further cemented by the strategic coup of gaining the support of the one Indonesian Islamist figure who posed a charismatic challenge: former JI amir Abu Bakr Ba'syir. Both Aman Abdurrahman and Abu Bakr Basyir were imprisoned in the Nusa Kambangan penal complex, albeit in different prisons. This allowed Aman Abdurrahman through his followers to influence Abu Bakar Basyir to shift from a hitherto 'neutral position' on the JN-ISIL discord in Syria in favour of ISIL.

Another key figure in ISIL's Indonesian network is Santoso, the leader of Mujahedin Indonesia Timur (MIT). Santoso and MIT have their roots in the 1998-2007 Poso conflict. Unaddressed Muslim grievances provided the fertile ground for emergence of new jihadist groups. MIT was established by Santoso in 2011 and has since been involved in open conflict with the Indonesian police, as well as running training camps in the Poso mountains. When the Syrian conflict erupted, Santoso was among the first Indonesians to pledge loyalty to ISIL in 2013. His reaching out to ISIL, however, must be seen as another strategic move, which, like that of Aman Abdurahman, aimed at repositioning himself among Indonesian extremists. To date Santoso has proven less successful. This may, however, change if the ISIL leadership in Syria decides seriously to embark upon establish a Southeast Asian province because Santoso, unlike Aman Abdurahman, controls territory.

Conclusion

Indonesian interest in the Syrian jihad has been driven by local Indonesian dynamics. These have pushed Indonesian volunteers towards Syria and have seen Islamists in Indonesia, such as Aman Abdurrahman and Santoso, reach out to ISIL to elevate their own position within the Indonesian jihadist community.

The increasing fragmentation of ISIL supporters in Indonesia is a clear sign of weakness. This weakness, however, may increase the risk of violence in Indonesia as different factions compete with each other by launching violent attacks. Moreover, these attacks may increase in frequency as it becomes more difficult for Indonesians to travel to Syria, thus making local jihad the only outlet left for jihadist fervour[64].

The competition between different pro-ISIL factions may also result in efforts to 'out-radicalise' each other by adopting more brutal methods of killing in line with 'the management of savagery'.

The pressure on ISIL in its core territories of Syria and Iraq could also increase the risk of violence in Indonesia should the ISIL leadership decide to push into new areas in order to establishment a new province. Here again local dynamics are relevant. Santoso has already made his case to ISIL for using the territory he controls in the Poso Mountains.

> *...weakness ... may increase the risk of violence in Indonesia as different factions compete with each other by launching violent attacks.*

It can also not be ruled out that, at some point, Santoso may feel compelled to announce an ISIL province in the Poso Mountains unilaterally. Here he needs to weigh the additional attention he will receive from the security forces against the gains in stature he will obtain.

CHAPTER 8

Offline propaganda by ISIL

In addition to issuing online propaganda designed to recruit foreign fighters and encourage jihadist attacks abroad, ISIL has a sophisticated offline communications capability designed to achieve total information control within its territory. To ensure absolute communications domination, access to the Internet is being removed, outside radio signals are jammed and satellite dishes are banned. The population is given a picture of an idealised, benevolent but also vengeful caliphate. The propaganda subjugation of the population may make it impossible to completely destroy ISIL. Those within its territory will have an alternate view of reality which has its only modern parallel in North Korea.

Since the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) seized control of Mosul in the summer of 2014, the group has persistently been at the forefront of mainstream media, commanding headline news and driving the international security agenda. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's iteration of the Islamic caliphate poses a unique security threat to its varied adversaries. In the space of five years, it has attracted tens of thousands of supporters to join its ranks from as many as 86 states[65]. Beyond that, it has been able to inspire "self-starter" terrorist attacks far more effectively than Al-Qaeda ever did[66]. ISIL's propaganda machine has played a critical role in generating and sustaining its ability to project power. Indeed, propaganda is an essential pillar of its overarching strategy[67]. While audiovisual media alone does not cause radicalisation or recruitment, it is an important catalyst to the process as a way to reinforce the beliefs of sympathisers, to provide "evidence" for the claims made by its recruiters, and to inspire global—sometimes violent—activism in its name[68].

Meaningfully countering ISIL's political messaging has long been a central objective of the international coalition that was formed to destroy the group in 2014[69]. Indeed, the topic of propaganda has featured in most key speeches made by Western leaders about the group since late summer 2014, when Mohammed Emwazi's string of beheading videos began[70]. However, while there is no denying that the group's media efforts require a response, the focus on the phenomenon as it appears online has served as something of a red

herring. Coalition governments have been overly preoccupied with how ISIL propaganda's Internet presence endangers their national security, in comparison to how it is being applied offline in the so-called caliphate itself.

Indeed, rarely is it recognised that the thousands of photo reports, videos, audio messages, magazines and *anashid* (religious songs) that the group's official media offices produce are not intended merely for Internet consumption abroad. Rather, this content is aimed at a domestic audience—the people over whom ISIL rules. In a manner that is typical of totalitarian regimes, as pointed out by political scientists Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, communications are being used as a mechanism to consolidate the group's existence, exert political control and preserve its longevity[71]. While its offline application may pose a less immediate menace than the threat of foreign fighters and self-starters, this aspect of its propaganda is being ignored at the peril of the coalition. Unless it is recognised and mitigated, it may become impossible to truly degrade and destroy ISIL insurgency.

