Defeating ISIS on the Battle Ground as well as in the Online Battle Space: Considerations of the "New Normal" and Available Online Weapons in the Struggle Ahead

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Abstract

The United States and its allies continue to achieve significant military victories against ISIS (otherwise known as ISIL or the "Islamic State"). The loss of territories resulting from military victories is especially important given that ISIS relies in part on recruits from the territories it controls. Efforts have also been directed at killing the group's core leadership; stemming the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria through tightening up border security and surveillance; and targeting militant jihadi narratives and propaganda that is pushed out by ISIS on a twenty-four/seven basis via the Internet and social media platforms. In such a complicated security landscape, a new discourse on ISIS is born—its allure, threat, grandeur, lawlessness, and violence have emerged as the "new normal" in Syria and Iraq, and recently have spilled out to Western Europe and beyond in home grown and ISIS directed attacks. While cognizant of the progress achieved in the fight against ISIS, this article, in particular, highlights the dangers emanating from the group's continuing online, as well as face-to-face, recruiting success in the West and the apparent stagnation in the fight for dominance in the digital battlefield where ISIS is currently winning.

Introduction

Significant military victories against The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and the *Islamic State* have been achieved to date. Since 2014, estimates are the group has lost approximately 45 percent of its territory in Iraq and 10 percent in Syria.[1] Military campaigns continue to diminish the group's ability to exercise full control over large swaths of territories in Iraq and Syria and its membership base in general, as well as its ability to finance itself through the sale of oil, antiquities, slaves, and through taxing and extorting monetary payments from its civilian population. Pentagon sources have also reported a decline in the number of foreign fighters going to Iraq and Syria from 2,000 to 500, and perhaps dropping as low as 200 a month.[2]

The battle is also being fought through a combination of *hard* and *soft* power measures. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, Islamic State's spokesperson—and according to some sources also responsible for plotting and directing the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, Istanbul, and Paris—was recently killed in Aleppo, also sending a significant blow to Islamic State's core leadership.[3] Omar al-Shishani, a top Islamic State commander and a veteran of the Chechen jihadi war, was also recently killed.[4] These were two battle-hardened and charismatic leaders suddenly removed from ISIS through airstrikes. Efforts have also been directed at reducing the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, with beginning efforts at targeting ISIS narratives and propaganda on the Internet and social media. Efforts are also being made to exploit rivalries and feuds between ISIS and competing groups on the ground to delegitimize and diminish the appeal of militant jihad to volunteers

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[1] Krystal Chia and Lin Xeuling, "ISIS is Targeting Southeast Asia amid Declining Mideast Support: Terror Expert*," The Soufan Group,* August 4, 2016, available at: *http://soufangroup.com/tsg-report-cited-on-channel-newsasia-isis-is-targeting-southeast-asia-amid-declining-mideast-support-terror-expert/.*

[2] "Are Airstrikes Successfully Weakening ISIS?" *PBS NewsHours,* May 1, 2016, available at: *http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/are-airstrikes-successfully-weakening-isis/.*

[3] Tim Lister, "Death of Senior Leader al-Adnani Caps Bad Month for ISIS," *CNN,* September 1, 2016, available at: http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/30/world/isis-setbacks-adnani-death/; Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla," ISIS' No 2 is Dead: What It Means to The West," *The Hill,* September 6, 2016, available at: *http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/homeland-security/294523-isis-number-two-is-dead-what-it-means-to-the-west.*

[4] Will Worley, "ISIS Confirms Death of Hugely Popular 'Minister of War' Omar al-Shishani," *Independent,* July 13, 2016, available at: *http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-confirms-death-of-hugely-popular-minister-of-war-omar-al-shishani-a7135446.html.*

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and foreign fighters, including through the lens and stories of those who have defected or disengaged from the group.[5]

Discussion

Despite progress, ISIS remains a formidable force with a military presence in Iraq and Syria, including struggling affiliates in Libya, West Africa, Egypt, Lebanon, and Yemen.[6] ISIS maintains a solid contingent of foreign fighters still under its control who pose both a terrorism threat to the West and a serious risk to the regional stability in the Middle East. It also maintains an impressive social media presence that resonates with many militant jihadi wannabe volunteers worldwide, in particular homegrown terrorists who ISIS sometimes directs and other times only inspires.

