

# The downfall of Daesh in the Middle East and implications for global security

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## Abstract

Territorial losses of Daesh, or the Islamic State (IS), in Iraq and Syria have led many to conjure the demise of the global terrorist organization. Conditions on ground, however, are ripe for the recuperation of the organization. The presence of extra-regional players, the widening Shia-Sunni divide, the failure of Iraqi and Syrian governments to stabilize the conflict-hit regions and a timely decision by Daesh to activate its sleeper cells in different parts of Europe, Asia and Africa could very much benefit the organization in recovering from battlefield losses or heralding the fourth wave of global jihad. This, then, could further augment the global implications of the rise of IS, including revival of Cold War era “proxy-ism”, refugee crises leading to fissures among the community of European nations, the intensification of the sectarian conflict in the Muslim world and “lone wolf” terrorism in the West. The paper seeks to map the possibility of Daesh’s recuperation in light of the “terrorist lifecycle” and how this would impact the global peace in general, and in South Asia in particular.

**Key Words:** ISIS, terrorist lifecycle, hard Counter-Terrorism, South Asia

## Introduction

Violent extremism remains more pervasive in the societies possessing pre-conditions such as relative deprivation, socio-economic grievances, bad governance and pro-violence doctrinal infrastructure. High-profile terrorist attacks and states’ disproportionate reactions only serve as catalysts transforming reluctant supporters into active combatants. The Iraq-Iran war (1980-88), subsequent international sanctions

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against Iraq, and finally the US-led invasion of the country created pre-conditions conducive for emergence of the Islamic State (IS), a.k.a. Daesh (by its Arabic acronym). Similar preconditions existed in Syria under the tyrannical regime of Asad, whose policies led to the marginalization of the majority Sunni population of Syria.

The Arab Spring proved to be the catalyst which helped the IS to fill the vacuum of a legitimate authority. As the IS emerged from the ashes of chaos and anarchy, it soon rose to the level of a formidable entity, which pushed many state and even non-state actors<sup>2</sup> to form counter-coalitions. They took the production of suicide bombers to an industrial scale, and created a structure of a *de facto* state that withstood the might of international onslaught for several months. By the end of 2016, however, the organizational infrastructure of the IS seemed to be crumbling with the loss of finances, territory, fighters and the top and middle tiers of its leadership.

These battlefield losses led many counter-terrorism specialists and policy makers to forecast the demise of Daesh as an organization. This paper, however, argues that total obliteration of the organization in the near future is far from inevitable. Causal factors behind the emergence of Daesh including the presence of extra-regional players, Sunni alienation, and the incompetence of Iraqi forces still remain unaddressed. Chances of recuperation may further be increased by a timely decision of Daesh to activate its sleeper cells in different parts of Europe, Asia and Africa. Also, the rise of far-right nationalism in the West will continue to alienate Muslim diaspora communities, providing an ideal pool of potential recruits for violent Islamist organizations including Al-Qaeda and Daesh.

The paper is organized into three different sections. The first section provides an overview of the factors leading to the emergence of the IS, how the organization impacted international and regional security, and whether those conditions still exist in the areas in question. In the second part, the author discusses counter-strategies and tactics being adopted by different stakeholders to combat Daesh, and what have been the outcomes so far.

A brief description of the “terrorist lifecycle” is provided in the third part, followed by an assessment of the global terrorist organization in light of causal factors and the terrorist lifecycle framework.

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Bond, "Taliban 'special forces' fighting ISIS." *Mirror*, 18 December 2016, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/incoming/taliban-special-forces-fighting-isis-7038671>, last visited 10 May 2017.

### **Are Conditions Conducive for the Recuperation of Daesh?**

Gerges studies the evolution of global Jihad into three different waves and argues that Daesh represents the third wave.<sup>3</sup> The first wave started in the 1970s and was led by the disciples of Sayyid Qutb and Hasan al-Banna, prominent Egyptian Islamists known as the master theoreticians and founders of contemporary Jihad. Both figures created a strategy for terror, which continues to be appropriated by different terrorist organizations operating in different parts of the Islamic world. The first-wave leaders including Zawahiri, Abdullah Azzam and Imam Sharif (a.k.a. “Dr. Fadl”) devoted much of the time and energy to produce theological justification for targeting “renegade” and “apostate” rulers. The culmination point for the first wave was during the multi-national Afghan Jihad in the 1980s. With the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the first wave subsided and paved the way for second wave, in which the focus shifted from the “near enemy” (apostate regimes and invading powers in the Muslim World) to the “far enemy” (the United States and Europe).<sup>4</sup> The US invasion of Afghanistan and subsequently of Iraq heralded the third wave of global Jihad. Initially, the groups and leaders originating in the second wave took the lead but gradually a new generation of zealots replaced the second wave’s vanguard. Daesh represents this third wave.

