



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**CALIPHATE RELOADED:
WHY THE ISIL IS NOT UNIQUE**

DAVID CHOCHUA

EXPERT OPINION



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Terrorist organizations rise and fall. Some are surprisingly resilient but never qualify as a terminal illness in the eyes of opposing state(s) which does contribute to their long lifespans. Others operate for a short while but bring about death and destruction of a disproportionately high magnitude. Still others, luckily the least numerous lot, manifest an unholy combination of the two.

Being as old as other forms of political violence, terrorism constantly morphs to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. But while some aspects of contemporary post-modern terrorism could veritably be counted as revolutionary, recurring themes do dominate. Therefore, if we are to devise a successful counter-terrorism strategy against the current heavyweights, the lessons learned from previous encounters with similar groups should serve as a blueprint.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is no exception. All the media hype aside, ISIL *does not* constitute a qualitatively new type of terrorist organization, necessitating qualitatively novel counter-measures. Its lightning rise should, rather, be attributed to a highly competent leadership, a very efficient use of available resources and a near perfect sense of timing – plus a very favorable milieu of the war-torn Syria and a power vacuum resulting from the unending sectarian strife in Iraq.

Undoubtedly, ISIL is both “bigger and badder” than the overwhelming majority of contemporary terrorist-insurgent forces, controlling large swaths of territory both in Syria and Iraq and commanding up to 31,000 fighters, approximately 15,000 of them foreigners. It is also the richest terrorist organization with earnings amounting to \$2 million per day by September 2014. Although it is hard to find a wealthier organization in the past, in terms of territorial control ISIL lags far behind the Columbian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) which, during its apex, controlled land roughly the size of France; as well, the Naxalites of India are still numerically superior. In the same vein, while its international efforts of mobilization are impressive in both scale and sophistication, the first “Islamic international” appeared long before, during the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, with the upper estimate placing the number of foreign fighters at 20,000.

Not a Domsday Cult

One of the first aspects the counter-terrorism community should look at when dealing with a new large, capable and resource-rich terrorist organization is whether or not the organization will limit itself to conventional weaponry or decide to dramatically escalate the fight and go catastrophic,

including the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The term “catastrophic terrorism” was introduced in 1998 by Ashton Carter, John Deutch and Philip Zelikow, stating:

A successful attack with weapons of mass destruction could certainly take thousands, or tens of thousands, of lives. If the device that exploded in 1993 under the World Trade Center had been nuclear, or had effectively dispersed a deadly pathogen, the resulting horror and chaos would have exceeded our ability to describe it. Such an act of catastrophic terrorism would be a watershed event in American history. It could involve loss of life and property unprecedented in peacetime and undermine America’s fundamental sense of security, as did the Soviet atomic bomb test in 1949. Like Pearl Harbor, this event would divide our past and future into a before and after.²

Aum Shinrikyo’s sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway clearly demonstrated, already two decades ago, that the use of a WMD by terrorist organizations had ceased to belong to the realm of the unthinkable. Eight years later the 9/11 attacks by al-Qaeda ushered in a new age of terrorism with the aforementioned catastrophic nature as its defining – and the most dangerous – hallmark. However, the fact that 9/11 did not involve the use of a WMD was, to a certain extent, even more alarming. To put it in a nutshell, when a terrorist organization *makes a watershed decision* to kill thousands, a WMD is just one option.

Capability is thus a crucial, not *the* crucial element. An overwhelming majority of terrorist organizations are rational actors, pursuing specific political objectives. Moreover, while some “lone wolves” and many of their own individual operatives are suicidal, terrorist organizations are certainly not. Therefore, if the objectives could be attained with a conventional toolkit, there is no real incentive for terrorist organizations to go catastrophic, even if they are capable. Organizations that intend to govern proto-states are especially vulnerable to an overwhelming retaliation because of their territorial attachment.

Doomsday cults represent a notable exception to this general rule of terrorist organizations being rational actors. The worldview of doomsday cults, however, invariably comprises some sort of an apocalyptic clash between good and evil, with the cults considering themselves as its catalyst. That a WMD will remain the most befitting weapon to spur such a Manichean struggle should thus hardly come as a surprise.

Even without a messianic vision, rational terrorist organizations still face the dilemma, if the capability permits, to go catastrophic. One of the fol-

lowing two preconditions should exist, I would argue, for such a development.

