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From Wolf Pack to Lone Wolf: The Retreating Islamic State's Radicalized Strategy to Exist beyond Territoriality

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Analysis of the self-identified Islamic State's (IS) prolific and complex propaganda machine combined with increasing incidents of homegrown terrorism paint the group as a pervasive national security threat with a global reach. At the same time, reports from the front lines of its self-proclaimed "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria boast sequential defeats and massive territorial losses for IS. These conflicting depictions of IS's capacity are reflective of the jihadist group's broad strategy to reshape its identity. By promoting and producing so-called "lone wolf" terrorist attacks internationally, IS is seeking a new source of legitimacy which can survive the military and territorial losses of the caliphate.

Explosive Origins

The chaos and instability caused by the Syrian civil war was the ladder with which IS climbed to power. Within the omnipresent carnage of conflict, the Salafi jihadist group found legitimacy among disenfranchised Sunni Muslims who were unsympathetic to regime loyalist and other rebel groups. The group distinguished itself from its regional competitors in both its ideological aspirations and its ultraviolent tactics. Early military clashes were characterized by the jihadists' indiscriminate killing of opponents and civilians. The group also found an audience that was ripe for radicalization within the marginalized Sunni population in Iraq. Harnessing this fresh support, IS launched a series of sweeping offensives in Iraq and Syria that filled international headlines in early 2014. The relatively small extremist group captured the major urban centers of Raqqa, Fallujah, and Ramadi with an unforeseen level of ferocity and success. In June of the same year, IS achieved a monumental victory the capture of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul. By the end of the month IS declared the establishment of a caliphate that transcended the internationally recognized borders of Iraq and Syria.

Implications of the Caliphate

In declaring the establishment of the Islamic State, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself the caliph and "Commander of the Faithful" of what he believed to be the first ideologically legitimate Islamic caliphate the world has seen in a millennium. This territorial aspect of a caliphate provided a boost in credibility and legitimacy for IS. At the same time, this very territoriality confined IS to new criteria for legitimacy, and opened IS up to more observable measures of success, and failure, to which it had not been subject to prior to its territorial caliphate. With the establishment of the caliphate, IS was now theologically bound to possess "*ardh al-tamkeen*", or "land to rule", and strictly enforce its Salafi ideology throughout this land.¹ Furthermore, IS's identity became tied to the belief that its caliphate was destined

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to defeat the army of “Rome” (Christianity) in Dabiq, Syria, which would in turn incite the apocalyptic Day of Judgement by God that is foretold in the Quran.² This purpose, coupled with the Salafi/Wahhabi ideology that violence is the justified mechanism to purify the faith of all “*kufir*”, or “unbelievers”, obligates the caliphate to engage in what Islamic Law refers to as “offensive jihad”, or the constant war against all who do not practice their ultra-conservative brand of Sunni Islam.³

Following the establishment of the caliphate, IS demonstrated its understanding of what constituted, and was necessary to maintain, its legitimacy, as well as the measures required to do so. Securing and expanding the caliphate became IS’s paramount goal, but its commitment to the offensive jihad meant it faced a plethora of domestic enemies, including the governments of Iraq and Syria, Shi’ite and Kurdish fighters, and rival Sunni militants, on a circumambient war-front. The high cost to maintain legitimacy left IS hungry for increased manpower. In response to this demand IS directed a bulk of its burgeoning propaganda machine towards recruitment of a steady influx of foreign fighters to the build an army of the caliphate.

Legitimizing the Caliphate

A robust propaganda apparatus was part of the complex bureaucracies emblematic of the state established by IS. Under the presumed leadership of the caliph’s chief spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS’s propaganda network was funded and managed using the same level of diligence given to the military. As a result, IS developed perhaps the most advanced propaganda apparatus ever seen from a terrorist organization. Social media operatives managed the development and distribution of thousands of videos, pictures, audio recordings, and messages on highly trafficked social media sites every month, as well as the publication and distribution of periodical online propaganda magazines; including the English language *Dabiq*, French *Dar al-Islam*, Turkish *Konstantiniyye*, and Russian *Istok*.⁴

The output of IS’s vast propaganda apparatus demonstrated a high level of forethought and guidance, exemplifying the strict control IS leadership had over its content. As such, IS’s propaganda provides a useful tool for understanding the caliphate’s broader strategy. Propaganda output prior to late-2015 focused on recruitment to the caliphate, as IS and the newly established caliphate needed new recruits to fuel its offensive jihad and build an army. This propaganda strategy was uniquely different from that of most other terrorist organizations, particularly that of al-Qaeda. After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent loss of its Afghan safe haven, al-Qaeda’s propaganda prioritized radicalizing unaffiliated individuals, including those often described as lone wolves, to conduct attacks against the far enemy in the West. While IS required the manpower to build a standing military and defeat the enemy at its gates, al-Qaeda’s lack of dependence on territorial legitimacy allowed it the space to focus on the far enemy in the West.

