A Phoenix Rising from the Ashes? Daesh after its Territorial Losses in Iraq and Syria

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Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Daesh in its post-state period. Having lost the territories in Iraq and Syria, the organization is now limited to a small enclave in the east of Syria and several other pockets in Iraq. However, various factors are helping the organization survive. Paradoxically, the loss of territory also led Daesh back to its terrorist essence. This article will show how in terms of ideology, operations, organization and manpower, Daesh at present is a small, Sunni Iraqi guerilla/terror organization. But unlike the prevailing assumption that Daesh might return to its former strength and that its existence is a sine qua non, this article concludes that the organization is neither invincible nor imperishable.

Keywords: Daesh, Iraq, Syria, ISIS, commanders, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Ideology

In December 2017, Iraqi prime minister Haydar al-'Abadi declared an end to Daesh's presence on Iraqi territory. [1] The announcement came after a series of military battles in which the Iraqi security forces liberated all cities, towns and villages under the control of the so called "Islamic State" in Iraq. Shortly thereafter, a U.S.-led coalition, made of local Syrian forces, drove the organization out of its most significant assets in Syria, including the towns of al-Raqqa, Dayr al-Zor and Albu Kamal. Consequently, by early 2018, Daesh had suffered a considerable defeat. Its claim to run a "state" was no longer valid and its slogan "we remain and expand" (*Nabqa wa Natamadid*) was a sham.

Having dedicated so much to Islamic "state formation", the change must have been harsh and dramatic for the organization. In addition, even its capacities as a terrorist organization were diminished: no major terror attacks were perpetrated in the West during this time. In Iraq, the prime target of Daesh terrorism, the May 2019 terrorist attack in Baghdad was the first in well over a year. The group's diminished capabilities in that country were largely the result of effective counter terrorism by organs of the Iraqi state, particularly the military intelligence and counter-terrorism forces under the Ministry of the Interior, as well as the difficulty of coordinating such attacks from Syria. Even the media output of the organization was seriously hampered due to the deaths of Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, Abu Maria al-'Iraqi and Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Furqan in 2016.

And yet, as recent events have shown, Daesh still survives despite these efforts. Attacks in previously declared "liberated" areas have resumed, particularly at night, and as illustrated by the April 2019 attacks in Sri Lanka, the group is clearly committed to organizing and/or inspiring mass casualty attacks abroad (something that is still very much within its capabilities). Its leadership and command elements were in a small area in the east of Syria, relatively close to the border with Iraq until they were chased out of it in March 2019 by the Syrian Kurds with international support. But in Iraq they maintain a clandestine presence in the Hamrin and Makhul hilly region between the provinces of Salah al-Din, Diyala and Kirkuk, in Sharqat and Qiyara south of Mosul and in the western desert. This presence is confined to uninhabited areas, but poses a daily threat to the population in the Sunni periphery. In addition, the prime goal of the leadership in Syria seems to be the reactivation of "sleeper cells" in Iraq and the transfer of combatants through the border into Iraq in order to increase its presence there.

Paradoxically, the recent setbacks suffered by Daesh may bring it some positive impacts, as this article will show. It still survives as a result of the temporary lack of interest that the various belligerents in the Syrian war show in the region in which Daesh remains. This lack of attention—also the result of the alleviation of the terrorist threat in the West—works in favor of the organization and allows it to regroup. Just as significant is the downsizing of the organization from an "Islamic State" and even a Caliphate aspiring to regional and

ultimately global control, to a small armed group operating clandestinely in remote areas of Sunni Iraq and Syria. This seems to be a more suitable framework for the organization. The article will show the various modes of adaptation to being, once more, a clandestine armed group. It will cover the ideological, operational and personnel aspects of the change. In conclusion, the article will evaluate the sustainability of the organization in its new form.

Theoretical Approach

In his recent book *Rules for Rebels*, Max Abrahms provided three rules that terrorist organizations "should" follow in order to succeed and maintain their success over time. His study, although partly focused on Daesh, comprises many terrorist organizations—some, according to him, more successful than others. His rules are "learning to win", after the victory "restraining to win", and "branding" the organization as a "moderate" one. Abrahms is very critical of Daesh for not following these rules, while other organizations—Hizbullah for example—do.[2] Indeed, Daesh committed many strategic errors impacting their expansion and management of success. Yet, Abrahms' thesis should be discussed within a broader discussion on the "true nature" of Daesh. Could an organization that was largely apocalyptic in outlook, attracting fanatics from all over the globe, ever hope to brand itself "moderate"? Could it restrain the drive to expand and practice Jihad that was at the center of its activity? Did it ever want to be an Iraqi Sunni organization?

Underneath Abrahms' assertions, and a central aspect of research on ISIS, is the expectation that this organization would start to behave according to what western scholars on counter-terrorism consider "reasonable behavior". In the case of Daesh, this organization is expected to promote the grievances of the local Sunni population in Iraq and Syria, engage more in social welfare, tone down its global jihad and in general adopt a more moderate line. It is expected to be more organic to its environment: the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria, more localized and less global, in order to survive and thrive. In other words, it is expected to be a different organization.

We are not judging Daesh for its failure or for not corresponding to these expectations, nor are we suggesting concrete steps that must be taken to eliminate Daesh or the future threat of the organization in its post-defeat form. However, we do not ignore the significance of the colossal failure by the organization to maintain its initial success. Concentrating on an analysis of the leadership, personnel and organizational structure of Daesh, the article will illustrate how this organization is adapting to its new operational environment. At times, it even follows some of Abrahms' "rules".