The infrastructure

For political messaging to enjoy maximum success, a state or proto-state must exert full control—or something close to it—over mass media[72]. In the digital communications age, there are few places on Earth where such complete control is possible, as it necessitates the rare ability to limit all other channels of information. The Democratic Republic of North Korea is one such example; ISIL's heartlands in Syria and Iraq are another[73].

For years, ISIL has proactively wrested control over the information space in the territories it controls. When it enjoys full control of an area, one of its first actions after solidifying its provision of governance and judicial structures and bedecking the streets with its flag, is to establish *nuqat i'lamiyya* (literally, 'media points')[74]. These makeshift propaganda offices are often nothing more than shipping containers or mobile homes equipped with projectors, printers and plastic chairs [Figures 1-2][75]. Sometimes, they are mobile [Figure 3][76]. As well as serving as open-air cinemas for any of ISIL's 40 official video-producing media outlets, these points are satellite publishing houses for its written propaganda[77]. Each week, for example, ISIL's 16-page news publication, *al-Naba',* is electronically disseminated across the 39 provinces of the

caliphate[78]. At media points, it is downloaded and printed before supporters embark on their weekly newspaper round, which falls on a Saturday [Figures 4-6][79]. Media points are also the places in which the group's electronic magazine, *al-Maysara,* is burned onto compact disks, and al-Himma Library *dawa* materials are printed and bound [Figures 7-8][80].

ISIL's information infrastructure extends to the airwaves, too. Its official daily bulletins, which are broadcast over social media in five languages, are more than online phenomena[81]. They are disseminated in analogue format throughout the 'caliphate', alongside 'on-the-air *fatawa'*, revisionist history programs on 'the *kafir* Baath Party', and call-in medical clinics—all of which are aired daily by al-Bayan Radio, ISIL's own FM station which operates from Tripoli Province in Libya to Nineveh Province in Iraq [Figures 9-10][82].

Substantial as it may be, the actual efficacy of this infrastructure would be far less consequential were it not for the group's stranglehold on the free passage of outside information into its borders. If ISIL is to sustain its totalitarian state-building project, outside channels of media that run against the party line pose a long-term destabilising threat. Recognising this, the group has worked to remove free access to the Internet, jam FM radio signals and ban satellite dishes, which it refers to as *'adu min al-dakhil* (an enemy within) in official publications [Figures 11-12][83]. Everywhere in the 'caliphate' heartlands, public access Internet cafes must now be monitored and licensed by the group's Public Security Office[84]. In several provinces, private access has been entirely banned, regardless of whether it is for local soldiers, foreign fighters or civilians; in others, it is in the process of being shut down [85].

The sum of all this is a situation in which news that runs contrary to ISIL's rigorously dictated line is hard to come by for those living under it. Whether one is in Iraq or Syria, credible reports about the global coalition's efforts is scarce indeed, and the few tidbits that do get through become instantaneously obscured by the overwhelming quantity of ISIL-produced disinformation. Conspiracy theories run amok and confusion as to the coalition's real aims is rife, such that the caliphal narrative is the only constant.

The message

As previous research empirically demonstrates, the body of official ISIL propaganda circulated online is more complex than mainstream media coverage would suggest[86]. Far more prominent than the instances of ultraviolence for which Islamic State is infamous are representations of the utopian caliphate "state", be they photos of wildlife and waterfalls or videos showing street cleaners and maternity wards.[87]

The same can be said of the propaganda that is circulated in the real world—ISIL brands itself offline as the benevolent, as well as vengeful, 'caliphate'. The 25 photo essays and three video features it publishes each day are designed to distract from reality and generate a rally-around-the-flag effect[88]. On a given day, civilians in any one part of Islamic State's territories may be force-fed images of waterfalls in Nineveh Province, vegetable agriculture in Salahuddin Province, electricity engineers in Barakah Province and military advances in Damascus Province—and that is not to mention content emerging from ISIL's overseas provinces [Figures 13-16][89]. Images of bustling markets in Libya, cannabis plants being burned in Afghanistan, religious sermons in Nigeria and ambushes in Egypt are equally ubiquitous[90]. There is a constant, unrelenting stream of high-definition "evidence" of divinely-driven statecraft and military momentum. Furthermore, its utopian expansionism aside, the group's adversaries are bundled—and condemned— together, regardless of whether they are allies or enemies, as dead children and old people are paraded before the propagandists' cameras[91].

> *Conspiracy theories run amok and confusion as to the coalition's real aims is rife, such that the caliphal narrative is the only constant.*

Morale is buoyed among supporters, and despair entrenched for potential dissenters: civilian sympathisers are able to distract themselves from the iniquities of ISIL rule by looking on at the seemingly stable, fruitful lives of their brethren elsewhere; soldiers losing ground on one front can find inspiration from victories allegedly won hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles away; and potential dissenters are deterred as the perception of generalised

risk is compounded by gruesome films in which like-minded individuals are burned, drowned or dismembered to death[92].

Conclusion

In ISIL's heartlands, propaganda is total. It stretches from the morning news to lunchtime listening and evening recreation. Ultraviolence is routinised, juxtaposed with visceral scenes of beauty and vivid, euphoric depictions of prayer. Crucially, and in stark contrast to when it is disseminated online, its offline delivery is mono-directional and, as things stand, uncontestable. As such, its offline consumers are subjected to what Paul Kecskemeti, writing in 1950 about Nazi and Soviet propaganda, termed the "suggestive effect"—as a substitute for certainty, the official, ubiquitous ISIL narrative "is the only thing that can be accepted[93]". Kecskemeti continues: "every part of [this narrative] is designed to enhance respect for the totalitarian government, to generate approval of its policies, and to silence doubts as to the power, benevolence, wisdom, and cohesion of the ruling clique[94]".