Scholars studying the emergence and evolution of Daesh agree that factors such as protracted Iran-Iraq war and subsequent international economic sanctions created preconditions for violent extremism. The situation was further worsened by America’s destruction of Iraqi institutions, particularly its dismantling of the Baath Party and the army, which created a vacuum that unleashed a fierce power struggle and allowed groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and IS to emerge and flourish. Efforts by the US to rebuild Iraqi Army met with partial success as the Iraqi military continuously struggled in combat readiness and effective leadership.<sup>5</sup> 30,000 Iraqi troops dropped their weapons

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<sup>3</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges: “ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism”. *Current History*, December 2014, [http://currenthistory.com/Gerges\\_Current\\_History.pdf](http://currenthistory.com/Gerges_Current_History.pdf), last visited on 18 March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on the debate between “far enemy” and “near enemy” please refer to Aryan Baker: “Who Killed Abdullah Azzam?” *Time*, 18 June, 2009, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1902809\\_1902810\\_1905173,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1902809_1902810_1905173,00.html), last visited 19 March 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Tucker: “The Islamic State: Origins, Goals and Future Implications”. *The Eurasia Center*, July 2014, [https://eurasiacenter.org/publications/ISIS\\_Briefing\\_Colin\\_Tucker.pdf](https://eurasiacenter.org/publications/ISIS_Briefing_Colin_Tucker.pdf), last visited 19 March 2017

and fled when a few hundred IS militants overran Mosul in June 2014.<sup>6</sup> Widespread corruption<sup>7</sup> and a lack of an *esprit de corps* still continues to limit Iraqi forces' capabilities to prevail on the battlefield.<sup>8</sup>

The rise of the Islamic State was facilitated by the conscious alienation of Iraq's Sunni population by a Shiite-led Baghdad government backed by Iran.<sup>9</sup> Following the fall of Mosul in June 2014, the United States attempted to restore the sectarian equilibrium by removing the Iran-backed Nouri al-Maliki, who was primarily blamed for marginalizing the Sunni population. Maliki was replaced by the more moderate Haider al-Abadi, but he was thwarted by sectarian hardliners operating in Iraq with the blessings of Iran.

As the IS rose to power, regional and international players moved in to counter this transnational threat. They, however, differed in their approaches, which led them to adopt different sets of strategies and methods. The US relied heavily on firepower and sponsoring so-called "moderate rebels" (or "good terrorists" from others' vantage point) who may threaten the Assad regime in Syria but prove helpful in combating Daesh. Russia, on the other hand, focused more on defending Assad and only became interested to counter Daesh because Chechen rebels joined Syrian Daesh units. Elsewhere in the wider "Khorasan" region,<sup>10</sup> Russia sought the help of the Afghan Taliban to prevent the advance of Daesh into Central Asia, Russia's traditional sphere of influence. International response to counter Daesh did not only revive the Cold War era proxy-ism but also increased the acceptability of erstwhile fundamentalist organizations in the regional and international corridors of power.

### **The terrorist lifecycle**

Terrorist groups in general are relatively short-lived. In 1992, David Rapoport's quantitative analysis found that 90 percent of terrorist organizations have a life-span of less than one year, and out of those that survive past one year, more than half disappear

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<sup>6</sup> Chelsea J. Carter, Salma Abdelaziz and Mohammed Tawfeeq: "Iraqi soldiers, police drop weapons, flee posts in portions of Mosul", *CNN*, 13 June 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Zaid Al-Ali: "How Maliki Ruined Iraq". *Foreign Policy*. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/19/how-maliki-ruined-iraq/>, last visited 19 March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Wladimir Van Wilgenburg: "Iraqi Soldiers Flee Again in Iraq Army's First Mosul Operation". *The Daily Beast*, 26 March 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Tucker: "The Islamic State: Origins, Goals and Future Implications". *The Eurasia Center*, July 2014, [https://eurasiacenter.org/publications/ISIS\\_Briefing\\_Colin\\_Tucker.pdf](https://eurasiacenter.org/publications/ISIS_Briefing_Colin_Tucker.pdf), last visited 19 March 2017.

<sup>10</sup> The area comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and parts of India.

within the following decade.<sup>11</sup> It means that a great number of terrorist organizations are formed but relatively few persist. The complete lifecycle of a campaign generally comprises of four main phases including emergence, rise, downfall and demise.

The first phase is characterized by the birth of a violent campaign and the instigation of violence. For this to happen certain preconditions are necessary including successfully creating a common goal, a common cause and a common ideology. A cause alone does not produce a movement, if it is not capitalized upon effectively. This is where the role of leadership, or the vanguard, becomes even more relevant. One requires a vanguard that accepts the cause and works towards the dissemination of this cause among the potential recruits and the masses. In other words, three elements are required in the emergence phase; identification of ideology, public support, and recruitment by a robust leadership.