Methodology

Post-defeat Daesh suffers from the loss of 42 (out of 43) founders and leading commanders, including all the Iraqis who served as officers in the security services prior to 2003. This article examines the organizational makeover in the post-state period. As the organization is not as active as it used to be in Iraq before late 2017 and is not engaged in daily warfare, the information on it is rather limited. Iraqi, Arab and international media do not report on Daesh as often as they used to before 2017. Occasionally, the media reports on the capture of senior Daesh commanders, like the capture (in Turkey) of senior member Isma'il al-'Ithawi in February 2018,[3] the capture of four senior commanders in May 2018,[4] or the testimony of a middle ranking commander from Falluja.[5] The discussion in this article on the ideological change will draw upon IS publication such as the audio recordings of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the news agency "Aa'maq".

This article could not have been written on the sole basis of published sources. It is the product of cooperation between an Israeli and an Iraqi researcher. The latter collected information and data from sources in Iraq that have never been published before and are known to be accurate. Together, we worked on his very rich database of over 10,000 names of Dawa'ish. The Iraqi researcher had access to information from interrogations of Dawa'ish by the Iraqi security forces and has published that previously in various media,[6] including in Arabic. Security sources pose a problem. By no means are these the sole sources of information. Yet, they cannot be ruled out just because they cannot always be corroborated, while other information in circulation is in use. This information from the interrogations was given to one of the co-authors in good faith and since then it has formed the basis of his research and international credentials. Most of the "classified" information

was corroborated by open sources. Reference source citations are provided wherever possible.

Unlike a previous article,[7] in which the collective profile of commanders in the organization was garnered from hundreds of names, in this article the number of names will be smaller and most are senior commanders. We will use tables examining the same categories to analyze the composition of the personnel and to show the adaptability of the organization to its new disposition. The tables will include the nationality of the commanders, their tribal origins and what they did before 2003. We will compare that to the previous research. In analyzing the names we will rely on information found in real names and "*nommes de guerre*" (*Kuniya*)—i.e., "Abu Mas'ab al-Suri" indicates that this commander is Syrian.

Location

Before its overthrow in March 2019, the organization was based in a remote area in the east Syrian valley of the Euphrates between the villages of Hajeen, al-Sha'fa and al-Susa, north of Abu Kamal. This is where the leadership was hiding [8] and it is the nerve center of whatever remains of the organization. This is the only place in which the organization controlled a contingent piece of land, a poor vestige of the vast territory it controlled before 2017. The region is on the left bank of the Euphrates and in the south reaches the Syrian border town of Abu Kamal, still under control of the Syrian government. Beyond the river, to the south-west, the region borders an area under control of the Syrian government. To the north, it borders an area under control of the Kurdish led Syrian democratic Forces (SDF). Nearby is a border crossing to Iraq, particularly difficult to patrol, in which the Euphrates flows into Iraq through the towns of Abu Kamal (Syria) and al-Qaim (Iraq). This provides a crevice through which Daesh sends forces into Iraq.

In addition, Daesh uses the desert areas south-west of the Euphrates, an enclave within an area supposedly under control of the Syrian government, for training and reorganization. In the post-state period, the organization no longer relies on taxation of populations. The areas under its control in the east of Syria are almost totally uninhabited. Its advantages for Daesh include its remoteness and the fact that it is far less important than other areas to the competing belligerents in this war. This remoteness allowed the organization to be away from the limelight and engage in reorganization. Before its overthrow, Daesh was using the area to gain another advantage: the area is separating the Syrian army and the SDF. Daesh could benefit from the détente between them, and occasionally even used the redeployment of the SDF from some bases to take them.[9] The latter alarmed the Iraqi government and prompted a recent incursion by Iraqi forces (mainly the "Hashd al-Sha'bi) into Syrian territory around Abu Kamal.[10] Finally, the proximity to Iraq—the central stage for Daesh—is another advantage of the region and a central interest to Daesh.

In Iraq, Daesh still maintains a permanent presence in the Hamrin area near Kirkuk and in the hilly area between the provinces of Salah al Din, Diyala and Kirkuk. The main village there is Mutaibija. This pocket has never been cleansed by the Iraqi security forces. It is a constant threat to larger towns in the vicinity, including the cities of Samaraa and Tikrit. From there—and by incursions through the Syrian border—Daesh expanded its presence to the west of Anbar and to desert areas around Samarra, south and west of Mosul. Particularly dear to Daesh is Wadi Huran (a desert area south of Mosul, in Anbar province), which played a crucial role in the preparation for Daesh to take Mosul in June 2014. Unlike the pocket in Syria, the areas in Iraq do not form a contingent territory. With the Iraqi state maintaining a certain presence in the Sunni countryside, the organization does not control any region there and is forced to conduct underground activity. Significantly, Daesh in Iraq is now confined to the more peripheral villages of the Sunni countryside and not to towns or cities there.

Ideology in the Post-State Period: Ard al-Tamkin

The transition from an "Islamic State" and even a caliphate—with universal aspirations and a strong apocalyptical dimension—into a clandestine organization was harsh on many disciples of Daesh. As we shall see later in the article, manpower thinned out dramatically, with only a hardcore group of fighters and dedicated Jihadis remaining. Israeli commentator Tzvi Bar'el sums it up correctly in claiming that Daesh today "had dissipated into [remote] fragments of land in which it is [still] fighting occasional battles."[11]

The idea of an "Islamic state" was a central pillar in the ideology of Daesh. The slogan "remains and expands" (*Baqiya wa Tatamadid*) reflected a convergence between two main principles of the organization: Islamic state-building and Jihad. Both suffered heavily as a result of the defeat, but it seems that Jihad prevailed. As Adam Hoffman points out, the organization still calls itself "Islamic State" and refers to its soldiers as "soldiers of the Caliphate" (*Jund al-Khilafa*),[12] yet this seems to be only an imagined simulation of a state.

