

The Islamic State after the Caliphate - Can IS Go Underground?

by Thomas R. McCabe

Abstract

While ISIS may intend to resume its underground existence in Syria and Iraq as the ISIS statelet is about to be defeated, this may turn out to be significantly more difficult than many expect. At first glance, the postwar environment may appear fertile for ISIS to pursue such a strategy, but other factors – widespread factional and popular hostility to ISIS and the loss of theological/ideological and functional legitimacy due to defeat - will make it difficult for IS cadres and rank and file to go underground. It will be especially difficult for many of the foreign fighters - in particular Western foreign fighters - who joined ISIS to go underground.

Keywords: Islamic State, Future ISIS, Syria, Iraq

Introduction

The ISIS “caliphate” is on the path to losing open control of the core territory it currently still dominates, first in Iraq and later in Syria, where it is evidently preparing a redoubt in eastern Syria.[1] The obvious question is: what will happen after that? What will happen to ISIS after the Caliphate is defeated? An obvious major concern is that ISIS will return to the underground from whence it came and continue the war from there. [2] This author, however, argues that this would be difficult. At first glance the postwar environment may appear fertile for such a move, yet countervailing factors are likely to make it difficult for ISIS fighters to go underground. This is especially likely to be the case for many of the foreign fighters, in particular Western foreign fighters, who joined ISIS (or other jihadi groups fighting in Syria).[3]

How Effectively can ISIS go Underground?

While ISIS cadres have evidently made considerable preparations for resuming underground operations,[4] how effectively they will be able to do so depends on at least four major factors. These are: (i) how effectively the Syrian and Iraqi Governments reestablish stable governance and security - above all whether or not they can identify and root out the ISIS infrastructure;[5] (ii) whether those governments can reintegrate the Sunni Arabs at the core of the revolt in Syria and Iraq; (iii) the practical realities of going underground; and (iv) whether ISIS will be able to maintain its declared legitimate authority if underground.

(i) Reestablishing Stable Governance and Security

This means the governments in question will be able to reestablish/impose and maintain some kind of effective control over areas previously held by ISIS and/or other insurgents. If the governments manage to do this, it will make it much harder for ISIS (and other subversive groups) to go underground and remain functional. But this task will be extraordinarily difficult and the degree to which the Syrian and Iraqi Governments are successful remains an open question.

For a start, the defeat of the ISIS statelet will not necessarily mean the end of the wars in Syria and Iraq. There are ample opportunities for additional wars in the aftermath, driven by rival nationalisms: Turkey is talking about enlarging its borders,[6] (the Iraqi Kurds may already be doing so [7]), while there are factional rivalries, and competing ambitions between regional states.[8] Syria, in particular, is a proxy theatre of war for several states in the region, where the sponsors appear ready to fight to their last local ally. Sunni states may continue their support of Sunni factions as a way of distracting Iran, as Iran has done to the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen.[9] Further, the Middle East may be in the opening round of multiple

civil wars within Islam, both between Shia and Sunni Islam, between Shia factions, and among Sunni jihadist groups. These wars are likely to be protracted and bloody; they will further increase religious polarization (and bloody-mindedness) within the region and within Islam as a whole, and will further devastate parts of the Middle East.

Next, both the Syrian and Iraqi governments are fragile. While the near-collapse of the Iraqi government and security forces in the face of ISIS has been widely noted, the collapse of the Syrian government and military in the face of ISIS and other insurgent groups was even more comprehensive. The Iraqi and Syrian governments have, at most, only partially recovered. Many of the forces nominally aligned with those governments are factional militias that serve their own agendas and/or the agendas of their foreign sponsors, and are not controlled by the national, central governments.[10] This is most prominent in Iraq, where the Kurds formed effectively an autonomous government, and at least major parts of the Popular Mobilization Forces militias, created in the aftermath of the Iraqi security collapse of 2014, are under Iranian control. [11] This is also the case in Syria, where its Kurdish population desires autonomy and where many militias function independently.[12] Will these forces accept and support government policies with which they (and/or the patrons on which they depend) do not agree?[13] Or are they more likely to pursue their own agendas?

(ii) *Reintegration of the Sunni Arabs - an Open Question*

While the Assad regime and the Iraqi government have made some efforts in that direction, things do not look promising, to put it charitably. The wars against ISIS and other insurgent groups in Syria and Iraq will continue to be hard-fought and brutal and, especially in Syria, protracted. This is likely to be followed by a vindictive peace in an atmosphere characterized by religious polarization,[14] widespread individual and group hatred, desire for revenge,[15] and the desire to extract concessions from the loser.

