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Study



The Future of ISIS

between the possibilities of recession
and expansion

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INTRODUCTION

After the fall of many leaders of ISIS in Syria, Iraq and several African countries, and following the loss of several high ranking figures in charge of security and economic files between 2020-2022, it is worth investigating the likelihood of the Organization's rise or fall, and the factors leading to one possibility over the other.

Data and follow-ups of the ISIS's security and military activities during the years 2020-2022 indicate an increase in its military activities in three burning hotspots of the world; namely Afghanistan, sub-Saharan Africa, and Mozambique, with a slight decline in its operations in both Syria and Iraq. In the second quarter of 2023; however, there has been a noticeable escalation in its activities. This has prompted us to think that the effectiveness of the Organization's strategy in all the aforementioned regions will likely take an upward trend. Such a new strategy relies on key considerations such as the regional context, and the type of structuring that the it is developing in those regions, especially after the major attacks it carried out in several countries, such as Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Mali; and the response to these strikes it suffered in 2022 by Al-Qaeda in Mali. In addition to all that; there is the continued state of tension prevailing in these countries; which provides a supportive environment for the expansion of ISIS military operations and its recruitment propaganda.



FIRST: FACTORS BEHIND THE CONTINUITY OF ISIS ORGANIZATION

Despite the weakness of the Organization in terms of the structure of the Central Command in Iraq and Syria and the prosecutions imposed on it, and the decline of its spatial authority, the organization - because of several factors - was able to continue. Understanding these factors facilitates the evaluation of the next phase for ISIS.

ESCALATION OF THE OPPRESSION AND IDEOLOGY DISCOURSE

The factors of the Organization's rise, spread and continuity are complex and sophisticated. Collectively these factors help it to continue. Moreover; its spatial peculiarities constitute a strong factor in its presence in one geography but not in another. For example, the organization can not have a spatial or propaganda presence in the places controlled by the Shiites of Iraq, or in Christian areas in Nigeria. In contrast, the Organization takes advantage of certain grievances in the Islamic environment: "Christians and Muslims", or in the Sunni one: "Sunnis and Shiites", or in the nationalist one: "Tajiks against the Taliban" to support its activities and secure the requirements for its presence. Thus, the domestic policies of governments along with social conditions contribute to the fertile soil for the popularity and acceptance of the Organization's narrative.

Since its emergence in 2014, ISIS/Daesh has relied on media platforms for more than one purpose. Furthermore, during these events, it was necessary for the Organization to draw attention to its ideological propaganda as well as the operations of its members and Sheikhs (religious leaders) who come from the tribes of Jordan. **Daesh's resort to the media was not arbitrary or carried out in an ad hoc manner, but it is clear that Daesh virtual cells developed a deliberate media strategy for this purpose using tendentious propaganda continuously, regardless of the credibility of such propaganda.**



Despite the diversity and multiplicity of reasons and factors for the rise and spread of extremist jihadist thought, the Organization - in terms of general classification - distributes its efforts within key words that are still essential in reading the phenomenon, such as: feeling marginalized, injustice and exclusion, feeling the absence of justice, and the question of identities. It is, therefore, possible to understand the reflection of these concepts within the privacy of each society and state separately.

In promoting its narrative on the social media spaces, ISIS uses hundreds of members through support accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. In addition to their huge spread in Telegram, statistics show that it has more than 20,000 active accounts and hundreds of groups on Telegram. It further targets its audience through global and local “trends” both on Facebook and Twitter.

For example, the organization took advantage of the recent protests in Jordan in November 2022, where there were frequent strikes by the Union of Truck Drivers, Taxis and Public Buses. Such strikes extended to a number of shops in governorates such as Maan, Karak and Madaba.

According to the description of many of its supporters, ISIS was keen to take advantage of this opportunity in its channels and groups on the applications of Telegram, Tam Tam, Tech Have **Through continuous media incitement against the Kingdom, ISIS has found in propaganda a key pillar for itself to reappear in a position of strength, hoping to achieve through propaganda and excitement its goal of recruiting some people or increasing unrest in the Kingdom, or emotionally re-stimulating its supporters through that.**

The pro-ISIS strategy followed by the channels on Telegram focused on the following:

- Disseminating a huge mixture of true and false news items about the Wadi Araba Agreement.
- Focusing on referring to the so-called “betrayal of the Islamic Ummah by the Jordanian monarchy.”
- Focusing continuously on Jordan's participation in the "bombing of the innocent civilians in Syria under the banner of the International Coalition."
- Appealing to the tribes to pledge allegiance to Daesh to take revenge on those who arrested and killed their sons.