The need for a “hit” (blockbuster): This is especially pertinent in regard to newly formed organizations, including “splinter groups.” Terrorism, first and foremost, is an *action*. Usually operating in a competitive environment, terrorist organizations contest with each other to win the support of the constituency whose cause(s) they claim to advance. Becoming a brand will thus ensure a flow of both finances and fighters. Terrorists of all sorts seem to understand well the usefulness of Carlos Pisacane’s “propaganda of the deed.”

The final showdown: If facing a situation when the end is near and inevitable, the leadership of a terrorist organization may resort to an ultimate, desperate assault – either to stop the opposing state(s) with the sheer shock of the unthinkable coming true or, if it already consigned itself to death, to galvanize the prospective supporters. An enduring name is an inalienable part of the terrorism mythos from religious fanatics to secular extremists. More ominously, such an attack will certainly raise the bar that the most radical followers of the same cause will aim to reach.

The Islamic State, however, is not a doomsday cult. Though ambitious in scale, its primary objective of creating and governing a state has been neither revolutionary nor inconceivable; the takeover of the Gaza Strip by HAMAS, the Taliban’s conquest of Afghanistan or proto-states run by LTTE or FARC all attest that terrorist/insurgent forces are very much capable of such endeavors. In addition, for too many reasons to list in this paper, the international community largely leaves them to their own devices unless they make a strategic mistake such as the Taliban’s decision not to hand in Osama bin Laden to the United States following the 9/11 attacks.

The use of a WMD or conventional weaponry to go catastrophic with the aim of securing a “blockbuster” in the West seems to be irrelevant for ISIL. Due to its battlefield successes, ISIL has already become a brand among terrorists, including formal allegiances by a number of groups previously affiliated with al-Qaeda. In the ongoing battle for primacy within the global jihadi community, now it is al-Qaeda on the defensive and, hence, more determined to regain the erstwhile leadership position via using its signature method – a catastrophic attack.

Regarding the likelihood of a final showdown, while acknowledging that no option should be considered off-the-table when dealing with large religion-driven terrorist organizations, I will still place it in a low-probability category. Considering the aptitude with which it learned past lessons, ISIL

is much more likely to devolve back to a smaller purely terrorist organization with the hope of reemerging during a more conducive environment in the future.

Apt Pupil

Being the weaker side of the asymmetric warfare, terrorist organizations need to constantly innovate and improvise to compensate for the disparity in resources. In the same vein, past successes/failures on all levels – strategic, tactical and operational – are carefully analyzed and the *modus operandi* is adapted to the ever-changing circumstances.

In the ISIL case, the organization has repeatedly proven to be a quick learner following a string of setbacks during 2007-2009. Facing a successful counter-terrorist strategy that included both targeted strikes against its leadership and a bottom-up fight by the Sahwa³ councils and the US-led coalition, ISIL overhauled itself and devolved from an insurgent-terrorism force back to what Charles Lister correctly identified as a “typical terrorist organization.” It also undertook other major actions including the relocation of its headquarters, a recentralization of bureaucracy, assaults on prisons (to free the incarcerated leadership members), massive campaigns of coordinated bombings in urban centers and attacks specifically targeting army and security forces to degrade their morale.

Truly, none of the aforementioned steps was *per se* revolutionary. However, their excellent coordination attested to ISIL’s transformation into a highly capable force.

The Islamic State’s socio-political governance strategy seems to be on par with its battlefield efficiency. Militant organizations of all sorts, Islamists included, understood already decades ago that successful territorial control necessitates the provision of public services. Coupled with draconian punishment measures for breaking the ISIL-imposed law, this “carrot” effectively guarantees at least tacit support of the local Sunni population. The rest has been relegated to second-grade citizenship or faces outright persecution.

In addition to *local* benefits of assuming state functions (such as entrenchment into society and societal support via providing funds and fighters), one should not forget about the *international* dimension either: a [lasting] success of the ISIL “state project” will serve as a powerful stimulus for other jihadists to join ISIL or, even worse, to attempt to replicate the same strategy in their respective homes (with varying degrees of affiliation with ISIL).

Finally, the Islamic State has also drawn valuable lessons from its own as well as others' mistakes concerning the declaration of a Caliphate. This strategic move of June 29, 2014 was by no means the first attempt of a militant organization (ISIL's precursors included) to establish a Caliphate.⁴ Nor will it be the last.

