CTC PERSPECTIVES – WELCOME TO THE HOTEL CALIPHATE: YOU CAN CHECK-OUT ANY TIME YOU LIKE, BUT YOU CAN NEVER LEAVE

October 7, 2016

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When the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) first analyzed the thousands of leaked Islamic State personnel files, one thing that stuck out to the researchers was the 431 exit records. The first of these documents, dated March 1, 2013, notes that the fighter, Abu Yousef Al Maghribi, left the caliphate “to meet family and get treatment.” On the very last date in the dataset, August 21, 2014, there are actually four exit records. The reason given for the exit of three of these fighters was “treatment” and the fourth was due to the fact that “his family was imprisoned.”

Perhaps this last fighter was grateful to have been able to leave to help his family in need. Little did he know that had he only remained in the caliphate for another few months, he would be the prisoner. And instead of the caliphate being his understanding employer, it would have been his uncompromising warden.

What evidence do we have that the Islamic State is trapping its own fighters and preventing them from leaving? The best evidence for this is the group’s own words.

The Islamic State recently released the 49th issue of its Arabic-language newsletter Al-Naba. The group noted that this was a special issue, as it marked eight years of circulation for the newsletter. In it was an interview with the Islamic State official in charge of hijra (emigration), who clearly points out that the caliphate is a place of no return for those who come to it.

The interview is heralded on the front page in large font that says, “We shall help whoever comes to us as a muhajir for the cause of Allah…But we shall prevent whoever wants [to leave] to dar al-kafirin [the land of infidels]” (emphasis added). In the interview itself, after distinguishing between the land of Islam and the land of infidels, the official reiterates an invitation to all Muslims to come to the caliphate, noting that the Islamic State “has spent huge amounts of money and still does” in an effort to remove travel barriers.

Then comes the kicker: “We also would never allow Muslims to leave towards the land of infidels to live there permanently because it is completely haram [forbidden].” His next statement is even more limiting: “Temporary travel is only permissible under necessary circumstances.” Realizing this might not be the welcome mat that will attract people to the caliphate, the official tries to reassure potential travelers with two specific examples of such circumstances: “a sick person whose sickness could result in death or damage of organs, and no treatment is available in the land of Islam” or if the person is a “merchant who is permitted to travel to bring products needed for Muslims.”

Open-source reporting of Islamic State documents captured by U.S. military forces suggests a reason for those who are on death’s doorstep not to let their hopes of leaving the caliphate get too high: their value to the group might be in harvesting their organs rather than letting them travel. [1] And for the merchants who seek to fall under the exception of importing goods to the caliphate, they can expect stiff tariffs. [2] In sum, even the “necessary circumstances” given by the Islamic State official come with strings attached that make the invitation seem less convincing.
What will be particularly interesting is to see if the interview with the hijra official appears in the next issue of the group’s English language magazine Rumiyah. Rumiyah normally contains some translated materials that have appeared in previous issues of Al-Naba. For example, the second issue of Rumiyah contained some material from issue 48 of Al-Naba. So, if this interview from the 49th issue of Al-Naba were to make an appearance in Rumiyah, it would likely come in the third release of that magazine. However, the group is clearly making choices about what material it translates from Al-Naba into Rumiyah.

If it does not appear, then a possible explanation for such an omission is that the group believes that it may be easier to trap Western, English-speaking fighters in the caliphate once they come, so no need to warn them of the inability to leave. If true, this suggests that the group is counting on the ignorance of the Western fighters while it very clearly wants to send a strong warning to the Arabic-speaking fighters that fill its ranks within the population. Indeed, one the most important audiences for Al-Naba are the Arabic-speaking fighters who are already inside the caliphate. It is not uncommon for Islamic State propaganda releases to show media officials distributing hardcopies of Al-Naba to fighters and civilians in the territories that it controls. In other words, the message to those inside the caliphate is that you cannot leave, while the message to those outside is to still come. Having laid out the not-so-welcome mat, the interviewee then goes on to offer the group’s rationale for imposing such a prohibition on leaving the caliphate.[3] Such restrictions are necessary “if there is a possibility that there are dangers threatening [Muslims] religion, their lives, their money, or their honor.” The untold truth is that each of those dangers is a significant concern for those living inside the caliphate as well.

And lest the Islamic State be seen as all bark and no bite, the promise to prevent departures is not simply an idle threat. A series of documents recently leaked to Aymenn al-Tamimi, who maintains a repository of leaked documents, illustrates this point effectively.[4] The documents are a compilation of lists of individuals arrested in Al-Shirqat, Iraq. What is notable about them is that several contain references to arrests for trying to leave the caliphate. One of the leaked spreadsheets contains the names of 11 individuals arrested for “fleeing outside of the land of the Caliphate.” While the documents do not articulate the fate of those individuals, the interview of the hijra official referenced above leaves little doubt.

Conspicuously absent from the official’s list of reasons why the travel limitations are in place is the most obvious: the caliphate is not all that it is cracked up to be. Consequently, the goal of the Islamic State is to prevent people from leaving and further weakening its increasingly tenuous hold on power. Such an explanation tracks better with the many stories over the past several months that have been written about the group’s harsh punishment of those who are trying to leave the caliphate. As noted by retired Marine Corps General John Allen, formerly President Obama’s Special Envoy on the Islamic State, “Daesh has killed hundreds of its own foreign fighters to keep them from getting out.”[5] It is not out of care and concern for its citizens that the group is enacting these measures, but out of care and concern for maintaining the group’s own position.

The reason that this prevented exodus is important, particularly as documented through the group’s own words and actions, is that it serves as a warning to those who still see the group as an ideal type. Potential recruits and current members do not have to rely on Western authorities for indications of the crumbling nature of the caliphate. The distress signal is being sent in the form of arrests of those leaving and by the group’s public condemnation of leaving, despite its earlier policy, which seemed to have allowed greater latitude when it came to such departures. Although there is still more uncertainty ahead, one may interpret this message as conveying that the caliphate is sinking and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as captain of the ship, intends to take as many as he can down with him.

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The views presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.

Substantive Notes & Citations

[1] To be clear, the fatwa allowing for the harvesting of organs was only for those deemed apostates by the group. The real question for wounded fighters is whether or not they are confident that the group will send them for costly medical treatment as opposed to declaring them apostates in an effort to profit from their death. Some reporting, of unknown reliability, has suggested that the latter may actually be happening in practice. For information on the fatwa authorizing the harvesting of organs, see Warren Strobel, Jonathan Landay, and Phil Stewart, “Exclusive: Islamic State sanctioned organ harvesting in document taken in U.S. raid,” Reuters, December 25, 2015. For information on the harvesting of the organs of wounded fighters, see William Watkinson, “Cash-strapped ISIS Remove Organs from Wounded Jihadi Fighters to Sell on Black Market, Reports Say,” IBI Times, April 21, 2016.