As part of an exacting, rigorously designed communications strategy, ISIL is doing more than projecting its power. Through its voluminous media output and efforts to secure a monopoly on information, the organisation is systematically working to consolidate political power in its territorial heartlands, curtail the possibility of local dissent and entrench a conspiratorial, jihadist understanding of the world. The global anti-ISIL coalition has been active in challenging the group's propaganda. Questions of efficacy aside, however, the parameters for success in its information war are, at present, exclusively focused on countering the group's online influence. Tactics are thus devised based on their ability to undermine the organisation's recruitment of new members and inspiration of attacks in its name. This is to the detriment of the coalition's strategic goal of eliminating the group, as it has served to distract from this less obvious—but more insidious—offline application of ISIL media.

Figure 1: "Establishing a media point in Zawba'a", Janub Province
Media Office, 29 October 2015.

Figure 2: "Opening a media point in the city of Sirte",
Tripoli Province Media Office, 31 August 2015.

Figure 3: "A mobile media point's tour in the eastern sector",
Khayr Province Media Office, 9 September 2015.

Figure 4: "Distributing *al-Naba'* magazine in the Samarra' Peninsula
to ordinary Muslims, Salahuddin Province Media Office,
26 November 2015.

Figure 5: "Distributing *al-Naba'* and *da'wa* books and pamphlets
to soldiers of the caliphate", Diyala Province Media Office*,*
3 December 2015.

Figure 6: "Printing and distributing the *al-Naba'* news publication",
Homs Province Media Office*,* 24 December 2015.

Figure 7: "Burning and distributing *al-Maysara* electronic magazine to ordinary Muslims in the eastern region", Khayr Province Media Office*, 28 August 2015.

Figure 8: "Opening a media point in the city of Sabikhan", Khayr Province Media Office, 26 July 2015.

Figure 9: "Wait, we are also waiting",
al-Naba' XI, 29 December 2015, 16.

Figure 10: "al-Bayan Radio Infographic",
al-Naba', 29 November 2015.

Figure 11: "The banning of satellite receivers", Department of Hisba, 2 December 2015.

Figure 12: " al-Bayan Radio Infographic", *al-Naba',* 29 November 2015.

Figure 13: "Nature in the city of Mosul", Nineveh Province Media Office, 21 January 2016.

Figure 14: "One of the onion producers in the province",
Salahuddin Province Media Office. 21 anuarv 2016.

Figure 15: "Aspect of the work of the Services Department:
repairing powerlines in the city of al-Shadadi", Barakah Province
Media Office, 21 January 2016.

Figure 16: "Targeting the positions of the Nusayri army in the
environs of Liwaa' 128 in eastern al-Qalamun", Damascus Province
Media Office, 21 January 2016.

CHAPTER 9

Why do people leave ISIL?

Many foreign fighters who joined ISIL to fight against the Assad regime, or take part in jihad, have become disillusioned and sought to return home. There have been many causes, rooted in the difference between expectations and harsh realities on the ground. A high proportion did not want to engage in the internecine battles among jihad militias. Many were repelled by ISIL's brutality and disregard for human life. Others found discrimination against races or nationalities instead of utopian social harmony and equality, and complained that their group was used as cannon fodder. Some judged ISIL leaders to be corrupt and hypocritical and indifferent to suffering, rather than humanitarian champions. The existence of foreign fighters willing to discourage others from joining ISIL opens up possibilities for damaging ISIL's recruitment appeal.

In many respects, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has become a victim of its own success. Since it has come to dominate the conflicts in both Syria and Iraq, much has been made of the remarkable fashion in which the group has been able to mobilise tens of thousands of recruits—men, women, and entire families—in support of its cause. These migrants to the so-called Caliphate are attracted to the group's millenarian cause for a wide variety of reasons. However, quite often these causes create unrealistic expectations and migrants expect to find a political panacea, a religious utopia and flawless racial harmony. As is common to all such projects of idealised perfection, the chasm between expectation and reality proves corrosive over time.

ISIL is highly susceptible to these shortcomings not just because of the expectations it has created among supporters and members, but also because of the constantly changing nature of Syria's civil war. Perspective is important when considering the latter issue: at different times, different individuals have travelled to Syria for different reasons. It is important to contextualise and understand these varied motivations, as well as how they have shifted over the last five years. This paper will explore a variety of themes, highlighting key areas of ISIL's narrative where a significant gap

exists between promise and reality, fuelling defections from the group.

Fighting injustice

Narratives of fighting injustice have resonated particularly strongly in jihadist propaganda relating to the Syrian crisis. These views were particularly pronounced at the start of the conflict when the situation was more credibly arranged as a battle between the Assad regime and anti-government forces (whether secular or religious). Fighters who travelled in the initial phase of the conflict often framed their participation in it in terms of wanting to "help" and "assist" the Syrian people. During an interview with British foreign fighters who were members of ISIL, some of them told the author, "the truth is many people left to help the Syrian people, then we got labelled as terrorists[95]".