Nevertheless, the organization shows a considerable capability for ideologically adapting to the new situation. Its ideology is cyclical in the sense that the defeat is a return to what Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani termed "our primary situation" by which he meant pre-2014 Daesh in Iraq.[13] 'Adnani implied, shortly before his death, that the organization failed in its attempt, but it failed in the first attempt and, as the turn of events follows a cyclical form, the believers should not despair as there will be another chance. This theme also appears in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's August 2018 audio in which he promised that "the tides of war change".[14] This ideological line differs significantly from the apocalyptical and deterministic line that, according to some, characterized Daesh.[15] Currently, Daesh's ideology is practical and not apocalyptic. It is much closer to the matter-of-fact approach of Abu Bakr Naji's manual "*Idarat al-Tawahush*" (*The Administration of Wilderness*, aka *The Management of Savagery*) than to the prophecies about Dabiq.[16] The apocalypse is absent from recent pronouncements and publications. Apparently, it is being deferred to a later stage.

The practicality is expressed in two terms which closely correspond to the organization's mode of operations. The first one, used by Daesh, is "the land of *Tamkin*" (*Ard al-Tamkin*). *Tamkin* is an Arabic term with several meanings-all relevant to Daesh's mode of operation. It could mean strengthening, consolidation, intensification, establishment, enablement and capacitation, but also deepening.[17] In practical terms it means the consolidation of Daesh's presence in remote and uninhabited areas, mostly in Iraq, creating there the capacity to reemerge. This refers to the training in bases in the desert of Wadi Huran, south of Mosul, which preceded and prepared the taking of that city in June 2014. Others areas serving as *Ard al-Tamkin* are Jazirat Samarra, Habaniya lake, the Jazira desert west of Mosul and the west of Anbar and in Syria the land south of Deir al-Zor. The Hamrin area could serve as "*Ard al-Tamkin*" for the reoccupation of nearby towns like Hawija, Baiji, Jalawla. In some of these areas, Daesh's presence needs to be established. Therefore, a major activity is the expedition of members, often across the border from Syria, to these areas. There, they are trained, new recruits are recruited and commanders form contact with "sleeping cells" nearby. The "Lands of consolidation" should be far from the watchful eye of the Iraqi state. They are not permanent and highly mobile.

Another goal is the creation of "triangles of death" (*Muthalathat al-Mawt*) in areas of the Iraqi and Syrian countryside. This is not a term used by Daesh. The idea of creating it goes back to the "triangle of death" created by the Jihadis under Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi after 2003, south of Baghdad. It also echoes Abu Bakr Naji and his book. In remote areas where the state is weak or absent, the organization will establish presence and intimidate the local population. Thus, the local (Sunni) population would quickly despair of getting help from the state and if they like it or not consider the organization as the sole power in the region. This should not be confused with state administration, as even Zarqawi, already in 2006 established small-scale Islamic states in several regions of Iraq. In the newly formed "triangles of death" the organization would not be involved in administration and would only concentrate on guerilla warfare and intimidating violence.

Modes of Operations

To a large extent and given the circumstances, the modes of operation differ between Syria and Iraq. In Syria, the organization is still under attack, especially air strikes, therefore its operations are mostly defensive. Foremost is the hiding of the leadership, headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It is not known if the leadership is stationary or in the move, but it is believed that at least part of it is in the area between Hajeen and al-Susa.[18] As most of the airstrikes are in Syria, this is seriously impeding the movement of the cadres and overall activity there. This activity includes the maintenance of *Madafat* (basic training camps were new recruits are accepted and trained) and underground shelters, occasionally also taking over camps abandoned by other forces, especially SDF. Another aspect is the cooperation with local tribes. Not much is known about it. The area is unpopulated and Daesh does not control any settlement there. Therefore, this aspect does not take a large part of its activity.

Considerably more important is the passage of cadres from Syria to Iraq and, in case of necessity, from Iraq to Syria. The latter serves clearly as "*Ard al-Tamheed*" (preparatory ground) to Iraq, as it did in 2008-2014. The passage to Iraq is a basic interest of Daesh,[19] therefore the location of their last enclave near the border is an asset. Although in this part of the border Iraq built a concrete wall to prevent incursions, the Euphrates river near Abu Kamal creates a crevice through which incursions are possible.[20] The fact that on the Iraqi side only the *Hashd al-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilization forces, a Shiite militia) is posed is a further advantage for Daesh who threatens local commanders with violence and the latter succumb and allow passage.[21] Sometimes, the passage to Iraq is for defensive purposes and in the event of an offensive by the Coalition on Daesh's strongholds hundreds might try to cross. Daesh is returning to Iraq by infiltrating their men into internally displaced camps. When these return to their hometowns, the Dawa'ish often return with them. According to uncertified information, members of Daesh returned to their posts in the public service, including the security apparatus and serve as secret eyes and spies for the organization.[22]

Over the last year there was a steady increase in the number of Daesh activities in Iraq. The operation resembles previous terrorist activities, in October 2018, a car bomb exploded in Qiyara, south of Mosul and in November a car bomb exploded in the center of Tikrit, killing and wounding 21 persons. In the two cases, C4 explosive was used, indicating that the organization still holds sufficient quantities of these explosives despite the discovery of most of its depots in Iraq.[23]

The operations in Iraq seem to be more planned than in Syria. They include the targeting of government officials and local collaborators with the government and the security forces in the Sunni countryside. Attacking some villages, Daesh caught the *Mukhtars* (local dignitaries representing the population in its contacts with the government) and executed them on the spot. This act was filmed to extend the circle of fear and to show to other villages that the government would not come to their rescue.[24] Other personal targets are officers in the security services and the *Hashd,* members of local tribes who command tribal units, government officials. These are sometimes killed by the so called "*Saytarat Wahmiya*" (fake checkpoint), whereby IS men disguise themselves in Iraqi army uniforms, put a checkpoint and kill passers by. All these operations are meant to spread terror and establish "triangles of death".