The United States (U.S.) counterparts, particularly in Europe, continue to struggle with border enforcement. While Turkey has often ignored the streams of foreign fighters moving across its borders into Syria to join ISIS, Greece found itself overwhelmed with its porous borders and lack of cooperation with Turkey in stemming the flow of illegal immigrants.[7] Difficulties for Turkey's security services also arise from their inability to distinguish foreign fighters from innocent holiday goers who booked resort packages in Turkey, but who instead of vacationing, enter ISIS from Turkey for short training sessions to be sent quickly back home for attacks launched sometime in the future.[8]

It is also difficult to track individuals who have left and returned from the battlefield in Iraq and Syria, much less gather enough evidence to prosecute. From a legal standpoint, prosecuting them is difficult as it places a requirement on the state to prove that travels to Syria or Iraq entailed

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[5] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, LLC, 2016), 332; Anne Speckhard, "The Best Weapon to Defeat ISIS: US testimonials from Disillusioned Recruits Who've Defected Against Them," *New York Daily News,* July 6, 2016, available at: *http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/anne-speckhard-best-weapon-defeat-isis-article-1.2700282.*

[6] Nicole Gaouette, "US Adds ISIS in Yemen, Libya, Saudi to Terror List," *CNN,* May 19, 2016, available at: *http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/19/politics/isis-yemen-libya-saudi-arabia-us-designation-terrorist/.*

[7] Ahmet S. Yayla, "Deadly Interactions," *World Policy Journal* 32:4 (2015): 83-91. *doi: 10.1177/0740277515623751.*

[8] Rukmini Callimachi, "How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers," *The New York Times,* August 3, 2016, available at: *http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html?_r=0.*

engagement in terrorism or that a suspect returned to commit a terrorist act.[9] Interviews with law enforcement officials in the Balkans, specifically in Kosovo, revealed the issue of how some ISIS cadres are declaring themselves killed on social media and then cross borders illegally to return home, living without papers under the radar of government and security services. Despite the European members' commitment to strengthen efforts against the potential foreign fighter threat, barriers in the areas of information and intelligence sharing, mainly due to data privacy and national sovereignty and security concerns, continue to persist. Moreover, poor data sharing across the separate EU nations will continue to be an issue as ISIS cadres flee Syria and Iraq to return home. Some of the same issues represent a barrier to U.S.-European cooperation as well.[10]

While the group's geographic, military and political presence in Iraq and Syria continues to shrink, as indicated by intelligence analysts and government officials, its global ambitions, and psychological presence are likely to grow.[11] Battlefield setbacks are likely to cause a shift in the group's strategy. The terrorists are likely to take refuge in the rural areas and outskirts of Iraq and Syria, revert to mass casualty bombings, and establish operational and logistical sanctuaries with one of its regional affiliates in the Khorasan Province (Afghanistan or Pakistan), West Africa Province (Nigeria, Chad, Niger or Cameroon), or North Caucasus Province (Russia). Southeast Asia has recently been added to the list as well.[12] The group will also likely continue to expand its support base and intensify its attacks outside of Iraq and Syria. In fact, the recent ISIS attacks in Turkey, Brussels, Paris, Bangladesh, and Germany serve as a testament to the shift in the group's tactical strategy and long-term commitment to attack in the West. Such newly created realities are what some refer to as the *new normal*.[13]

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[9] Archick, et al., "European Fighters in Syria and Iraq: Assessments, Responses, and Issues for the United States," *Congressional Research Service,* April 27, 2015, available at: *https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44003.pdf.*
[10] Ibid.
[11] Carol Morello and Joby Warrick, "Islamic State's Ambitions and Allure Grow as Territory Shrinks, *The Washington Post*, July 4, 2016, available at: *https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/islamic-states-ambitions-and-allure-grow-as-territory-shrinks/2016/07/03/b465c502-414a-11e6-88d0-6adee48be8bc_story.html.*
[12] Krystal Chia and Lin Xeuling, "ISIS is Targeting Southeast Asia."
[13] Carol Morello and Joby Warrick, "Islamic State's Ambitions; "James J. Carafano, "'New normal' Has ISIS Popping All over the World, "*Boston Herald,* March 22, 2016, available at: *http://www.bostonherald.com/opinion/op_ed/2016/03/carafano_new_normal_has_ isis_popping_up_around_globe*; Ashish Kumar Sen, "ISIS Strikes Brussels: Is this the 'new normal'?" *Atlantic Council,* March 22, 2016, available at:

In our "ISIS Defectors Interview Project," thirty-eight defectors and foreign fighters shared their horrific stories and experiences of living under the Islamic State and the ISIS-controlled territories. These were individuals from Syria (32), the Balkans (4), and Western Europe (2). Many of them had witnessed Muslim children as young as six-years-old manipulated into suicide bombings, massacres of Muslim dissenters, systematic rape of Muslim and Yazidi women as sex slaves, and the complete perversion of Islam. As insiders to one of the most lethal terrorist organizations to date, these defectors represent the real and delusional ISIS and had much to say to denounce the group—statements which should be fully exploited to break the ISIS narrative and promotion of their so-called utopian Caliphate. [14]