In Syria, it is unclear how much the Assad regime will try to reconcile the Sunni Arabs (while it has shown some degree of flexibility with secular rebels, it shows no sign of being willing to do so with the various jihadi groups).[16] Assad made clear his intent to militarily reconquer all of Syria,[17] and we must expect that he is prepared to continue using the same brutal tactics used so far,[18] and will then consolidate his control with similar methods. Assad is not only prepared to win ugly but undoubtedly prefers to win that way, since his obvious aim is not only to win the war but to intimidate the survivors (that you cannot kill your way out of an insurgency is a Western conceit that much or most of the rest of the world, especially the Russians and the Middle Eastern rulers, dismisses with contempt - after all, that is precisely what Assad's father did to put down a previous rebellion in the early 1980s). The people in the areas the Assad regime is trying to reconquer undoubtedly view the war as indiscriminate violence targeting the civilian population.[19]

In Iraq, there is no consensus as to what will come after the anti-ISIS war,[20] and many of the Sunni Arabs expect the worst.[21] Prime Minister al-Abadi made some efforts to reconcile the Sunni Arab minority,[22] but the Iraqi government has been reluctant, or even unwilling, to empower moderate Sunni Arab forces, and it is uncertain how much more Abadi will be able to do. While it is to be hoped that military success against ISIS will strengthen his position, he barely controls his own government and remains vulnerable to a no-confidence vote or removal after the 2018 election. Either outcome could bring back to power former Prime Minister al-Maliki, whose anti-Sunni sectarian policies contributed to the rise of ISIS in the first place. Abadi has limited or no control over many of the Shia militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces, who, as previously noted, are frequently supported or controlled by Iran and are, functionally speaking, often Shia jihadis driving a sectarian agenda. Meanwhile, it is reasonable to expect that popular sentiment among the Shia and Kurdish populations favors punishing the Iraqi Sunni Arabs for supporting, or at least for failing to oppose, ISIS.[23] The governor of Nineveh Province announced his intent to lock up ISIS members and expel the rest of their families from Iraq,[24] which under the circumstances could be used as a policy of revenge against the Sunni Arabs.

The next question is how much reconstruction the Iraqi and Syrian governments will be able and willing to undertake. The portions of Iraq and Syria that ISIS controlled will be economically, socially, and physically devastated, both by ISIS rule,[25] and by the wars to drive out ISIS.[26] They are likely to be further devastated in whatever violence follows the wars against ISIS. There are millions of refugees that the Assad regime in particular is likely to be reluctant to resettle or allow to return.[27] Both the Iraqi and Syrian Governments are effectively bankrupt. Assad's war in Syria is largely funded by Iran,[28] and his Russian and Iranian patrons are unlikely to be inclined or able to fund the enormous costs of Syrian reconstruction - estimated to be \$150-180 billion as of April 2016-.[29] The Abadi Government in Iraq has ambitious recovery plans, but whether it can carry them out or fund them remains to be seen.[30] How much postwar support Iraq will get from the United States is also uncertain -- the Trump Administration may be signaling that it wants to disengage after the ISIS statelet is destroyed.[31] Since Iraq and Syria are dominated by Shias and aligned with Iran (in the Iraq case) or are dominated by Iran (Syria), the Sunni Arab oil states are unlikely to fund either of them, and the rest of the international community will rapidly show donor fatigue if it does not already have it.[32] Ultimately, to whatever degree the Syrian and Iraqi Sunni Arabs manage - or are allowed - to recover it may be in spite of the policy of their governments rather than because of it.

Finally, there remains the problem of corruption. ISIS-connected people may simply be able to buy their way out of trouble.[33]

Requirements Necessary to Function from the Underground

The requirements necessary for functioning effectively from the underground may well work against ISIS. While the two previous sets of factors create or preserve an atmosphere of Sunni grievance that ISIS and other insurgent groups, including al Qaeda, could theoretically exploit, how effectively ISIS will do so remains unknown.

As foreign fighters are killed or captured or flee and are not replaced, ISIS will revert to being increasingly reliant on Syrian and (especially) Iraqi manpower. While Syrian and Iraqi ISIS members who survive the final battles may be able to return to underground operations, it will be difficult for many of the surviving foreign fighters, who provided much of the core strength of ISIS, to do so. They are, after all, foreigners. This will especially apply to the thousands of foreign fighters who came from outside the Arab world, in particular, to many Western foreign fighters and fighters from Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and areas of the former Soviet Union, who are likely to speak poor Arabic at best, and do not look Arabic. For that matter, Arabs with non-Syrian or non-Iraqi Arabic accents will receive special attention from the security authorities.