Most of the operations in Iraq are preparatory. Daesh spots the weakness of the Iraqi security forces in control of the Sunni periphery and orders a return to Iraq. The returning cadres are ordered to contact and reactivate "sleeping cells", to build *Madafat* and camps in uninhabited desert areas and to start recruiting among the local population. Tunnels are dug in Iraq and across the border to smuggle arms and personnel and for hiding. In mid-2018, the Iraqi military intelligence arrested Kamil al-'Issawi, a new Daesh commander in Falluja. His testimony, published in the Iraqi press, provides information on the organization's operations in Iraq. According to him, the new *Wali* (IS governor) of Falluja sent orders to Syria calling combatants to return to Iraq. In Falluja they were concentrated in al Karma, north of the city and were instructed to establish *Madafat* in the rural area out of the city, to organize combat units (*Mafariz)* and attack army bases and members of the security forces. They managed to accomplish all of that, using hidden arms.[25] Eventually, all members of his unit were captured. In addition, units of *Inghimasiyun* (cadres who blend into the local population and engage in terror and intimidation) are also increasingly used, indicating a closer connection to the locals. A more difficult task is the connection of all pockets of Daesh in Iraq: Anbar, Center, Hamrin, North of Baghdad. Still unable to accomplish such connection, the organization operates as small enclaves under the command of the leadership in Syria.

A major challenge is the resumption of terrorist attacks in Baghdad or any other major city in Iraq. Such attacks have a much greater resonance than the small-scale warfare and terror in the Sunni backlands, away from the attention of most Iraqis. Baghdad is now encircled by a security belt and obstacles. Yet Daesh, already present in nearby Fallujah and the north of Baghdad, will keep trying to resume presence in Baghdad. It already attacked in the center of Mosul. A solitary car bomb in Baghdad is always a possibility, yet a full-scale resumption of frequent attacks in Baghdad will take more time.

Personnel

It is estimated that the total number of remaining fighters in Daesh is around 25,000, of which 15,000 are in Syria (3,000 active combatants and 12,000 non-active) [26] and 10,000 in Iraq (2,000 active and 8,000 non-active). In addition, it is estimated that 3,000-3,500 unknown fighters returned to Europe.[28] Hoffman quotes a UN report from August 2018 claiming that Daesh still has 30,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria.[27] According to the International Coalition, the number of POWs of Daesh in Iraq and Syria is around 7,000.[29]

Concentrating on commanders, the analysis will follow a previous article on the IS commanders to show the changes.[30] Whereas the previously mentioned article analyzed hundreds of (mostly dead) IS commanders, the current one will examine commanders in 2018, mostly still alive or in Iraqi captivity. I will follow the same methodology and categories used by the author and compare the data. The following table lists the top leadership of Daesh, the so called *al-Lajna al-Mufawada* (Cabinet) under al-Baghdadi.[31]

Table 1: al-Lajna al-Mufawada (IS Cabinet)[32]

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Caliph, Iraqi

Mithaq Talib al-Janabi (alias: "Abu Omar"): Head of the cabinet and supervisor (*Mushrif*) of security in Iraq and Syria. Iraqi

Anwar Hamad al-Janabi (alias: "Haji 'Aref "): Deputy head of cabinet. Iraqi

Ahmad 'Abdalla Suweid al-Shammari (alias: "Abu Salih al-Shammari"): Commander of army (*Mas'ul Diwan al-Jund*), Iraqi

Nashid Fahd al-'Issawi (alias: "Abu Suheib al-'Iraqi"): Head of the security and intelligence (*Mas'ul al-Amn wal-Istikhbarat*). Iraqi[33]

Rafi Isma'il al-'Asafi (alias: "Abu Sattam"): Head of administration and finance in Iraq and Syria. Iraqi

Mu'taz 'Ali al-'Ithawi (alias: "Abu Yassir al-'Ithawi"): Commander of operations in Iraq. Iraqi

Ibrahim Muhammad al-'Issawi (alias: "Abu Ziyad"): In charge of operations of finance in Iraq. Iraqi

Mustafa Mansur al-Rawi (alias "Abu Talha"): Commander of operations in the Hajeen area. Iraqi

Khidr Ahmad Rashid (alias "Abu Ahmad al-Fanni"): Supervisor of operations in the Iraqi provinces of Nainawa (Mosul) and Salah al-Din. Iraqi

Sukru Tuncer: In charge of operations abroad, French of Turkish origins

Abu 'Ammar al-Sa'udi: Operations abroad, Saudi

Table 2: Nationality of Prominent Commanders [34]

Nationality	#
Iraqi	21
Syrian	3
Saudi	1
European	1

Table 3: Nationality of Commanders

Nationality	#
Iraqi	60
Syrian	4
Kurd	1
Egyptian	1
Saudi	1
European	1
Chechen	1
Uzbek	1
Unknown (most probably Iraqis)	17
Total	88

The previous article also discovered a disproportionate number of Iraqis among the commanders (345 out of 631 among commanders, and 92 out of 129 among prominent commanders). But in 2018 the command of the organization is clearly more Iraqi. The Syrians and the Saudis were almost completely wiped out. The cabinet includes two commanders in charge of operations abroad, showing that Daesh did not lose its interest in global terror (and assigns this to the foreigners), but in general the foreign fighters also faded from the ranks. It is estimated that only one out of 50 fighters (not only commanders) currently is a "*Muhajir*" (foreigner).