Many of the interviewed defectors warned that if the group is defeated militarily in Syria and Iraq, their plan is to shave their beards, cut their hair, and blend into normal society in the local area and mount guerilla style urban attacks. While we may welcome ISIS losing territory and its so-called state being destroyed, we must also recognize that fighting a militant army out in the open may be easier than fighting a veiled guerilla movement. Recent events in Turkey, which appear to allow continued illicit and even openly proclaimed Islamic State activities in Turkey and the generous access that Syrian refugees have in Turkey, makes it quite possible that ISIS cadres and leaders could hide inside Turkey as well, if defeated in Syria and Iraq and continue terrorist operations from Turkey, basically unimpeded. With the massive arrests and firings in the recent Turkish purge, Turkey has lost considerable expertise and experience in its counter-terrorism policing, intelligence, and judiciary services.[15]

While many Islamic State foreign fighters have returned home and do not intend to go back, research indicated that there are others whose decision whether to stay or return is largely dependent on the extent to which they are welcomed back into society and if they see any future for themselves apart from ISIS. Research also shows that many returnees still believe in the dream of so-called Caliphate, continue to share social and ideological bonds with those currently in Iraq and Syria, keep up communication with them, and many even profess a desire to return to the battlefield. Some of them, in fact,

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http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/isis-strikes-brussels-is-this-the-new-normal.
[14] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors*, 332.
[15] Ahmet S. Yayla, "Turkey's Failed Coup: A Victory for ISIS," *The Hill,* July 20, 2016, available at: *http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/288452-turkeys-failed-coup-a-victory-for-isis.*

have already returned, while about others we can only wait and see.[16] In light of such evidence, governments are likely to continue to face difficulties in responding to this new normal threat of many unknown, undetected by security services, or difficult to prosecute radicalized returnees who may be on the verge of causing harm at home or be travelers who engage in terrorist activities abroad. Likewise, for those who are successfully prosecuted, European prison sentences tend to be short and many European prisons continue to be hotbeds of radicalization, which will likely not discourage continued ISIS involvement. Between the United States and Europe, these factors may also pose risks in terms of the U.S. visa waiver system, which allows free visa entry to most Europeans, some of whom may harbor evil intent towards Americans.

The new normal are also differences in policy perspectives among the parties affected on how to tackle the phenomenon of foreign fighters, as are the disagreements over the nature and the level of threat that foreign fighters may pose to their home countries. One could also not help but notice how the growing online presence and support for terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, especially among the young, appear to have overwhelmed law enforcement's ability to effectively monitor all extremist and violent activities, and in particular ISIS-related online activities, forcing them to focus only on those they perceive as the most severe security cases.[17] Of course, as Michael Steinbach, Executive Assistant Director for the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Security Branch, recently noted, the sheer volume of cases makes sorting through such cases a lot like trying to drink from a fire hose. He added, the time from *flash to bang* decreased from months and years to weeks, making those that might slip through the cracks even more concerning. Terrorist attacks, arrests, charges related to ISIS activities, and the fear of ISIS- inspired homegrown attacks from returnees all have become the new normal.

In the actual theater of operations, depending on who wins the U.S. Presidency, the United States will be faced with the decision of whether or not to send in ground troops to fight ISIS. Putting boots on the ground in Syria and Iraq, aside from those in Special Forces teams and advisory roles, is a decision most Americans do not support due to the previous costs and poor results in Iraq. Likewise, any U.S. or Coalition-led occupation of Syria or Iraq

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[16] U.R., Y.D., D.K., R.B., M.S., B.I., A.K, Anne Speckhard, Ahmet S. Yayla, and Ardian Shajkovci, France, Turkey, and the Balkans, September 2014-June 2016.
[17] FBI officials, L.K., Anne Speckhard and Ardian Shajkovci, The Balkans and the United States, June 2015-September 2016.

will likely have blowback for the U.S. and Coalition troops, as well as Western interests in general. Indeed, ISIS has long been goading Western troops into entering their territory as it plays into the group's apocalyptic *Us versus Them* and *End Times* rhetoric and propaganda and would most certainly fuel new recruits—as it did during the previous Iraqi invasion for al-Qaeda in Iraq. Given that air strike withdrawal is not a viable option, the ideal formula for defeating the group would entail a clear political solution to the Syrian crisis, security restored to the local populations, a committed regional force ready to fight ISIS, and a clear vision of what will happen politically after the conflict ends. Assad does not appear likely to step down, the Iranians and the Russians continue to support him, and many regional actors have conflicting stakes in the ultimate outcomes and in continuing to fuel subversively the battles. The solution to the problem would be eased if we knew with certainty who our allies and our true adversaries are, and why those who we consider to be allies and are trained to fight hesitate to do so. Most importantly, little is known exactly what kind of enemy ISIS is, and will be, as it continues to lose its territory. Terrorist groups constantly morph, as do alliances in the region—those openly stated as well as those occurring under the surface.