> *As is common to all such projects of idealised perfection, the chasm between expectation and reality proves corrosive over time.*

This statement highlights one of the first areas that posed a dilemma for foreign fighters. In the early phase of the war, many Western migrants to the conflict did not regard their participation as being either contentious or morally ambiguous. For them, the war was a national liberation struggle sharply focused against a tyrannical despot. There were no extraterritorial ambitions expressed by any of the major fighting groups at that time, and Western governments were both declaring the Assad regime to be illegitimate while also supporting (often materially) armed rebel factions. These early fighters therefore likened themselves to those who had participated in the Spanish civil war[96]. Indeed, when *The Guardian* journalist George Monbiot made that very comparison in an op-ed for his newspaper, foreign fighters contacted the author of this paper and asked him to convey their gratitude to Monbiot because of their belief that "his piece really helped the brothers out here[97]". When Western governments began pursuing these fighters through counter-terrorism legislation, it had a profound effect on their outlook towards the conflict. Prosecutions coupled with strong public pronouncements from officials raised barriers to participation by compelling aspirant fighters to first consider the potential implications of their endeavour.

This dilemma was further accentuated when different opposition factions began fighting among themselves in early 2014, a period often referred to as the *fitna* (discord). Groups such as the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusrah and Ahrar al-Sham began fighting ISIL, and intra-group factionalism and violence have continued in years since. The idea of fighting other Sunni Muslims for unclear or ostensibly partisan reasons prompted some foreign fighters to re-examine their role in the conflict. "Muslims are fighting Muslims; I didn't come for that", a disillusioned British fighter from London told the author[98].

Concerns over infighting exacerbated tensions on other issues too, such as ISIL's lack of humanitarian concern towards civilian populations and its preoccupation with fighting other jihadist groups instead of the Assad regime. From a database collected by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), at King's College London, of 60 public defector narratives, at least 21 individuals (35 per cent) cited this as a reason (sometimes in addition to others) for leaving the group[99]. "I wasn't doing what I had initially come for and that's to help in a humanitarian sense the people of Syria", said an Australian defector called Abu Ibrahim[100]. Other fighters stated that the group "is not protecting Muslims, it is killing them[101]".This broader campaign of fighting against other Muslims has also fuelled disillusionment about the group's priorities, with one defector stating that his colleagues "were no longer targeting Assad forces, but rebel factions[102]". During the peak of intra-group rivalry and factionalism in early 2014, one defector even went as far as warning others against travelling to Syria. "I want to tell all the mujahideen not (to) come to Syria", he said. "This is not jihad; you will find yourself killing other Muslims[103]".

Islamic unity

One of the strong utopian aspects of ISIL's message is its claim that it is capable of creating a perfect society. Its propaganda clearly states that while issues like racism or class division riddle Western states, everyone is equal in their society. Indeed, the only distinction between one person and another arises around the issue of piety and devotion to God[104]. The underlying corollary is that ISIL is able to resolve tensions around identity and belonging that many of its recruits experience by offering a supra-cultural

identity that transcends geography and race. It is an intellectual identity where membership is achieved through a fraternity of the faithful, providing recruits with resolution and purpose.

A strong sense of brotherhood is consequently presented in ISIL propaganda, particularly in non-combat videos and pictures reporting *istirahat al-mujahideen*—militants drinking tea and singing with one another[105]. ISIL therefore fosters a sense of unity by urging Muslims to relocate to the "land of Islam," which they argue is the natural home of all Muslims[106].

Defector testimonies once again highlight the chasm between expectation and reality, with 8.5 per cent of all those who left the group citing ethnic or racial tensions as their reason for doing so[107]. A number of fighters have explained, for example, how they felt one group was given preferential treatment over another, and how the group they belonged to was being used as little more than cannon fodder. Various groups make this claim, each one accusing the other of having secured a more favourable deal for itself. Thus, Syrian fighters have accused ISIL of neglecting Syrians who first struggled against the Assad regime and initiated the revolution that gave rise to the so-called Caliphate. They also feel that Syrian civilians are not being looked after sufficiently well, despite suffering tremendously in the ongoing conflict. Others complain about the apparent racism of Arab ISIL fighters towards non-Arabs. Perhaps the best known case in this regard is of an Indian fighter who alleged that his Asian background resulted in him being given menial and degrading tasks, such as being ordered to clean toilets.

Corruption and barbarism

The final substantive area of defector disillusionment stems from the arbitrary and random nature of the group's behaviour, particularly with regards to corruption and barbarism. Given that the group derives its legitimacy from claims to Islamic authenticity and the institution of the 'caliphate', ongoing support is contingent on the movement maintaining an ostensibly religious character. ISIL regularly falls short in this regard. Many of its fighters are religious novices, motivated to join the group primarily to seek adventure, prove their masculinity and gain redemption. They lack a deep knowledge of Islam and do not have an established religious pedigree[108]. When they are seen to fall short of these utopian

ideals, disillusionment can grow (particularly among more religiously-motivated fighters).

The dataset on defectors shows that just over 21 per cent of them cite corruption and barbarism as their reason for leaving[109]. A Syrian fighter named Saddam Jamal had been a drug dealer before the uprising and joined ISIL because of its growing power and strength, before he chose to defect. "They think nothing of bringing down a whole building with women and children inside, just to kill one person," he argued[110]. Another fighter, a Tunisian, noted that the group has become so barbaric that it is simply killing for the sake of killing. "It's not a revolution or jihad, it's slaughter," he said[111].