The second phase is defined as escalation, which is the intensification of the operational, strategic, tactical and logistical aspects of the campaign. In this phase, the attacks intensify, and the group may opt to expand the battle area. This rise of the movement is facilitated by increasing popular support leading to more funding and logistical support as well as political legitimacy, which in turn enable more recruitment. As violence escalates during this phase, government retaliation also intensifies. During this phase, government operations tend to have adverse effects in mitigating the terrorist campaign as they may provoke a violent backlash.

De-escalation generally marks the decline in the frequency of attacks and the group's activities. Terrorist organizations often reach this stage when they lose their direction and operational capacity. As the conflict drags on without securing considerable gains towards the end goal, it results in the spread of dissatisfaction among the competing leaders and fighters hence leading to fractionalization within the terrorist organizations. When the internal rivalries turn bloody, it squeezes terrorist organizations' public support.

Finally, demise signals the complete abandonment of violence, and ultimately, the end of a terrorist campaign. It is rare for the group to abandon their campaign as a result of achieving political and military goals. Quite often, the demise occurs when political goals become no longer relevant in the face of a changed political environment.

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<sup>11</sup> In 1992, David Rapoport found that 90 percent of terrorist organizations have a life-span of less than one year, and those that survive past one year, more than half disappear within the following decade. David C. Rapoport: "Terrorism," in: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Government and Politics*, Volume 2, ed. by Mary Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1067.

The four phases of a lifecycle are a general categorization established for the purpose of facilitating the analysis of a terrorist campaign. The reality is of course more complex, as no terrorist campaign will fall neatly into four entirely distinct stages. In the case of Daesh, after the international onslaught, the group appears to be in the third phase of its lifecycle, which is downfall. A number of factors, however can either expedite the downfall or reverse the gains of the international coalition.

The longevity of terrorist groups often depends on popular support that accounts for resilience and guarantees more recruits, finances and hideouts. But the IS became synonymous with viciousness and brutality. It carried out massacres, beheadings and engaged in religious and ethnic cleansing against other sects and religions. The IS made important mistakes, simultaneously opened fronts against the international system, local regimes, rival sects and tribes. A multi-frontal war, with minimum attention paid to target-selection, put great pressure on the international community, Iraqi state, Kurds, Shia militias and Sunni Sahwa tribes to respond. The decline of support inevitably leads to isolation and marginalization, eroding the support base of the violent group. They have become more vulnerable. Under these circumstances, if the states apply the right combination of hard and soft counter-terrorism, demise is possible. The IS, however, has a different approach to ensure her survival and expansion.

Leaders of the first and second waves of global Jihad always portrayed their struggles as defensive in nature and abstained, to a large extent, from targeting civilians. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the leader of the third wave cared less about popular support and public opinion. He wished to appeal to the “effectees” of marginalized segments of Iraq, Syria and Western Muslim diaspora communities, which provided the maximum number of supporters and active fighters. This stream of recruits is likely to continue as the sectarian narrative continues to thrive in Syria, Iraq and the larger Muslim world. The Pakistani theater reflects vividly how the IS manipulates sectarian faultiness deliberately to sustain her presence and thrive in the region. The recent recruitment and mobilization of Pakistani Shia by Iran to take part in the anti-IS fight in Syria and Iraq, and local alliances between ISIS and anti-Shia militant groups indicate that a new transformation is about to take place in the sectarian war within Pakistan. Historically, in Pakistan Shia militancy has remained reactive and selective. But with thousands of Pakistani Shias being recruited and trained by Tehran, the landscape of sectarian militancy is likely to undergo a momentous transformation with the possibility of a head-on confrontation

between militant fronts of the two opposing sects. The IS stands to benefit immensely from such an environment.

Another factor contributing to the endurance of a terrorist campaign relates to states' counter-measures. It has been noted that the disproportionate use of force often backfires, leading to the legitimacy of terrorist organizations. The multi-party military campaign to drive out Islamic State militants from their strongholds in Mosul and Ramadi relied heavily on firepower, which caused excessive civilian casualties. In March 2017, a leading Sunni politician from Iraq warned the US that mounting "collateral damage" threatened to undermine the effort to crush the militants.<sup>12</sup>

### **Future Assessment**

Notwithstanding anti-Daesh battlefield gains, the presence of pre-conditions that led to the emergence of the organization can decelerate her descent from "downfall" to "demise" for a year or two. This descent, however, will have profound implications for the regional and the international *jihadi* landscape.