Table 4: Pre-2003 Occupations of Iraqi IS Commanders

Occupation	#
Member of Saddam Hussein's security services	4
Religious scholar	1
Unemployed	1
Engineer	1
Physician	1
Fallah	1
Unknown	51

Members of the security services of the Ba'th regime still rank first. During the years 2014-2017 Daesh lost 42 out of its 43 founders, including all the senior officers. The last casualties among the officers were the head of the cabinet Ayad al-'Ubeidi and his deputy Ayad al-Jumaili. They were substituted with much less experienced and charismatic commanders.[35] Two members of the current cabinet were officers under Saddam: Ahmad 'Abdalla al-Shamari, the "chief of staff" and Mu'taz al-'Ithawi, commander of operations in Iraq who is said to specialize in open space warfare. Although no birth dates are available, looking at the pictures of the new commanders, including prominent ones, reveals their young age. Indeed, Iraqi security forces disclose that an increasing number are new recruits and unknown to them. Having members with no significant pre-2003 career indicates that post-2017 Daesh is undergoing a generational change. For these new commanders, the more relevant question is not what they did before 2003, when they were probably too young. Rather, questions of interest include how they joined Jihadi activity after 2003, and when they joined Daesh.

Table 5: Tribal Origin of Iraqi IS Commanders

Tribe	#
Al-Janabiyeen (South of Baghdad and near Tikrit)	5
Jabur (Mosul area)	5
Albu 'Issa (Falluja area)	4
Albu Mar'i (of the Duleim confederation, Rammadi area)	2
Mushahada (north of Baghdad)	2
Zawba' (Falluja area)	2
Albu 'Itha (Rammadi area)	2
Karabla (Al-Qa'im near the border with Syria)	2
Muhamada (Al-Qa'im near the border with Syria)	2
Different tribes (one from each tribe)	20
Unknown	27

Compared to the previous article, this list does not reflect the tribal diversity of Sunni Iraq. The Jabur, possibly Iraq's biggest tribe, lost its prominence: none of the members of the cabinet is a Jaburi. Smaller tribes, notably the Janabiyeen and Albu 'Issa, became more prominent. Significantly, the head of the cabinet and his deputy are from the same tribe, the Janabiyeen[36] and two holders of sensitive positions in the *Lajna* are from the Albu 'Issa. The reasons for the post 2017 prominence of these particular tribes are unknown. In regional terms, the tribes of western Iraq are more represented than other regions, possibly because of the proximity to the Syrian border.

In his article, Zeidel discovered a discrepancy between regional origins of commanders and locations of service: more commanders were serving away from their places of origin. This was particularly noted with foreign fighters and hindered Daesh's ability to effectively govern regions under their control. The available data is not conclusive on this point, but there are indications that the organization—now acting clandestinely and more sensitive to merging in the local environment—is trying to use locals on account of outsiders. Thus, for example, Kamil al-'Issawi, from Fallujah, who was a local commander there before 2018, was instructed to return to Fallujah by the new Wali and restore the organization. His brother, also a Daeshi, remained in Iraq and he contacted him on his return.[37] The list of IS casualties in the January 2019 air raid of the Iraqi air force on the meeting of the military command of the so called "*Wilayat al-Furat*" in the Syrian town Susa allows us to glance at the regional and tribal origins of the commanders: 12 commanders were killed, eight of them Iraqis and of them five were from al-Qa'im, the nearby Iraqi border town. Four of the five were from the two major tribes of al-Qa'im: the Karabla and the Muhammada.[38] This suggests that Daesh is now nominating more locals to operational positions than ever before.

Organization

The survival and persistence of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph is a key element behind the transformation of the organization. At present, Baghdadi is more of a spiritual leader than a Caliph but he represents the ideological core of Daesh and hiding him is a continuous challenge. Al-Baghdadi dedicated a large part of his August 2018 audio recording to organization and warfare, indicating that he is also closely involved in these aspects of activity.[39] His persistence shows an internal cohesion in the ranks of the leadership, prompting Daesh's rivals to undermine it by spreading false information on cracks between al-Baghdadi and some of the leaders.[40] His survival softened the shock of the defeat in Syria and Iraq.

Daesh's 2018 organization gives the impression of slimming. As it is no longer a "state", it is no longer in charge of the various aspects of administration and governance. In 2018 the organization cancelled 14 "ministries" (*Diwan*), including, inter alia, education, agriculture, "spoils of war" (*Ghana'im*), health, services and the moral police (*Hisba*).[41] These "ministries" were, to a large extent, what gave Daesh its unique color. In fact, the *Lajna al-Mufawada* is now playing a more central role. Instead of the "ministries" the organization adopted

a more pyramidal structure, which is highly centralized around the Caliph and the cabinet. The Caliph has a *wali* who serves as his deputy. The *wali* is a member of both of the supreme councils of the organization: *Majlis al-Shura* (The Shura Council) in charge of the ideology and the *Lajna al-Mufawada* (the executive council or cabinet). The *wali* has three deputies:

1. A deputy in charge of security, industry (production of car bombs and artillery) and the special mail and coded communication.