To acquire new recruits to the caliphate, IS employed two seemingly incompatible propaganda styles that attempted to bolster the caliphate’s legitimacy while tailoring its messaging with different rationalities for joining. The first theme exaggerated the stability of the caliphate by portraying IS as a champion of peace and inclusivity for all Sunni Muslims, boasting about the benefits and stability brought by its religiously righteous government, as well as the peaceful coexistence between its multi-ethnic people.⁵ The message repeatedly painted the caliphate as a pathway to prosperity by nostalgically romanticizing the power and prestige of previous Muslim caliphates, a message designed to strongly resonate with Muslims disenfranchised by repressive and secular regimes. In stark contrast, the second style of propaganda depicted IS as a military power, slaughtering unbelievers and expanding its territory with an unprecedented level of success. The latter theme was most notably present throughout IS’s social media efforts, with frontline photographs of IS soldiers standing over deceased enemies, portraying victory and showing potential jihadists that IS had the resources and momentum to achieve victory over the enemies of Islam. With every military victory IS was able to better portray itself as the legitimate caliphate, and as a result its territorial control quickly became its greatest recruitment tool.

The caliphate’s demand for fresh recruits was being accomplished with surprising vigor, and by the end of 2015 worldwide recruitment was estimated at upwards of 30,000 foreign fighters.⁶ The capacity to achieve unprecedented military victory provided IS with an observable measure of success for recruitment purposes. As a former CIA analyst summarized “the overriding point is that success breeds success ... the perception of quick victories and territory and weapons and bases means they don’t need to try hard to recruit.”⁷

This self-serving cycle initially played out in IS’s favor, as it expanded to a size of over 35,000 square

miles by January 2015.⁸ The group demonstrated an unusual efficacy for survival and expansion even in the face of mounting opposition from intervening states and non-state armed opposition. Yet this symbiotic relationship between its legitimacy (particularly territoriality) and recruitment created a reliance on ambitious military objectives. While the cycle might have appeared self-sufficient, IS's pool of recruits, while substantial, was certainly not boundless, and sectarian as well as intra-sectarian violence further alienated the caliphate within the broader Muslim community. IS also became faced with a more unified international opposition, as additional states realized that IS's offensive jihad would not stop with Iraq and Syria. The military involvement of Turkey and Russia, among others, illustrates the growing opposition to IS. By March 2016, for example, the US-led coalition alone had conducted 10,809 airstrikes on IS targets, killing an estimated 20,000 fighters.⁹ This increase in internal and foreign opposition left IS confronting enemies on multiple fronts, and IS territorial legitimacy was increasingly under pressure with each loss it incurred.

A Turning Tide

By mid-2017 the caliphate, which once boasted 35,000 square miles, had been reduced to only 14,000 square miles.¹⁰ From early 2015 through early 2016, IS lost 40 percent of its territory in Iraq, including the cities of Ramadi and Tikrit, the Sinjar region, and the Baiji oil refineries. Through the same period IS lost over 10 percent of its territory in Syria.¹¹ These substantial defeats shattered the image of IS as an unstoppable force, which IS had become dependent upon for recruitment, and undercut its territorial legitimacy. By early 2016, the flow of foreign fighters to the caliphate had largely stopped, leaving IS with a dwindling force that continued to endure massive battlefield casualties. In the same way that IS's military victories had bred success off success, military failures now breed failure and loss of legitimacy, resulting in a decline in recruitment, making it all the more difficult to hold territory, let alone achieve military victory and territorial gains. What was once their greatest recruitment tool now stood as an indication of their failures, leaving IS to address the fact that they are increasingly becoming a caliphate with no land to rule. Faced with this cataclysmic chain of failure, and understanding its future consequences, IS shifted its propaganda and broader strategy towards achieving an alternative source of legitimacy.

The Homegrown Solution: Legitimizing the Idea not the Caliphate

In mid-2015 as IS began to see its territorial caliphate shrink, it shifted its strategy to one more comparable to al-Qaeda: the promotion of homegrown terrorism abroad. IS's calls for homegrown terrorism is reflective of the anxious group's leadership turning towards the niche of other terrorist organizations for solutions to its compounding problems. Demonstrably incapable of defeating the near enemy at its gates, IS transitioned towards targeting the far enemy, with the United States, United Kingdom, and France as the new front lines to wage its mandated offensive jihad. Highly symbolic of this transition and the circumstances which prompted it is IS's abandonment of its two-year-old propaganda periodical *Dabiq*, and the creation of *Rumiyah* in its place. *Dabiq*, which was named in reference to the Syrian city IS believed would be the site of their victory over the armies of "Rome", was abandoned following the publication of its 15th issue, after IS lost the city to Turkish backed forces. In response, IS began the publication of a new magazine, *Rumiyah* (Rome), and focused its content on alternative fronts in which IS was fighting around the world. Rather than romanticizing traveling to caliphate, IS began to romanticize fighting to defend the caliphate with attacks abroad.