The future of Daesh's provincial divisions (*wilayahs*), located thousands of miles away from the geographical center of the "Caliphate" appear very clear. Bin Laden once said, "When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse."<sup>13</sup> His loyalists proved him right when thousands of Al-Qaeda members and affiliates switched their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was seen by many as a strong horse among the contemporary Jihadi community. Daesh's ability to take over vast swaths of land, the presence of a visible Caliph (as opposed to an invisible Caliph like Mullah Omar of the Afghan Taliban) and the offer of financial incentives lured a number of former Al-Qaeda affiliates as well as factions of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban to join Daesh. This will change as Daesh fall from their prestigious position by losing territory they once controlled, al-Baghdadi is forced to go into hiding or eliminated, and the organization's business empire falls apart. Al-Qaeda may reemerge as the strong horse again, and fighters attached to Daesh's *wilayahs* may fall back in the fodder of local strong horses such as Afghan Taliban.

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<sup>12</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalii: "Sunni politician warns U.S. of mounting civilian casualties in Mosul". *Reuters*, 13 March 2017. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-sunni-idUSKBN16L05P>, last visited 10 March 2017.

<sup>13</sup> See in the following transcript of a videotaped conversation featuring al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden: <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/response/investigation/011213.binladen.transcript.html> (accessed 10 May 2017).

If Daesh decides and manages to divert the pressure on its core by heating up the peripheral theaters, it could lead to the revival of Cold War-era proxy-ism. Already in South Asia, countries like Iran and Russia may be increasingly looking to co-opt the Afghan Taliban to counter Daesh's expansion into Afghanistan and other neighboring states.<sup>14</sup> This would have a lasting impact on the future of violent extremism in South Asia in general, and in Afghanistan in particular. In Pakistan, IS had a troubled formative stage, which forced the majority of its members to relocate to Afghanistan, from where the organization continues to plan and execute attacks, including on Pakistani soil.<sup>15</sup> In India, despite having confirmed reports of some Indian nationals joining IS in the Middle East and despite being high on the group's agenda, New Delhi considers itself immune to IS penetration. According to Suba Chandaran, India has reasons to not to be alarmed by the IS threat.<sup>16</sup> He attributes Indian immunity to global jihad to the country's democratic system, its inclusive version of Islam, its representative institutions, and the secular outlook of the Indian intelligence apparatus. But this has surely changed after the election of Prime Minister Modi, whose nationalist "pro-Hindutva" policies are providing a fertile recruitment ground for Daesh.

To conclude, three important factors led to the emergence of IS: the presence of extra-regional state and non-state actors, a sense of alienation among the Sunni Muslims of Iraq and Syria, and the incompetence of the Iraqi military. These conditions are still present in the Middle East. The brutal and protracted war that killed nearly a million people and displaced cca. 11.5 million more from their homes has instilled deep sectarian divisions in the Middle East, which would continue to be manipulated by Daesh, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates. This, then, could further augment the global implications of a mismanaged downfall of IS, including the revival of Cold War-era "proxy-ism", refugee crises leading to fissures among the community of European nations, the intensification of the sectarian conflict in the Muslim world, and "lone wolf" terrorism in the West.

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Yochi Dreazen, "Exclusive: Iran Teams With Taliban to Fight Islamic State in Afghanistan." *Foreign Policy*, 26 May 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/26/exclusive-iran-teams-with-taliban-to-fight-islamic-state-in-afghanistan/>, last visited 8 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> In February 2017, a suicide bombing targeting a Sufi Shrine in the town of Sehwan killed 80 and wounded one-hundred others. The attack was claimed by ISIS and traced by Pakistani authorities to ISIS sanctuaries in Afghanistan. See Lizzie Dearden, "Pakistan 'kills 100 terrorists' in crackdown after Isis shrine bombing." *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/pakistan-isis-shrine-bombing-attack-terrorist-killings-latest-sehwan-sufi-shrine-death-toll-taliban-a7585901.html>, last visited 8 May 2017.

<sup>16</sup> D. Suba Chandaran: "The Islamic State: India is not alarmed, yet". *Asian Conflict Reports*, The Geneva Centre for Security Policy, August 2015.



The inflow of thousands of foreign fighters facilitated the rise of Daesh. A significant portion of these foreign fighters was motivated by identity crises resulting from various socio-political conditions in the West. The rise of far right nationalism can potentially push more Muslims living in diaspora communities to opt for radical pathways. If *hijrah* (migration to the Middle East) seems less attractive, they may settle down with conducting attacks in their adopted homelands. Resultantly, the lands of IS sleeper cells are likely to witness a sharp rise in lone wolf terrorism.

Counter-Terrorism scholars agree that military victory over IS may not signal its demise. Unless the conditions that led to emergence of IS — grievances among the Sunni Muslims of Iraq and Syria, the geo-strategic rivalries among the major powers, and weak political and military institutions — are addressed, a fourth wave of global jihad may just be in the making.