There are a number of issues relating to the hypocrisy of leaders who do not practice what they preach, or others who seems to be indifferent to the suffering of ISIL's enemies. Given that a substantial portion of ISIL recruits cite humanitarian concerns as being one of the main initial factors that caught their attention with regards to the Syrian crisis, this is a crucial area to consider when exploring (and communicating) ISIL's shortcomings.

Conclusion

Totalitarian movements create the conditions for their own failure when they promise to realise utopian ideals. ISIL is no different from any of the millenarian movements that have preceded it in this respect. The gap that exist between reality and expectation therefore provides opportunities for encouraging disengagement and defection while also fomenting further disillusionment. Many pressure points exist beyond those identified in the broad themes of this short paper, including the difficulties of everyday life in the 'caliphate' or the boredom recruits experience after migrating. Given that many of those who embrace such movements do so for non-ideological reasons, and are often guided by peer-networks or emotive considerations, there are unique opportunities to intervene in the debate. This would help damage the group's appeal by highlighting its inability to live by the standards it likes to project and its persecution of the very people in whose defence it claims to act, namely ordinary Muslims.

"People want to come back", a British foreign fighter told the author during an extensive interview about disillusionment within the ranks of ISIL. "They found out jihad is not what they thought[112]''.

CHAPTER 10

The foreign fighters problem: Why do youth join ISIL?

Young people join ISIL for an extraordinary variety of reasons. Some feel a religious mission; others seek adventure. Many are attracted by the ideal of a caliphate. ISIL has a strong appeal in Europe among marginalised youth, but has had relatively less recruitment success in the United States, where Muslims citizens are well integrated in society. Research emphasises the importance of social bonds and family engagement in preventing recruitment, and the high correlation between time spent on the Internet and support for violent extremism. The return of fighters with stories of abuse and brutality gives governments and media companies the opportunity to feature negative testimony about life in ISIL territory. Countries need to mobilise an 'army of volunteers' to persuade young people one-on-one to resist ISIL recruitment messages.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is simultaneously a criminal organisation, a proto-state and an apocalyptic cult with global terrorist ambitions. Volunteers are coming to ISIL by the tens of thousands, enticed by the chance to live in the only "place on the face of the Earth where the Sharia of Allah is implemented and the rule is entirely for Allah", as well as the promise of sex, violence and money. Some imagine they are joining a humanitarian mission, helping disenfranchised Sunnis. Many of these foreign volunteers will end up serving as cannon fodder.

Why do they join?

Terrorist leaders encourage participation by offering two broad types of incentives to individual members: material incentives in the form of physical protection, housing, food and cash; and non-material incentives in the form of spiritual and emotional rewards. ISIL has advertised these positive incentives to potential fighters, boasting about a "five-star jihad", that includes free housing, "healthcare in the Khilafah", schooling for fighters' children, taking care of orphans and the opportunity for individuals who cannot afford a wife to acquire sexual slaves or concubines. For example, two German recruits who escaped from ISIL and were then tried upon their return said that they had been recruited in Germany by

a "false preacher" who emphasised religion more than the requirement to join in the fighting. He promised that they "would drive the most expensive sports cars and have many wives" and that they could leave whenever they wished. Neither of these claims was true, the German recruits would find out.

From reading ISIL's literature, watching its propaganda and following its supporters on social media, it is possible to get a sense of what additional factors might attract foreign youth. In a May 2015 statement encouraging Muslims around the world to make *hijrah* (migration) to the 'Islamic State', Baghdadi claimed that Muslims living outside of ISIL-held territory were "homeless" and "humiliated", while assuring that inhabitants of the so-called Caliphate lived "with might and honour, secure by God's bounty alone". ISIL offers youth a chance to remake society and reinvent themselves. It offers a sense of purpose and a chance to be a hero. But jihadists have indicated they were also seeking adventure and a more glamorous life. Ignorance about Islam appears to make youth more vulnerable.

There is undeniable appeal to joining a group that is fired up with righteous indignation. Some people, moved to help others, join political parties, raise money for causes or try to increase awareness of injustices around the world. Some risk their lives covering war zones as reporters or as physicians healing the sick. But some individuals are willing to kill civilians as part of their holy war against perceived oppression, even though all mainstream religions forbid this. Some individuals, sadly, see jihad as a cool way of expressing dissatisfaction with a power elite, whether that elite is real or imagined; whether power is held by totalitarian monarchs or by democratically elected leaders. Many seek redemption from a sense of deep humiliation; while still others may believe they are participating in the lead-up to the End of Times. Because there is such a wide variety of "wants" satisfied by jihadist organisations, prevention and counter-radicalisation programs need to be tailored to individual needs.

ISIL is primarily a threat to neighbouring states, as well as weak states throughout the Middle East and Africa. But ISIL will undoubtedly continue to attempt attacks in the West. There are three broad categories of likely perpetrators outside of Syria and Iraq (not only in the West, but around the world):

- foreign recruits who return from the battlefields to bring their holy war back home;

- home-grown or self-recruited actors, inspired by ISIL and its ideology, perhaps over social networks, or commissioned by its money; and

- trained terrorists emanating from its strongholds to lead an ISIL attack.