ISIL carefully built support for this declaration for years before including an emphasis on the alleged belonging of its leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, to the Quraysh tribe from which the next Caliph would emerge according to Islamic tradition. Following the death of Abu Omar in 2010, the group continues emphasizing the same tribal belonging of its current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Admittedly, a number of Islamic scholars consider the ISIL declaration of a Caliphate a major mistake from the viewpoint of Islamic jurisprudence which will undermine their theological legitimacy. They argue that since a Caliph should represent the majority of the Muslim world, which ISIL clearly does not, the group should have chosen an "Islamic emirate" or "Islamic state." The discussion of which aforementioned school of thought reflects the Islamic theology better is clearly beyond the scope of this paper but Islamic State ISIL does possess a major advantage: religious edicts by "warrior priests" tend to ring truer among the rank-and-file jihadists (and, similarly, among religious terrorists of other confessions) than those issued by [supposedly] more authoritative religious institutions whom they often accuse of serving brutal and heretic governments.

No Strategy is Without its Flaws

Governing a state-like entity by a militant organization will be a short-lived endeavor unless the latter is able to conduct conventional battlefield operations to defend its territory (or seize it, in the first place) from adversaries. Quite logically, while carrying out large-scale military operations attests to a qualitative leap for the organization, it also entails traditional weaknesses of this form of warfare – especially when fighting a far superior force.

Overrunning demoralized Iraqi forces and disunited tribal fighters was a much easier task for ISIL. Fighting a vast international coalition will be an uphill battle. The Islamic State as an organization may well survive the fight via morphing back into a typical terrorist organization (either as a centralized entity or loosely connected cells) but the proto-state it has created cannot be sustained. Perseverance, a crucial determinant of winning protracted wars, at some point may wane among some counter-ISIL coalition allies but the key actors – the United States and certain neighboring states

– will most likely soldier on as long as necessary. They just cannot afford to lose for many reasons ranging from the threat of spillover to prestige.

Many major militant Islamist organizations encountered the dilemma of choosing to strike the “near enemy” (local, “apostate” regimes) or the “far enemy” (the West, led by the United States) long before the rise of ISIL. Restoration of a Caliphate, the ambitious idea that arguably came first to Abdulla Azzam, a major jihadi ideologue and Osama bin Laden’s former mentor, has emerged in different forms. *Even if focused exclusively upon bringing down local governments, however, the scale of this endeavor will inadvertently trigger US involvement at some point – to prevent the “domino effect,” to protect allies or both.* Likening the Middle East of 2015 with the Afghanistan of the 1980s is a self-deluding, self-defeating approach for terrorist organizations.

To his credit, Azzam was a rational man. His lofty rhetoric notwithstanding (“if the Muslims go to Palestine and fight for a week, Palestine will be purified of Jews”), in reality Azzam followed quite a down-to-earth strategy of “Afghanistan first.” Due to his death in 1989 we can only speculate to what extent words would have been backed with deeds, but the scope of the proposed Caliphate – vast territories from Spain to the Philippines, including Central Asia, India, parts of Europe and China – would have guaranteed the entrance of all major state actors into the fray, superpowers included. That would have amounted to a suicidal scenario for the Islamists.

The al-Qaeda leadership faced the same dilemma both during Azzam’s lifetime and afterwards with the pro-“far enemy” approach ultimately prevailing. Going increasingly global since the mid-1990s, al-Qaeda culminated with the coordinated attacks against the World Trade Center complex and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Although hailed by jihadists worldwide as a resounding victory against the champion of the “Zionist-Crusader alliance,” in fact it precipitated a strategic defeat, resulting in the downfall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This was a loss of historic proportions for al-Qaeda, I would argue, for two main reasons: first, the Taliban-governed Afghanistan came closest to the type of state al-Qaeda aspired to build; second, and more important, al-Qaeda lost the launch pad⁵ in the form of a friendly fundamentalist state, necessary for its master plan of liberating the Muslim world and restoring a Caliphate.

Politicians and pundits alike have written much about the international community’s strategic mistake of leaving Afghanistan shortly after the withdrawal of the Soviet army, leading to the Taliban’s takeover of the country within the course of just several years. The Syria and Iraq of 2015 and the prospects of the ISIL proto-state’s survival will be a drastically dif-

ferent story, however. Seeing on the same side of the battle such unlikely allies as the US and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the other, suffices to see the scope of the stakes involved.