After almost six years of investment with no clearly positive results or local partners who are reliable and able to institute any lasting peace in the region, the United States and its allies are clearly risk-averse—balancing unclear partnerships to the risks of allowing the conflicts to continue. Knowing that they cannot reliably influence inter-group rivalries, internal conflicts, sectarian violence, and regional rivalries, nor secure a larger political space and mandate at home to fight ISIS, the new normal appears to entail engaging in partnerships of convenience and admitting that arming anyone may result in later facing those same arms in the hands of enemy combatants. For the Europeans and the United States, avoiding further on the ground military involvement in the region may not be a viable option to containing ISIS so that the group does not threaten its citizens at home and interests in the Middle East, but the struggle for what might work continues unabated. For the Arab States, preventing Iranian dominance and growth in the region is crucial. Proxy warfare and funding of militias by the Gulf States and Iran continues to fuel the sectarian divide that al-Qaeda in Iraq lead by Abu Musab Zarqawi exploded wide open. For Russia and Iran, keeping Assad in power is important, while Iran also struggles to maintain a good relationship with the United States. For Turkey, ignoring ISIS, and even cooperating to fight Bashar al-Assad's regime and restraining the Kurds, may play best to their

own political and security interests—at least for the time being as Erdogan continues to solidify his power inside Turkey.[18]

Conclusion

The loss of significant swaths of territories by ISIS and the considerable drop in the number of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria are likely to continue to weaken the group's recruitment efforts. The former is especially important given that ISIS also relies on recruits—even children forcibly conscripted—from the territories it controls.[19] Such interpretations may be misleading, however, primarily because they discount the high rate at which ISIS continues to replenish itself despite its losses. While killing ISIS' leaders is an important aspect of the fight against ISIS, the past research on terrorist assassinations shows that killing terrorist leadership may not always represent a winning strategy—it does not work well if they can quickly replace charismatic and battlefield leadership, explosives expertise, and so forth. [20]

ISIS continues to control large swaths of territories in Iraq and Syria, which it will unlikely lose access to altogether. The fact that its leaders are usually killed in the communities that provide support to them and that atrocities continue to be carried out by the enemies of ISIS as well, it may be that the group will continue to generate a steady stream of recruits and leaders in the areas in which it operates. Likewise, failure to resolve the political and security issues in Iraq and Syria that gave rise and strong support to ISIS will continue to give fertile ground to its return.[21] Already complaints have been

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[18] Ahmet S. Yayla and Anne Speckhard, "Aftermath of Another ISIS Attack in Gaziantep, Turkey: A Possible New Internal Conflict for Turkey, "*International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism*, August 22, 2016, available at: *http://www.icsve.org/brief-reports/aftermath-of-another-isis-attack-in-gaziantep-turkey-a-possible-new-internal-conflict-for-turkey/*; Ahmet S. Yayla and Anne Speckhard, "Playing with Fire: Erdogan's Anti-U.S. Scheme," *World Policy Blog*, July 27, 2016, available at: *http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2016/07/27/playing-fire-erdo%C4%9Fans-anti-us-scheme*.

[19] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors*, 332.

[20] Mohammed M. Hafez and Joseph M. Hatfield, "Do Targeted Assassinations Work? A Multivariate Analysis of Israel's Controversial Tactic during the Al-Aqsa Uprisings," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29:4 (2006): 359-82.

[21] Max Fisher, "Does Killing Terrorist Leaders Make any Difference? Scholars Are Doubtful," *The New York Times,* August 30, 2016, available at: *http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/world/middleeast/syria-killing-terrorist-leaders.html?_r=1*.

made by Sunnis in the liberated areas of Iraq of disappearances, revenge killings, and rapes by Shia militias. [22]

Political grievances in the region that gave rise to al-Qaeda in Iraq and then to ISIS continue to exist without good solutions. After years of sectarian violence, the scars from torture, rape, or bombings will not be easily healed, nor trust easily restored. Moreover, the apparently stupendous draw of thirty-eight thousand foreign fighters and unabated recruitment to a brutal terrorist group and grueling battlefield is a glaring statement in itself about the social, psychological, and political grievances in the countries from which these ISIS foreign fighters come. First and second-generation Muslim immigrants continue to find life difficult due to lack of social integration and as marginalization and discrimination continue to create serious obstacles to their success in Western Europe. Corruption, oppressive regimes, bad governance, and high unemployment in many other parts of the world continue to fuel belief in the ISIS Caliphate and a willingness to fight for it.