Western recruits represent the principal threat to North America, at least for now. ISIL would very much like to turn Western Muslims against their homelands and, for now, this has proven more easily accomplished in Europe than in the United States. One primary explanation may be that the pool of disenfranchised Muslim youth is larger in Europe. European Muslim youth describe themselves, often accurately, as victims of prejudice in the workplace and in society more generally. In the most recent *European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*, one in three Muslim respondents reported experiencing discrimination, with the effect greatest among Muslims aged sixteen to twenty-four (overall discrimination rates decline with age). Muslims in Europe are far more likely to be unemployed and to receive lower pay for the same work than 'native' Europeans. Consequently, Muslim immigrants in Europe are disproportionately impoverished. While 10 per cent of native Belgians live below the poverty line, that number is 59 per cent for Turks and 56 per cent for Moroccans in Belgium. There are 4.7 million Muslims living in France, many of whom in poverty. An estimated 1,550 French citizens have left for Syria or Iraq; some 11,400 citizens have been identified as radical Islamists in French surveillance data[113].

By contrast, a majority of American Muslims are deeply integrated into American society. A 2011 Pew poll found that Muslim Americans feel happier with their lives than does the general population in the United States. That sentiment could change, however, with growing talk of imposing laws and requiring Muslims to register with the US government, a type of political speech that could actually facilitate ISIL's goals of alienating American Muslims. But even without the assistance of such speech, ISIL is working hard to attract North Americans.

A major project at Children's Hospital in Boston is presently being conducted where researchers are able to administer questionnaires to some 400 Somali refugee youth in Toronto, Boston, Minneapolis and two towns in Maine. The research on refugee youth suggests that there is a correlation between, on the one hand, delinquency, including support for violent extremism, and on the other, trauma exposure, social marginalisation and mental health issues. They have also found that strong social bonds are protective[114]. Somali-refugee youth workers have observed that parents imagine that their children are safe when they are inside the home, on the Internet. As is the case for some of the children of guest workers in European cities, the generation gap is especially profound when parents do not speak the local language and their children do, or when parents are ignorant about online recruiting. The team at Children's Hospital also found a correlation between time on the Internet and support for violent extremism. The youth workers also observed that many of their clients believe that ISIL is a CIA-run organisation. It is important to point out, however, the limitations of this research. While there may be similar risk factors operating elsewhere among poorly integrated immigrant Muslims, this project has only focused on Somali refugee youth in North America. Due to limitations imposed by the ethics board, the researchers cannot ask direct questions about youths' attraction to ISIL. Finally, although the researchers may be able to identify some risk factors among refugee youth, it is impossible to develop a profile of the prototypical recruit. A recent study by George Washington University's Program on Extremism of all those arrested in the United States in connection with ISIL crimes revealed an extraordinary variety of recruits, approximately 40 per cent of whom were converts to Islam[115].

> *Some individuals ... see jihad as a cool way of expressing dissatisfaction with a power elite, whether that elite is real or imagined...*

There are significant vulnerabilities in ISIL's continuing ability to lure Western recruits. One is that it is losing territory to local ground forces and Western bombing raids. Another is that its ability to pay fighters has been diminished. Yet another is that foreign volunteers are coming back with harrowing stories about what life with ISIL is really like. Some volunteers have said that they assumed that the stories they heard in the Western media about ISIL's brutality were not true. For example, AAibrah52 wrote in

response to an article[116], which described ISIL's practice of rape from the perspective of the victims, "What an ugly lie. You kuffar are sex obsessed". Another wrote, "Media getting desperate". When her parents revealed to the media that US government officials had discovered that ISIL's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had kept the US hostage Kayla Mueller as a sex slave, some ISIL fan boys expressed doubts about the veracity of the report, claiming that it was impossible to believe that al-Baghdadi would have sex with a white girl.

Terrorists who have left their profession often say that seeds of doubt about their leaders' integrity or true purpose led them to defect. Thus, evidence of ISIL's practice of paedophilia and sexual enslavement must be widely shared, not just to Western media, but to potential supporters of ISIL. The group flaunts its massacres of Shia, but not its murder of Sunnis. This, too, represents an opportunity to introduce doubt regarding the true nature of ISIL's practices.

During World War II, people expected to sacrifice themselves to help achieve the war aims. During the continuing war on jihadist terrorism, only a relatively small number of people have volunteered to serve. Containing ISIL requires a national and international effort, and must involve public-private partnerships. Entertainment, Internet and media companies that know how to appeal to millennial audiences can play a much larger role in crafting and disseminating compelling counter-narratives, bringing to bear their considerable expertise in market research and messaging. What is required is an army of individual volunteers who are willing and able to speak, credibly and persuasively, one-on-one, with youth who are attracted to 'jihad-chic', long before they are drawn to violate the law.

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[77] As well as the al-Tisam and Furqan Foundations, al-Hayat Media Centre, and A'maq Agency, each of the so-called caliphate's 36 provincial media offices has an official media office.

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[79] "Distributing *al-Naba'* magazine to ordinary Muslims", Salahuddin Province Media Office*,* 26 November 2015; "Distributing *al-Naba'* and *da'wa* books and pamphlets to soldiers of the caliphate", Diyala Province Media Office*,* 3 December 2015; "Distributing *al-Naba'* in the city of Sirte", Tripoli Province Media Office, 8 December 2015; "Printing and

distributing the *al-Naba'* news publication", Homs Province Media Office*,* 24 December 2015.