To conclude, while not replicating al-Qaeda's strategic mistake of targeting the US heartland, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is still steadily headed toward a collision course with the US because of its size, intentions and, therefore, threats it poses to American interests and allies. ISIL has thus inadvertently become a hostage of its own success.

Conclusion

On December 3, 2014, following several large-scale meetings, 60 Counter-ISIL Coalition partners convened for the first ministerial-level plenary session in Brussels, Belgium "for substantive deliberations." The breadth of the efforts to be conducted certainly is commendable, encompassing five lines of effort:

1. Supporting military operations, capacity building and training.
2. Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters.
3. Cutting off ISIL/Daesh's access to financing and funding.
4. Addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises.
5. Exposing ISIL/Daesh's true nature (ideological delegitimization).

The key line, I would argue, was the reaffirmation of the commitment to cooperate under "a common, multi-faceted and long-term strategy to degrade and defeat ISIL/Daesh." The global reach and lasting proselytizing power of ISIL naturally necessitates counter-measures of equal scale, both spatially and temporally.

As already mentioned in this paper, ISIL comprises a large cadre of foreign fighters, roughly a half of its total force. While the estimates vary widely, the number of Westerners is certainly in the thousands⁶ and growing. Calculating the exact number of those returning home from an overseas fight is an equally arduous task but even if we take an estimate of 11%, as employed by some experts,⁷ the potential threat cannot be exaggerated.⁸

According to media sources, several dozen Georgian citizens fight among the ranks of ISIL including one of its top military commanders, Abu Omar al-Shishani, aka Tarkhan Batirashvili. Thus far, however, we have not seen any declaration of war against or explicit animus towards the government and the people of Georgia, save for some isolated cases.⁹

For years, Georgia has been a significant contributor to international security with its troops serving with distinction in international missions in Afghanistan and the Central African Republic. As a member of the Counter-ISIL Coalition, however, Georgia's role will be limited to humanitarian assistance. Currently, the Parliament of Georgia also mulls a draft law criminalizing participation of Georgian citizens in illegal armed formations abroad.

The fight against ISIL will surely take years. It will require comprehensive, committed efforts on the political, economic, social, legal and educational fronts. Otherwise, if the underlying causes are not addressed, the oft-quoted question by former US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, "Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?" will always be answered negatively and not only in regard to Islamist terrorism.

Further Reading:

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1. Also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS) or Daesh (the acronym of its name in Arabic - *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī al-'Irāq wash-Shām*).
2. Carter et al. (1998) "Catastrophic Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, 77(6): pp. 80-94.
3. Arabic for "Awakening," tribal Sunni militia fighting against al-Qaeda in Iraq.
4. Back in 2005, the Jordanian journalist, Fouad Hussein, published a book, entitled *Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of Al Qaeda*. Based on extensive interviews with senior Islamist militants, including representatives of al-Qaeda and affiliated terrorist organizations, the book presented al-Qaeda's seven-stage plan for setting up a Caliphate. The plan envisaged the declaration of the Caliphate during the fifth phase, sometime between 2013 and 2016. The roots of ISIL are actually traced back to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, its founding father.
5. According to Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Victory for the Islamic movements against the world alliance cannot be attained unless these movements possess an Islamic base in the heart of the Arab region" (quoted in Karmon, 2006). Although Afghanistan is not located in the Arab region, the essence is surely more important than the geographic location. ISIL has followed the same strategy, this time in Arabia.
6. According to the estimate by Robin Wainwright, Director of EUROPOL, at a British House of Commons committee session on January 13, 2015, about 3,000 to 5,000 EU nationals have left Europe to fight in Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones. Richard Barrett, Senior Vice President of the Soufan Group, an intelligence organization, puts the number of Westerners fighting in Syria at about 3,000, out of the approximately 12,000 foreign fighters in total (June 2014).
7. An estimate by Charles Lister of the Brookings Doha Center. Some EU states such as, for instance, the Netherlands, have a much higher rate of returning fighters at 20% (in numerical terms, 35 out of 180).
8. Moreover, while not all foreign fighters are or will become terrorists, the difficulty of differentiating the two further complicates counter-terrorism efforts.
9. Online threats by a Tamaz Chagalidze, currently fighting in Syria. Mr Chagalidze puts the number of fighters from Georgia at 200.