2. A deputy in charge of religious affairs, the pledge of allegiance (*Bay'aa*), jurisprudence and tribes.

3. A deputy in charge of education, services, finance, health and taxes.

Thus, instead of a cabinet of over 14 "ministries", all these functions are concentrated at the hands of three deputies, under one *Wali*. In addition, Daesh has several "authorities" (*Hay'at*) or bureaus (*Makatib*) in charge of immigration to the "Islamic State", prisoners of war and martyrs, research, public relations, tribes and connections with distant *Wilayas* (provinces), such as *Wilayat Khurasan* in Afghanistan.[42] It is important to note that Daesh still refers to its organizational structure as a "state". It may have slimmed the state apparatus, befitting a terror/guerrilla organization, acting clandestinely, but this apparatus still contains all previous functions of the so-called "Islamic State".

Another important aspect in organization is the *Wilayat* (provinces). In 2016 an IS propaganda film claimed to have 19 *Wilayas* in Iraq and Syria (and 35 *Wilayas* worldwide).[43] Currently, the number of provinces in Iraq and Syria is 18.[44] Not a significant change. Yet, unlike 2014-2017, in most of the provinces, the structure suggests a network of guerrilla fighters and not a local government.[45]

This article is about whatever remained of Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Yet, the fact that the organization still contains some functions of global organization means that it did not lose its global aspirations. Trying to maintain contact with the estimated 3,000-3,500 foreign fighters who returned to Europe is one expression of the survival of the global vision. On the other hand, by 2018 the number of *Wilayas* beyond the core areas of Iraq and Syria was seriously reduced from 16 in 2016 to five: Khurasan (Afghanistan), West Africa, Saudi Arabia (called *al-Haramain*), Yemen and Sinai.[46] From this it would seem that global activity is a secondary priority to Daesh.

Conclusion

To evaluate whether post-2017 Daesh is "a Phoenix" it is important to understand that the organization received a heavy blow in Iraq and Syria. The territorial losses of an organization with a global vision were painful and possibly beyond repair. The losses of able cadres greatly diminished its military and media capabilities. This blow had an impact on the capabilities and the appeal of Daesh in the region and beyond. Daesh certainly did not wish (or expect) to be in this situation. Most of its messages now are meant to preserve whatever is left and prevent a total collapse by promising the cadres to regroup and return, relying on examples from their short history. One should not take this propaganda at face value.

Nevertheless, the organization shows some vitality and considerable steadfastness facing very harsh circumstances, under which other terror organizations would have dissipated. In addition to being a diehard fanatic organization, paradoxically, defeat brought the organization back to its basic essence: a small, marginal Sunni-Iraqi terror/guerrilla force, capable of waging small wars, intimidating populations and carrying out terror attacks in peripheral areas, exploiting the geopolitical and governmental vacuum there. In fact, Daesh became a more practical, matter-of-fact organization. Its organizational changes are impressive. Apparently, this is the heritage of men who served in Saddam Hussein's highly organized security services. The defeat also exposed the fact that Daesh essentially is an Iraqi organization, considering Syria to be only a corridor to "*Ard al-Tamkin*", Iraq.

As long as the situation in Syria remains as it is and the lethargy of the Iraqi state in providing security to the peripheral Sunni areas continues, Daesh will enjoy more years of survival and might become a more threatening

menace, especially to Iraq. However, Daesh is neither invincible nor imperishable. All sides fighting Daesh are required to improve combat preparation and fighting capabilities in order to keep inflicting further losses upon the organization. There is also a need for better coordination between the various international and local forces, so that a major offensive by the Coalition in Syria would not result in hundreds of Dawa'ish fleeing to unprepared Iraq and posing a grave threat to local security. Iraqi counter terrorism forces have been the best forces to fight Daesh on the ground in Iraq. However, when Daesh withdrew to Syria, this hampered their ability to act. Manning the border with these units and engaging them in operations of "hot pursuit" in Syria will clearly improve the mediocre capabilities of the Iraqi Shiite militias who man the border today. Daesh exploited the war in Syria since its inception. At present, when the Syrian regime (and its allies) seems to have the upper hand, Daesh is cornered in a remote part of the country and is no longer in control of territories in the west and south of the country. As long as the war in the west of Syria is not over, Daesh will continue to use Syrian territories for its endeavors.

In late April 2019, Daesh released a rare video of al-Baghdadi, the second in all. Al-Baghdadi is seen seated in a manner reminiscent of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Daesh's founder. The video delivered two main messages: that al-Baghdadi is still alive and well, and that the organization is following the path of Zarqawi.[47] Occasionally, the Iraqi military intelligence captures high ranking Dawa'ish, including some who may know on al-Baghdadi's whereabouts.[48] If he hides close to the Iraqi border, he is vulnerable to airstrikes while being moved or to incursions if stationary. If the loss of military commanders such as Abu Omar al-Checheni was irreparable, than the loss of the man who holds Daesh together would be much heavier.

This article contributes to our understanding of how Daesh is adapting to its post-defeat situation.[49] In terms of leadership and personnel, it is now more Sunni Iraqi than international. Attention is given to posting commanders in their home regions. In terms of operations Daesh is a smaller terror and guerilla organization, disposing of the actual governance. In terms of ideology, it is more local and practical and less apocalyptic and global. In terms of organization, it is more pyramidal, although still maintaining pretensions of a "state" and global activity and distribution. The trend certainly is to localization, focusing on Iraq and reverting to clandestine activities. Will the organization pursue this trend to its "logical end" and declare itself a local Sunni Iraqi organization with local claims? If so—and under the leadership of al-Baghdadi this is questionable—it will remain active for some time. However, as such, it would lose the international attention that is so central to Daesh. If not so, its ephemeral existence would finally vanish. We wonder if Daesh is able to accomplish such a basic change of identity.