[80] Both activities can be observed in, for example: "Opening a media point in the city of Sabikhan", Khayr Province Media Office, 26 July 2015; "Burning and distributing *al-Maysara* electronic magazine to ordinary Muslims in the eastern region", Khayr Province Media Office*,* 28 August 2015; "Opening media points in the al-'Amiriyya region", Fallujah Province Media Office*,* 28 October 2015.

[81] At the time of writing, al-Bayan Radio bulletins are disseminated in Arabic, Turkish, Russian, French and English. On occasion, they are released in Bangla and Bosnian.

[82] In the eleventh issue of *al-Naba',* an al-Bayan Radio infographic notes the 12 'most important programs' for Rabi' al-Awwal and Rabi' al-Akhr 1437. "*al-Naba'* XI: Wait, we are also waiting", 29 December 2015. In a November 2015 issue of *al-Naba',* Islamic State published an al-Bayan Radio infographic detailing nine FM radio stations—one in Libya, four in Syria, and four in Iraq—and three operations centres—one in Syria, two in Iraq.

[83] On 2 December 2015, ISIL's Department of Hisba released a statement banning satellite TV transmitters on account of their insidious spreading of 'deceit, lies and defamation'. By the end of the month, this statement had been officially translated into English and Farsi. In the weeks that followed, *al-Naba'* featured an infographic detailing the seven central evils of satellite transmission, subsequently translated into English. "The banning of satellite receivers", Department of Hisba, 2 December 2015; "The banning of satellite TV receivers", *Diwan al-Hisbah*, 30 December 2015; "*al-Naba'* XI: Wait, we are also waiting", 29 December 2015.

[84] "Notice 164: To all Internet café owners", Nineveh Province Security Department*:* Public Security Office*,* 12 May 2015; "Notice: To all Internet café owners", Raqqa Province Security Department: Public Security Office*,* 23 July 2015.

[85] "Notice: All satellite Internet café owners are bound by what follows", Raqqa Province General Security Department*,* 20 July 2015.

[86] See Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy", Quilliam, 2015; and Charlie Winter, "Documenting the Virtual Caliphate", Quilliam, 2015.

[87] "Conservation of Abu Manjal birds", Homs Province Media Office, 9 August 2015; "Nature in the city of Mosul", Nineveh Province Media Office, 21 January 2016; "Aspect of the work of the Services Center - opening a road to replace al-Hud Bridge", Dijla Province Media Office, 17 January 2016; "ISHS: healthcare services", Raqqa Province Media Office, 24 April 2015.

[88] Winter, "Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'", p. 9.

[89] "Nature in the city of Mosul", Nineveh Province Media Office, 21 January 2016; "One of the onion producers in the province", Salahuddin Province Media Office, 21 January 2016; "Aspect of the work of the Services Department: repairing powerlines in the city of al-Shadadi", Barakah Province Media Office, 21 January 2016; "Targeting the positions of the Nusayri army in the environs of Liwaa' 128 in eastern al-Qalamun", Damascus Province Media Office, 21 January 2016.

[90] "A tour of the birds market in Sirte", Tripoli Province Media Office, 17 September 2015; "Destroying and incinerating narcotics in the Shadal-Ashin region of Nangahar", Khurasan Province Media Office, 3 December 2015; "Aspect of the activities of the Hisba: seisure and destruction of a quantity of cigarettes in the town of al-Mahlabiyya", Jazira Province Media Office, 5 January 2016; "Photos from the clashes happening today with the Nusayri army in Qasr al-Halabat", Homs Province Media Office, 22 January 2016; "The ambiences of 'Id in West Africa Province", West Africa Province Media Office, 28 September 2015; "Striking a column of the apostate Egyptian Army", Sinai Province Media Office, 14 January 2016.

[91] "Russian planes bombed a number of places in the city of Raqqa", A'maq News Agency, 16 January 2015; "The Crusader-Safavid Alliance bombed the houses of ordinary Muslims, leading to a number of deaths and injuries", Dijla Province Media Office, 14 October 2015.

[92] "Punish them with an equivalent of that with which you were harmed", Anbar Province Media Office, 31 August 2015; "But if you return, we shall return", Nineveh Province Media Office, 23 June 2015; "Arrest and disposal of a spy who works with the Safavid government", Diyala Province Media Office, 24 November 2015.

[93] Paul Kecskemeti, "Totalitarian communications as a means of control: a note on the sociology of propaganda", The Public Opinion Quarterly, 14 (1950), p. 227.

[94] Kecskemeti, Ibid., p. 226.

[95] Author interview.

[96] Author interview.

[97] George Monbiot, 'Orwell was hailed a hero for fighting in Spain. Today he'd be guilty of terrorism', *The Guardian*, 10 February 2014.

[98] Author interview.

[99] ICSR defector database.

[100] Clarissa Ward, 'Former ISIS Member Explains Why He Left Terror Group', *CBS News*, 9 February 2015.

[101] Ruth Sherlock and Tom Whitehead, "Al-Qaeda training British and European 'jihadists' in Syria to set up terror cells at home", *The Telegraph*, 19 January 2014.

[102] Arwa Damon, "ISIS Defector Tells of Group's Deception", *CNN*, 18 February 2014.

[103] Ruth Sherlock and Tom Whitehead, "Al-Qaeda training British and European 'jihadists' in Syria to set up terror cells at home", *The Telegraph*, 19 January 2014.

[104] "No Respite," *al-Hayat Media*, Islamic State Video 2015.