Next, they will be pursued into the underground by the various local, regional, and world security services who will be trying to identify, locate, and eliminate ISIS holdouts. In the Mosul campaign alone, the Iraqi Government has over 30,000 names on its list of suspects.[34] When dealing with suspects, we should expect the local and regional services, in particular those of the Assad regime, to err on the side of excess.[35]

Further, in the course of its war and its rule, ISIS made many enemies who will be out for revenge. Syria, in particular, has a multi-sided civil war, with ISIS fighting numerous other anti-Assad factions, including nationalists and various other jihadis.[36] The situation is equally complex in Iraq.[37] Since ISIS has generally ruled as conquerors and brutally imposed its system at the expense of other factions, even previous allies, there will likely be little love lost between ISIS and those other factions upon ISIS' retreat. In particular, ISIS and the Al Qaeda factions in Syria spent extensive time and effort killing each other. [38] It will not be surprising to see these conflicts continue underground.

Finally, popular resentment of ISIS's brutal tactics will produce numerous personal grudges to be settled. An obvious way to do it will be to turn in any identified ISIS fighters to security forces.[39] Any financial rewards

for such identifications would be a further incentive. Or if they consider government screening to be too lenient, individuals or tribes may target ISIS members for revenge killings if given the chance.[40]

For these reasons, ISIS is unlikely to have the rather favorable atmosphere that enabled its cadres to rebuild their underground structure the last time, as especially happened in Mosul,[41] where ISIS's predecessor organization, Al Qaeda in Iraq/Islamic State of Iraq, was never really dug out even when the US military was present in force.[42] Under these circumstances, many ISIS survivors are likely to give priority to their own individual survival, rather than continuing the war.

Will ISIS be Able to Claim that it Retains the Right to Rule?

By the time ISIS tries to return to the underground, much of its narrative will be discredited - the ISIS leadership will only be able to spin defeat for so long before it is obviously double-talk for losing.[43] Much of the support ISIS has received, especially foreign support, was due to its claim to be a genuine state in control of territory, and its early success in routing its enemies - when ISIS could credibly claim to be living up to its motto of "Remaining and Expanding." [44] The self-proclaimed "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi claimed his position by right of conquest.[45] Since these successes were considered by many as a physical manifestation of the favor of Allah, what will happen when those successes and conquests are gone, and ISIS has obviously lost? At which point will it become impossible to ignore that Allah is not intervening on their behalf, that the state al-Baghdadi claims to rule is no longer on the map, and it becomes obvious that he was just another murderous would-be tyrant trying to carve out an empire of shattered states and ravaged peoples? Obviously, he will no longer be able to claim leadership of the global jihadi movement, let alone the world's Muslims. Compounding the loss of religious legitimacy, ISIS will also lose functional legitimacy by losing a war and bringing devastation to the people on whose behalf the war was supposedly fought.

Conclusions and Implications

While ISIS may intend to retreat to the underground in Syria and Iraq as the ISIS statelet is defeated, doing so may turn out to be significantly more difficult than many expect. At first glance, the likely postwar environment of massive destruction, ineffective governance, lack of security, and repression of the Sunni Arabs may appear fertile for ISIS to pursue such a strategy, but other factors - widespread factional and popular hostility to ISIS and the loss of theological/ideological and functional legitimacy due to defeat - will make it difficult for them to do so. It will be especially true for many of the foreign fighters, in particular the Western foreign fighters, who joined ISIS.

The effect of retreating to the underground is not likely to stop there. ISIS supposedly claimed that it will take a generation after it loses control of all territory to kill the idea of ISIS.[46] For most ISIS adherents, it is likely to take much less time than that. While the romantic appeal of "the Lost Cause" may retain residual appeal to its more fanatical supporters,[47] it is much more difficult to argue from failure than from success. Those attracted to the physical and psychological manifestations of the "caliphate" (the adventure of being a warrior for Allah and licensed outlaw, the availability of sex slaves for young men, the expectation of living in a truly Islamic utopia, among other 'attractions' [48]) are likely to lose interest in ISIS rapidly.[49]

Unfortunately, things do not end there. That ISIS will be less of a threat than commonly supposed does not mean it will not be a threat at all. ISIS is not the only force of jihadis in the field.[50] In particular, as shown by the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, al Qaeda's latest manifestation in Syria,[51] al Qaeda has modified its strategy, and is pursuing a long game of trying to sink roots into the society where it is operating while pursuing the jihadization of that society from the ground up.[52] This means it will not face many of the same challenges as ISIS. Beyond that, on the global strategic scale, as ISIS is defeated we can expect al Qaeda to reassert its claim to leadership of the global jihadi movement while attempting to selectively take over ISIS

personnel and networks.[53] This annexation is most likely to happen if and when Baghdadi is killed, upon which the pledges of personal allegiance (*bay'at*) given to him as ‘caliph’ are automatically dissolved. How many of his previous adherents, both in the region and in the worldwide jihadist movements, will be taken over by al Qaeda?

In summation, while destroying the ISIS “caliphate” may be a significant victory, it will not be a decisive one. The worldwide jihadist insurgency will go on.

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N.B. This ‘Special Correspondence’ should not be considered as reflecting the opinion of any agency of the U.S. Government.

Notes

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