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Notes

[1] "Iraqi PM Abadi Declares 'End of War Against ISIL'," *Al-Jazeera* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/iraqi-general-war-isil-171209120757374.html accessed April 2019.

[2] Max Abrahms, *Rules for Rebels,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. p.12-14.

[3] "'Amaliya Istikhbariya 'Iraqiya Turkiya Tutih biQiyadi Da'eshi Rafi'" *Al-Arabiya,* https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2018/02/15/عملية-استخباراتية-عراقية-تركية-تطيح-بقيادي-داعشي-رفيع accessed April 2019.

[4] Margaret Coker, "Five Top ISIS Officials Captured in US-Iraqi Sting", *NY Times* (May 9, 2018). https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-islamic-state-arrest.html, accessed April 2019. *Azzaman* (June 13, 2018).

[5] "Qiyadi fi Da'esh Yakshaf Tafaseel lil-Mara al-Ula'an Sahat al-Ii'tisam fi al-Anbar", *New News Iraq* (November 7, 2018). https://newnewsiq.com/view.php?cat=2732 accessed April, 2019.

[6] Hisham al-Hashimi, "*Tanthim Daesh fi al-'Iraq Inmudhijan*" (October 18, 2018). https://www.europarabct.com/تنظيم-داعش-عام-2018-أقارأنمؤوذجا-بقلم-الا/ accessed February 2019.

[7] Ronen Zeidel, "The Dawaish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders", *Perspectives on Terrorism,* XI, no. 4 (August 2017) http://bit.ly/2I1xTN0

[8] The authors of this article have no information on the current location of the leaders of Daesh. However, the capture by the co-alition of a member of the leadership, Abu Suhaib al-'Iraqi in late March 2019 in east Syria indicates that at least part of the senior leadership is still there. "Man Huwa al-Rajul al-Thalith fi Haykaliyat Daesh aladhi Ii'taqalahu al-Tahaluf bi Inzal Jawi?" *Orient-Net* (March 31, 2019). https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news show/164836

[9] This happened lately when the SDF left some bases close to the Iraqi border and Daesh took them.Wa'il Ni'ma, "Da'esh Yu'awid Nashatahu fi al-Manatiq al-Muharara Dun Rad Hukumi Hazim", *al Mada* (November 13, 2018). https://almadapaper.net/De-tails/214555/داعش-يعاود-نشاطه-في-المناطق-المحررة-من-دون-رد-حكومي-حازم

[10] Wa'il Ni'ma, "Quwat Iraqiya Tusaytir 'ala Makhafir Dakhil al-Aradi al-Suriya", *Almada* (November 5, 2018). https://almadapa-per.net/Details/214350/قوات-عراقية-تسيطر-على-مخافر-داخل-الأراضي-السورية. accessed December 3, 2018.

[11] Tzvi Barel' "Who Heard about Syria?" (in Hebrew), *Haaretz* (November 12, 2018).

[12] Adam Hoffman, "The "Islamic State" without a State" *Tel Aviv Notes*, (November 29, 2018), published by the Moshe Dayan Center https://dayan.org/content/islamic-state-without-state, accessed December 2, 2018.

[13] 'Adnani is quoted by Hoffman. For the message see: "New Audio Message from the Islamic State Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani al-Shami: And Those Who Lived [In Faith] Would Live Upon Evidence" *Jihadology* (May 21, 2016). https://jihadology.net/2016/05/21/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-adnani-al-shami-and-those-who-lived-in-faith-would-live-upon-evidence/

[14] Al-Baghdadi is quoted by Hoffman. Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Leader Baghdadi Resurfaces in Recording" *The New York Times* (August 22, 2018). https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/22/world/middleeast/isis-leader-baghdadi-recording.html accessed November 14, 2018.

[15] William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, New York: St Martin's, 2015, pp.140-159 (Hebrew edition).

[16] Abu Bakr Naji, *Idarat al-Tawahush: akhtar Marhala satamurr biha al-Umma*, Syria: Dar al-Tamarud, no date given.

[17] *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976 (3rd Edition), p. 918. For its use by Da'esh see *Majallat Dabiq,* no. 5, p. 25.

[18] Following the taking of the last stronghold of Daesh in Syria in March 2019, none of the leaders, except one, was, captured or killed. The whereabouts of the top leadership is not known and locating al-Baghdadi is one of the top priorities of those who fight ISIS. Hiding the leadership remains a top priority for ISIS.

[19] According to senior Daesh commander Saddam al-Jamal, arrested by the Iraqis in mid 2018, Daesh considered Iraq to be more important than Syria. Al-Jamal, a Syrian, explains this by the fact that most of the commanders were Iraqis. *Azzaman* (June 13, 2018). The entire interview is on https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=%d8%b5%d8%af%d8%a7%d9%85+%d8%a7%-d9%84%d8%ac%d9%85%d9%84+&view=detail&mid=94A6BCE8D6B885CA92D294A6BCE8D6B885CA92D2&FORM=VIRE accessed April 2019.

[20] *Almada* (November 24, 2018). Daesh is also digging tunnels under the border in that area. Hisham al-Hashimi, " Taqsir Mawqif Imkaniyat Daesh 'Aam 2018", sent to me by email from author

[21] Hisham al-Hashimi, " Taqsir Mawqif Imkaniyat Daesh 'Aam 2018", sent to me via email by author.