[105] Charlie Winter, "The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy"*,* Quilliam, (2015), p. 27.

[106] G. Al Imam, "Opinion: ISIS and Arab Unity", *Asharq Awsat,* (September 2014).

[107] ICSR defector database.

[108] ICSR foreign fighter database.

[109] ICSR defector database.

[110] Ruth Sherlock, "Bodyguard of Syrian rebel who defected to ISIL reveals secrets of the jihadist leadership", *The Telegraph*, 10 November 2014.

[111] "Disillusioned ex-Islamic State members tell of 'slaughter': 'It's not a revolution or jihad'," *Associated Press*, 3 February 2015.

[112] Author interview.

[113] Scott Atran and Nafees Hamid, "Paris: The War ISIS Wants", *New York Review of Books*, 16 November 2015.

[114] Heidi Ellis et al. "Relation of Psychosocial Factors to Diverse Behaviors and Attitudes Among Somali Refugees", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 2015.

[115] Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, "ISIS in America, From Retweets to Raqqa", George Washington University Program on Extremism, December 2015, p.18; http://cchs.gwu.edu/reports.

[116] "The Islamic State is Forcing Women to be Sex Slaves", *New York Times*, 20 August 2015.

APPENDIX A

Workshop agenda

Al-Qaeda, ISIL and Their Offspring
Understanding the Reach and Expansion
of Violent Islamist Extremism

A workshop of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)

29 February 2016
CSIS National Headquarters, Ottawa

Program

08:30 – 08:45	Structure and objectives of the workshop
08:45 – 10:15	**Module 1 – The state of play in Syria and Iraq**

- *Sustaining the Islamic State, and Al-Qaeda's footprint on the ground: Current state and future prospects*

- *Understanding the foreign-fighter phenomenon*

- *The Al-Nusra Front and the impact of air campaigns*

10:15 - 11:00	**On-Stage Debate – Dangerous Liaisons: Will Al-Qaeda and ISIL strike a grand bargain?**
11:00 – 11:15	Break
11:15 – 12:00	**Keynote address – Après Paris: ISIL's evolving strategy against the West**
12:00 – 13:00	Lunch

13:00 - 14:30	**Module 2 – Local Roots, Global Aspirations: Emerging theatres of concern around the world**

- *Libya*

- *The Sinai Peninsula*

- *Indonesia*

14:30 – 14:45	Break

14:45 – 15:45	**Module 3 – Motives and Messaging: Understanding and escaping the pervasive propaganda machine**

- *ISIL's propaganda and messaging*

- *Why do fighters leave ISIL?*

15:45 – 16:45	**Module 4 – Strategic Trends: Implications of Al-Qaeda and ISIL's resilience and reach**

- *How to tackle the situation at home*

- *Long-term approaches to the problem in the Middle East*

16:45 – 17:00	Summary and closing remarks

17:00	Adjourn

APPENDIX B

Academic Outreach at CSIS

Intelligence in a shifting world

It has become a truism to say that the world today is changing at an ever faster pace. Analysts, commentators, researchers and citizens from all backgrounds—in and outside government—may well recognise the value of this cliché, but most are only beginning to appreciate the very tangible implications of what otherwise remains an abstract statement.

The global security environment, which refers to the various threats to geopolitical, regional and national stability and prosperity, has changed profoundly since the fall of Communism, marking the end of a bipolar world organised around the ambitions of, and military tensions between, the United States and the former USSR. Quickly dispelling the tempting end of history theory of the 1990s, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, as well as subsequent events of a related nature in different countries, have since further affected our understanding of security.

Globalisation, the rapid development of technology and the associated sophistication of information and communications have influenced the work and nature of governments, including intelligence services. In addition to traditional state-to-state conflict, there now exist a wide array of security challenges that cross national boundaries, involve non-state actors and sometimes even non-human factors. Those range from terrorism, illicit networks and global diseases to energy security, international competition for resources, and the security consequences of a deteriorating natural environment globally. The elements of national and global security have therefore grown more complex and increasingly interdependent.

What we do

It is to understand those current and emerging issues that CSIS launched, in September 2008, its academic outreach program. By drawing regularly on knowledge from experts and taking a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach in doing so, the Service plays an active role in fostering a contextual understanding of security issues for the benefit of its own experts, as well as the

researchers and specialists we engage. Our activities aim to shed light on current security issues, to develop a long-term view of various security trends and problems, to challenge our own assumptions and cultural bias, as well as to sharpen our research and analytical capacities.

To do so, we aim to:

- Tap into networks of experts from various disciplines and sectors, including government, think-tanks, research institutes, universities, private business and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Canada and abroad. Where those networks do not exist, we may create them in partnership with various organisations;

- Stimulate the study of issues related to Canadian security and the country's security and intelligence apparatus, while contributing to an informed public discussion about the history, function and future of intelligence in Canada.

The Service's academic outreach program resorts to a number of vehicles. It supports, designs, plans and/or hosts several activities, including conferences, seminars, presentations and round-table discussions. It also contributes actively to the development of the Global Futures Forum, a multinational security and intelligence community which it has supported since 2005.

While the academic outreach program does not take positions on particular issues, the results of some of its activities are released on the CSIS web site (http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca). By publicising the ideas emerging from its activities, the program seeks to stimulate debate and encourage the flow of views and perspectives between the Service, organisations and individual thinkers.