IS began to advertise itself as a global idea that jihadists could support with attacks abroad, with an increasing emphasis on inspiring attacks by lone wolves. Lone wolves can be described as self-radicalized single-actors detached from terrorist hierarchies who are willing to conduct independent attacks within their home territory in the name of established causes with which they possess a self-proclaimed affiliation with. To radicalize these lone wolves, IS's propaganda apparatus targeted a demographic frequently labelled as "in-betweeners", described as young men, typically the sons of immigrants, who feel marginalized within Western societies and have yet to develop a real identity for themselves, making them more easily radicalized and manipulated into turning their loyalties away from their places of birth or domicile.¹² Both direct and indirect styles of propaganda are utilized to instigate homegrown terrorism from these in-betweeners, as well as other potential lone wolves. For its indirect style, IS highlights the anti-Muslim behaviors of Western states and the greatness of Islam in an effort to steer loyalties towards its own ideology. This style typically discredits Western states for their participation in the coalition against

IS, labeling them as “crusader-states” fundamentally against Islam and Muslims.¹³ The alternative style is much more direct in clearly and explicitly calling upon its followers to conduct lone wolf attacks. Calls for lone wolf terrorism were, unfortunately, answered swiftly with several major attacks. Al-Adnani’s May 2015 call for Muslims around the world to attack during Ramadan serves as the turning point of IS’s broader strategy to retain relevance and legitimacy. It took only three days for a sympathizer to answer al-Adnani’s call with an IS-inspired beheading in Lyon, France. Following the attack in Lyon, there was a substantial uptick in IS-inspired lone wolf attacks against the far enemy in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

The promotion of lone wolf terrorism provides several distinct benefits for the retreating caliphate. First and foremost, it is a low-cost and simple strategy that requires minimal planning. Lone wolf terrorism is a decentralized tactic that is difficult to deter and detect because their attacks require little to no communication, and they typically have minimal, if any, traceable affiliation with known terrorists. Lacking the organizational constraints of group terrorism, lone wolves are more adept at conducting especially lethal attacks in countries with an advanced and pervasive counterterrorism capacity. Despite the meager resources necessary to produce lone wolf terrorism, such attacks induce fear and alarmism in host countries. By finding one-in-a-million sympathizers in a given country, IS can manage to portray itself as a growing global movement rather than a dwindling state.

Conclusion

The transition from a focus on the near enemy to the far enemy demonstrates a decreasing confidence in the future of IS’s territorial caliphate. As exemplified by their propaganda, IS no longer places priority on recruiting potential jihadists to travel to the caliphate and has shifted to a new strategy to retain its relevance and legitimacy. By inspiring people from around the world to carry out attacks abroad, IS can continue to appear as a viable figurehead within the Salafi jihadist movement and a champion of the offensive jihad. The internet provides the perfect pathway for IS to survive as an idea, giving it the mechanism to spread its ideology and inspire enough lone wolves to survive, even as the wolf pack is cornered and its den is crumbling around them.

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Notes:

- ¹ Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, “Inside the surreal world of the Islamic State’s propaganda machine”, *The Washington Post*, November 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/inside-the-islamic-states-propaganda-machine/2015/11/20/051e997a-8ce6-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html?utm_term=.7db064511e68.
- ⁵ See *Dabiq* issues 1-10.
- ⁶ The Soufan Group, *FOREIGN FIGHTERS: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015, http://soufan-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.
- ⁷ Scott Shane and Ben Hubbard, “ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media”, *The New York Times*, August 30, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media.html?module=Search&mabReward=rel-bias%3Ar%2C%7B%221%22>.
- ⁸ Jack Moore, “End of ISIS Approaching as Caliphate Loses Money and Land”, *Newsweek*, June 29, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/islamic-state-wont-survive-fourth-year-after-territory-and-revenue-collapse-630018>.
- ⁹ Cameron Glenn, *ISIS Losses By the Numbers*, March 25, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-losses-the-numbers>.
- ¹⁰ Moore, “End of ISIS Approaching”.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Scott Shane, Richard Pérez-Peña and Aurelien Breeden, “‘In-Betweeners’ Are Part of a Rich Recruiting Pool for Jihadists”, *The New York Times*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/us/isis-al-qaeda-recruits-anwar-al-awlaki.html>.
- ¹³ See *Dabiq* issues 10-15, and *Rumiyah* issues 1-12.

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