Likewise, Western support to oppressive and corrupt regimes, as well as counter-terrorism actions including drone kills and bombings that also kill civilians, remain festering grievances that fuel ISIS recruitment. As long as significant groups vulnerable to ISIS recruitment continue to believe the governments they live under will not serve them and do not see their futures bright without the promises of the so-called Caliphate, they may continue to fuel the ISIS dream of an alternative world order that falsely promises to deliver to them dignity, purpose, significance and justice.

Thus, despite apparent differences in legal and policy approaches and perspectives on the foreign fighter threat, foreign fighters will remain an important aspect of ISIS's strategy and recruitment campaign, or if ISIS is defeated entirely, give rise to follow-on terrorist movements that speak to the same sets of grievances among these ISIS recruits. In this regard, efforts should be made to understand foreign fighter motivations and grievances, whether they be real or perceived.

As indicated above, ISIS narratives and propaganda on the Internet and social media also represent a significant challenge in the fight against ISIS. Research shows that governments lack adequate policy and legal frameworks on how to incorporate effectively the narratives of those who have disengaged

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[22] An International aid worker in Iraq speaking to locals in liberated areas, Anne Speckhard, Amman, Jordan, November 1, 2016. M.M. L., Anne Speckhard, Amman, Jordan, November 13, 2016.

from ISIS into their counter-narrative messaging efforts, meaning much more emphasis is placed on criminalizing actions and little is being done to find viable ways to incorporate both

In addition, in the digital battlefield, government efforts are mostly focused on removing ISIS propaganda and content that is present online, which in and of itself is problematic considering the amount of the new material that is being added by the group on a daily basis to social networking sites. Likewise, governments have for the most part mounted anti-terrorist campaigns that are limited to rational and logical arguments, while ISIS (and al-Qaeda before ISIS) are using visuals and emotional arguments to secure its following. Without employing the same type of Madison Avenue emotional marketing appeal to vulnerable populations, we cannot hope to win against Islamic State's global online appeals.

ISIS also casts a wide net, then checks to see who is responding with "retweets," "likes" and other endorsements of their online materials. When they see endorsements they swarm in and, at least in the initial stages, meet the needs of their potential recruits while seducing them further into the group—and to their ultimate destruction. This points to the need to match ISIS' online outreach methods, specifically by using graphically visual and emotionally compelling materials and standing up city-wide helplines and rapid intervention teams to actually reach out to vulnerable persons who are entering or are already on the terrorist trajectory. Often, security forces know who these individuals and their family members are, but without employing equally effective swarming methods as ISIS uses the prospect for victory will remain farfetched. There is a need to become as adept at pulling potential joiners back off the terrorist trajectory and preventing entry all together, and to otherwise meet their needs and redirect their passions for justice and social change into nonviolent means—or else ISIS will continue to win, as they have been, in the online space.

Given the scale of the group's online presence and propaganda, and their arguably to date unchallenged power to entice many recruits worldwide, the focus should remain on delivering a proportional blow to ISIS online propaganda machinery. Our recent fieldwork research experience indicates that this can be done both by empowering important and credible voices within ISIS and by encouraging governments worldwide to reevaluate their current legal barriers that prevent many defectors from coming forward with their stories, all in an effort to increase the impact of counter-narrative messaging. Arguably, soft power approaches often cost less than one

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Tomahawk missile hurled into the battle space, and they work with little to no collateral damage to fuel even more terrorist activity. The new normal needs to incorporate not only defeating ISIS on the battleground, but also its digital Caliphate in the online battle space. [23]

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[23] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors*, 332; Anne Speckhard, "The Best Weapon"; Anne Speckhard, "How Do We Defeat ISIS? Less Bombs More Social," *The Hill,* July 6, 2016, available at: *http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international-affairs/286476-how-do-we-defeat-isis-less-bombs-more-social*; Authors stress that this could be done, as evidenced in recent interviews that captured on video dozens of ISIS defectors willing to speak out against the group, as well as efforts to produce their materials into captivating short video clips that appear as ISIS materials until one actually interacts with them to hear former ISIS cadres denounce the group. Example available at: *https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCumpEsozixbl-PyKw12hmnw*.