Internally in Jordan, these virtual cells followed the following:

- Publishing continuous videos of the strike operations.
- Publishing continuous news about protests and attacks on the police.
- Incitement to take to the streets and attack police patrols.
- Publishing links to local service groups - buying and selling, cars, repairs, social services, real estate... Etc. - and urging the supporters of the ISIS to enter these sites; and then publish the news of the Organization and quotes from the words of its leaders about Jordan in the hours after the time of entry. For example, the link of a service group is published at 5 o'clock; the entry continues to 8 o'clock. At 9 o'clock the publications begin from the supporters of the Organization, and so on.
- Creating news channels and publishing news related to Jordan that tend to incite.

CONCENTRATING ATTENDANCE IN VIRTUAL REALITY

Perhaps the most prominent thing that can be observed in the factors of adaptation is the ability of ISIS to manage itself in the models of actual control and spatial succession to expand in the peripheries and virtual succession. ISIS realizes that the caliphate, in the real sense that can be felt on the ground, practically has ended with the loss of major cities. At the same time; however, it maintained its symbolism among its followers and supporters, transforming from a realistic matter to a virtual symbol sought to achieve. This can be seen with ISIS's desire to return again to achieve a new spatial succession in the same place or elsewhere; which in turn provided it with an intellectual and ideological cover to manage the relationship between it and the various branches around the world.



KEENNESS TO ATTRACT AND RECRUIT

The ISIS propaganda is still centered on the same ideological ideas, on its continued presence in the global network, the Internet, and on the local reality where it spreads. This has enhanced its ability to gain a social base or restores its ability to recruit in a renewed manner. This is done in light of the focus of the security consequences policies on combating jihadist organizations, while neglecting the contexts and reasons. As such, ISIS has always found a fertile environment for recruitment and propaganda. It has established wide groups of local and virtual supporters, whether through its previous propaganda or realistically in its camps and areas of influence. This will certainly have an active role in later stages in gaining sympathy, support or direct involvement in the field work for the Organization.



SECOND: ISIS'S STRENGTH FACTORS

REMOTE EXTENSION AND ACTIVATING DECENTRALIZATION

In light of the transition from the stage of spatial control in the heart of the Islamic world - Syria and Iraq - to the stage of building new areas of expansion, it is noticed that ISIS preferred, after its great losses, to move to the decentralized management model of its branches in different countries and continents, especially in the most fragile areas, where the it has advanced human, logistical and operational elements, that allow it to carry out operations confirming the continuation of its branches rather than their extinction at the times of the central command decline. This applies particularly to the branch of Khorasan Province in Central and South Asia, and to ISIS branches in the Sahel and Sahara region, especially West Africa.

It is noteworthy that the continued strikes received by the central leaders of ISIS in Syria and Iraq in contrast to the mounting strength of some branches and "Wilayaat"/states affiliated with it have enhanced the independence of these branches from the central command; especially when the caliph encouraged them during the past periods to carry out operations and to have self-financing network, mobilization and recruitment.

EXPANDING NETWORKS SUPPORTING THE ORGANIZATION

Several cross-cutting information indicates the existence of new networks of ISIS outside its traditional areas in Afghanistan and the African continent. For example, UN security reports revealed the existence of several ISIS financing cells in South Africa that ⁽¹⁾ are active in the cities of Durban on the east coast of South Africa and the city of Cape Town since 2017. Following this cell, the personality of Bilal al-Sudani, who was assassinated in early 2023, was identified as one of the most important leaders and coordinators of financing operations between the parent Organization and its branches and supporters in the world.