[22] Wa'il Ni'ma, "Mas'ulun: 'Anasir Da'esh Ya'udun Li Watha'ifihim al-Hukumiya Wa Rawatibihim al-Mutaa'khira", *Almada* (March 27, 2019). https://almadapaper.net/Details/217547/مسؤولون-عناصر-داعش-يعودو-لوظائفهم-الحكومية-ويتسلّمون-رواتبهم-المتأخرة

[23] Wa'il Ni'ma, "al-Mufakhakhat Takhtariq al-Hawajiz al-Amniya fi al-Manatiq al-Muharara raghm Kithafatha", *Almada* (November 21, 2018).

[24] Hoffman, "The "Islamic State" without a State" (2018).

[25] "Qiyadi fi Da'esh Yakshaf Tafaseel lil-Mara al-Ula 'an Sahat al-Ii'tisam fi al-Anbar", *New News Iraq*.

[26] Based on an interview of one of the authors with Iraqi officers in the joint command of the Coalition. With the overthrow of Daesh from its last stronghold in Syria in March 2019, the number of fighters in Syria may have decreased considerably.

[27] Hisham al-Hashimi, "Tanthim Daesh 'Aam 2018: al-'Iraq Inmudijan" sent to me by Email by author.Another estimate is of 8,000 fighters in Syria, mainly Iraqis. Wa'il Ni'ma, "Quwat Iraqiya Tusaytir 'ala Makhafir Dakhil al-Aradi al-Suriya", *Almada* (November 5, 2018). https://almadapaper.net/Details/214350/قوات-عراقية-تسيطر-على-مخافر-داخل-الأراضي-السورية accessed December 3, 2018.

[28] Hoffman,, "The "Islamic State" without a State" (2018).

[29] Hamed Ahmad, "al-Tahaluf al-Duwali: Ma Yuqarib Sab'at Alaf Da'eshi Mu'taqilun fi al-'Iraq wa Suriya", *Almada* (March 27, 2019). https://almadapaper.net/Details/217544/التحالف-الدولي-ما-يقارب-7-الاف-داعشي-معتقلون-في-العراق-وسوريا

[30] Ronen Zeidel, "The Dawaish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders".

[31] Part of the information in the list was taken from an interview one of the authors did with the director of the Anbar branch of Iraqi military intelligence in February 2019.

[32] Based on information in the database of Hisham al-Hashimi

[33] Captured by Coalition forces in east Syria, late March 2019. *Orient-Net* (March 31, 2019). https://www.orient-news.net/ar/news show/164836

[34] This table will include members of the current cabinet as well as prominent military commanders who are not in the cabinet or were arrested.

[35] Al-Hashimi, "Tanthim Daesh"

[36] The supervisor of the *Wilayas* of Dijla, Salah al-din and al-Jazeera and the *Wali* of Salah al-Din in Iraq are also Janabiyeen. Part of the tribe lives in these areas.

[37] Qiyadi fi Da'esh Yakshaf Tafaseel lil-Mara al-Ula 'an Sahat al-Ii'tisam fi al-Anbar", *New News Iraq* (November 7, 2018). https://newnewsiq.com/view.php?cat=2732 accessed April, 2019.

[38] "al-Mas'ul al-'Askari wa Wali al-Furat Abraz Qatla Gharat Susa al-Suriya", *Almada* (January 8, 2019). http://kms.almadapaper.net/content/uploads/Issue/190108092339905~090120194346.pdf accessed April 2019.

[39] Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Leader Resurfaces in Recording", *The New York Times* (August 22, 2018). https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/22/world/middleeast/isis-leader-baghdadi-recording.html accessed November 14, 2018.

[40] For example, Iraqi sources claimed that al-Baghdadi issued a "death list" of top commanders, blaming them of "treason", *Az-zaman* (October 10, 2018).

[41] Hisham al-Hashimi, "*Tanthim Da'esh fi al-'Iraq Inmudhijan*" (October 18, 2018). https://www.europarabct.com/تنظيم-داعش-عام-2018-أنموذج-من-بقلم-ال/ accessed February 2019.

[42] Based on information from the interrogation of two prominent Dawa'ish arrested by the Iraqis: Saddam al-Jamal and Isma'il al-Ithawi.

[43] Jack Moore, "ISIS Releases New Video Outlining 'Structure of the Caliphate", *Newsweek*, (July 7, 2016). https://www.newsweek.com/isis-releases-new-video-outlining-structure-caliphate-478502 accessed April 2019.

[44] Hisham al-Hashimi, "Tanthim Da'esh"

[45] See tables of the structure of the *Wilayas* of North Baghdad (*Shimal Baghdad*) and Salah al-Din in possession of authors.

[46] Hisham al-Hashimi, "Tanthim Da'esh".

[47] Raja Abdulrahim and Nazih Osseiran, "ISIS Video Purports to Show Leader Baghdadi in First Such Footage in Years," *The Wall Street Journal* (April 29, 2019). https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-video-purports-to-show-baghdadi-its-leader-11556561245 accessed May 2019.

[48] This was the case of Isma'il al-'Ithawi, arrested in February 2018 in Turkey. His last position was the coordinator between Iraq and Syria and in this position, he certainly was involved in hiding al-Baghdadi. This captive was later used by the Iraqi intelligence to lure other high ranking Dawa'ish, captured in April 2018.

[49] For more analysis on post-defeat Daesh, please see *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. XIII, no. 1 (February, 2019), online at: https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/perspectives-on-terrorism/archives/2019#volume-xiii-issue-1 (particularly Truls Hallberg Tønnessen's introduction to the special issue, "The Islamic State After the Caliphate"); and Joshua Geltzer, "Why Gabhdadi Risked a Video Appearance," The Atlantic (May 1, 2019), online at: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/baghdadi-video-announces-rebirth-isis/588421/