(1) The cells comprised eight South African-based companies, four of which are related to Farhad Homer, four of which are larger Novell and Younis, MA Gold Traders (Pty) Ltd, Bailey Holdings (Pty) Ltd, Flexoseal Waterproofing Solutions (Pty) Ltd and HJ Bannister Construction CC, and Farhad Homer's Sultans Construction CC, Ashiq Jewellers CC, Oneos Trading (Pty) Ltd and Shaahista Shoes CC.



EXPANSION OF ACTIVITIES

To get rid of the effects of the field defeat, ISIS relied on developing the branches that pledged allegiance to it by providing them with strategic visions and administrative elements and developing a plan to link them to each other. Hence, it was necessary to expand the workspaces. Consequently, operations escalated in Mozambique in 2017 to 2022, Burkina Faso 2019- 2022, Mali 2020 - 2022, Nigeria 2019- 2022, and Afghanistan 2017- 2022. The largest work activities were at more than one level for its two branches: in Mozambique and Central Africa.

Expanding activities includes engaging in offensive operations against government and security forces, UN organizations, non-Muslim minorities, and al-Qaeda. Moreover, ISIS engaged in organized crime, smuggling weapons and drugs. It further extorted transnational corporations working in gold or oil mining.

Expansion activities also include recruitment, which is seen in several countries in Africa where Abdullah Hussein Abadiga, through his investment networks, helped recruit hundreds of young people and send them to weapons training camps in several African countries; and to collect donations from mosques in Cape Town for ISIS.

On the other hand, ISIS has helped other cells to work on providing temporary safe houses for the Organization and facilitate the transfer of funds between African countries and help in the purchase of logistical equipment from Congo, South Africa and Senegal. In Afghanistan, it has strengthened its recruitment structure through diplomatic tribal activity for its leaders. Such activities made ISIS a competitor to the authority of the Taliban through the initiative to attract tribes with vengeance towards the Taliban. Responsiveness to ISIS came from two prominent Pashtun tribes: the Pashtun "Mamoon Zai" tribe, and the Pashtun "Alizai" tribe. Growing responsiveness is clear in the Nangarhar province, especially the Directorate of Atchin due to the presence of ISIS which has strong prospects for increasing the movement and activity in the surrounding areas, as this State connects the Afghan east with the capital Kabul on the one hand and the northwestern regions of Pakistan on the other.



Through tribal links, relations can be established with the provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Nuristan and Kunar, due to the long and common borders that extend hundreds of kilometers with Pakistan. These data give an important advantage to these provinces; therefore, launching well-planned operations against the Taliban from Nangarhar may in the future put the Taliban before a major security challenge at least in the east and south of Afghanistan. This is practically seen during the escalation of critical security operations against different locations in the country and against leaders of the Taliban themselves.

All these expanding movements have made ISIS develop its structure in its areas of activity and increased its benefit from these movements by exploiting the weakness of its opponents, which is the slow response to the transformations that the Organization is going through and its pre-emptive moves.

ISIS ABILITY TO EXPLOIT THE WEAKNESS OF ITS OPPONENTS

ISIS is characterized by its ability to overcome security breaches through its policy of media blackout first and changing faces later. It further exploits local, regional and international factors to expand the scope of its work, as its experience in military and security work and its ability to adapt enables it to reproduce the new leadership, re-organize itself and shift its tactics from one stage to another with high efficiency.

In both Afghanistan and Africa, ISIS has exploited a range of regional conditions to expand its activities. Among these conditions are border, tribal and ethnic conflicts along with security fragility that make it impossible to monitor the entire area with qualitative efficiency to prevent its attacks.

ISIS has benefited from a recruit who presented his affiliation to the Organization in Iran to announce direct activity in it by launching a suicide attack on October 26, 2022 that targeted visitors to the shrine of Shah Jarragh in the city of Shiraz in southern Iran. That attack resulted in killing 15 people and wounding at least 19. In 2023, ISIS is likely to seek more targeting of the Iranian interior, as it confirmed on more than one occasion in its weekly Al-Naba newspaper that it will seek to carry out more operations inside Iran. This is to activate the principle of exploiting the political turmoil Iran has been witnessing for months.



THIRD: ISIS WEAKNESS FACTORS

There are many factors that weaken ISIS. The most prominent are:

LOSS OF LEADERSHIP

Daesh/ISIS lost three leaders between 2020 and 2022 from the rank of "Caliph" in addition to the arrest of dozens of its actors in several African countries and in Afghanistan. In addition to that, the Coalition classified a number of its actors such as Bilal Al-Sudani, who is in charge of financial coordination between the states, and Abu Sara Al-Iraqi, Ali Salman Al-Jubouri, who is responsible for developing the Organization's structure in Syria and Iraq as wanted figures.

It was noted that ISIS does not refer to the incidents of the liquidation or arrest of the second row leaders or those lower than them. It does not either disclose the killing of its leader until a successor is in place. This is out of concern that such an announcement could possibly be a fake one. It was also to emphasize the continuity of the organizational and structural body of the ISIS, so that it is not affected by the successive strikes to which it is generally subjected. These operations - the assassination of the leaders and their arrest - in fact, affect the hierarchy of the Organization, weaken its ability to quickly restore, postpones many projects and operations as a result of a leadership vacuum and the suffering of the Organization from the depletion of administrative and security joints. That was so clear especially after the killing of its most important leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, whose absence caused the loss of a charismatic leadership figure capable of holding and moving things around. Al-Baghdadi's heirs, the two Qarishis, were not close to his supremacy or influence.

On the other hand, bringing in new leaders are most likely persons from the third level who worked in the ranks of ISIS at the peak of its spread and control over several areas, which raises questions about its leadership capabilities on the one hand or its ability to pump new blood effectively on the other hand. This applies to Syria and Iraq in particular, and to the rest of the world in general.



SEEKING SAFE HAVEN

Most of the targeting of the leaders of ISIS took place during the years 2020-2022 first in Syria and secondly in Iraq and thirdly in Nigeria and Mali. Hence, the idea of coordination offices, which the organization seeks to activate to the fullest since its approval a year ago, was proposed. These leaders can move to the outlying states and manage operations from them. The absence of a safe haven will push the leaders of ISIS to arrange their arrival to new places. Here, it is likely to move to one of the sub-Saharan African areas, from which they can start to establish a new spatial control. Such procedures; however, will expose the Organization to new large-scale operations that might be launched against it in these areas. This will deplete it of its new leading figures and threatens its gains with loss again.



FOURTH: THE FUTURE OF THE ORGANIZATION BETWEEN RECESSION AND EXPANSION

ISIS has a clear presence outside the Arab domain in both Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa. There are; therefore, possibilities surrounding ISIS that range from expansion and rise to contraction and decline.

1. PROSPECTS FOR EXPANSION

A. AFGHANISTAN

During the year 2023, it is likely that the pace of the Organization's terrorist operations will increase in Afghanistan, in India and then in the southeast of the Asian continent. There are several indicators for that:

- ISIS's repositioning in Afghanistan: The repositioning of armed groups in the South Asian region is expected, especially after Daesh in Afghanistan activated coordination procedures through the Siddiq office led by Daesh leader in Afghanistan, Thana Allah, where Ghaffari runs a broader regional program that threatens neighboring countries in Central Asia and South Asia by activating the Siddiq office of the mother organization, which includes an area that includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Central European countries.
- Continued operations against the Taliban: The mutual targeting between the two sides is likely to continue, especially with the continuous operations by Daesh against civilians by three weekly operations on average. Add to that Taliban's keenness to stop the assassination campaigns led by Daesh against many leaders of the Taliban. It is certain that the direct repercussions of the operations carried out by Daesh Khorasan may go beyond the borders of Afghanistan and extend to other countries, especially with the presence of small groups supporting the Organization in India, the Philippines, and the Maldives.



B. AFRICA

ISIS branches in Africa are seeking to develop their activities and operations during the current year significantly, in light of the operational escalation in its traditional areas of influence: eastern Mali, Burkina Faso, northeastern Nigeria, northeastern Mozambique; and the ongoing attempt to extend towards new areas: Togo, Benin, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Congo, Central Africa. Daesh operations in the first range are almost double; and those in the second range increased by about 30% compared to 2021-2022.

West and Central Africa are characterized by increasing instability and the spread of violent extremism. Some countries in the region, such as Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea, have experienced military coups; which means that there is uncertainty about the political transition process in these countries. The situation remains alarming in Cameroon and Nigeria, where significant insecurity prevails in parts of those countries. In addition, northern Mozambique remains a source of serious concern, as the expansion of ISIS there drives people to flee. Eastern Congo is also a major flashpoint, with more than 100 armed groups fighting for control of the territory. In the midst of these disturbances, we see that Daesh carries out more than one hundred and fifty operations per month throughout Africa. By analyzing the data of these operations and their places of spread, we find that Daesh activity is centered on:

- Focusing on the Middle Belt regions of Africa.
- Focusing on targeting government forces and minority civilians.
- Diversifying targeting patterns by adopting different tactics in the execution of operations through a broad direct attack pattern, a pattern of IED explosions, and a pattern of sabotage against government and civilian property.
- Exploiting natural terrain to carry out organized attacks through small cells.



- Employing sectarian and ethnic dimensions in the context of the strategy of internal destabilization and the state of insecurity, as an environment and a fertile environment that allows for spread and expansion. The connection between the dimensions of the selected Daesh operations in Nigeria, Mozambique, Chad and Burkina Faso is their being within the scope of the Christian-majority middle belt. And this is linked to raising the sectarian and ethnic tension. Daesh also used this to fuel hostility between the Fulani Muslims and the Kutib Christians, especially in May 2022, when it provoked strife between Fulani herders and Kutib farmers in central Nigeria.

In analysing the nature of the targets in particular, it can be noted that ISIS in sub-Saharan/West Africa was better able to expand than the Organization's branch in Afghanistan, as operations in African states achieve two main objectives:

The first is a significant increase in security and military activity. This applies to all branches of ISIS on the continent. The second is the expansion of targeting Christians, through attacks on Christian villages, raiding the home of a Christian cleric, and carrying out bombings in Christian communities, especially as these states are located within the “Middle Belt”, which includes a Christian majority.

2. RETRACEMENT PROBABILITIES

The probability of retraction in these areas is enhanced if the following indicators are achieved:

- Following the path of dismantling terrorism and local communities by following the Taliban in Afghanistan policies that distance the local population from Daesh, which is trying to attract them, as well as the transitional Malian government that tried to negotiate with some branches of Daesh/ Al-Qaeda in 2022. The two parties, however, have not responded to the conditions and demands of the government so far.

- The continued targeting of ISIS leaders and cadres: This is the trend of the United States and several countries who follow the strategy of hunting leaders. Such a trend has a clear impact on pushing the Organization towards partial latency and gives local governments the opportunity to launch continuous campaigns against the strongholds of the Organization's branches.
- The use of artificial intelligence techniques in determining targeting priorities: The coordination efforts between countries may expand on the level of using artificial intelligence in the face of ISIS and other jihadist groups, but this model needs a complete database of the areas of spread of the organization, its supporters and leaders, and tracking their movements and meetings.

CONCLUSION



It can be said that ISIS was able to maintain its existence through its ability to adapt, by having an ideological propaganda, by disclosing and publicizing injustice and by attracting and recruiting fighters. On the other hand, ISIS has many elements of power that give it the advantage of growing and expanding, most notably: activating the idea of decentralization in its periphery and a strategy that regulates the work of its branches, in addition to expanding the scope of support networks, recruitment and field work. It has the ability to exploit its opponents and proactively move against them. However, the loss of its leaders and their attrition through the assassination campaigns led by the United States, resulted in a vacuum in ISIS's leadership and management, which gives the opportunity for its opponents to launch continuous attacks on it.

The active presence of ISIS is limited to Afghanistan and the countries of the African belt; and hence the prospects for the rise and expansion of this Organization are more likely than its decline, especially in the countries of Africa, as it can exploit its capabilities in rapid operations and continuous expansion and the ability to finance itself through arms trade, organized crime and developing its networks. The likelihood of its expansion is weakened by the existence of a clear strategy for comprehensive solutions in the African continent. This hypothesis; however has no validity, especially with the continent being inflamed for decades. The path of ISIS during 2023 therefore will continue to escalate, unlike its path in Afghanistan, where the Taliban has access to the networks of the Organization and to its local supporters, that can be attracted to Taliban's side. This depends on their ability to meet their ideological demands which Daesh is working on to attract them, along with its promises to improve their living conditions.



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