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ISIS: A European View

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The problem of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (heretofore referred to as ISIS) is one that is not new. In many ways an extension of previous problems, the group has demonstrated an impressive ability to adapt to its surroundings and grow in a manner that presents a particularly dangerous potential threat to countries around the globe. The long-term answer to the problem lies ultimately in resolving deep-seated conflicts in the Middle East, but the more immediate danger lies in the increasingly menacing threat picture that is observable emanating from the group around the world, be this in Europe or Asia. This brief paper will attempt to sketch the current threat picture from a European perspective, as well as offering some ideas for how Asia and Europe in particular might respond to the threat collaboratively.

ISIS: A Brief History

ISIS is not a new group.[1] In existence since the late 1990s it was initially founded by Jordanian Abu Musab al Zarqawi at a training camp in Herat, Afghanistan where he was seeking to build an army of Levantine warriors to overthrow the apostate regimes of the region. In many ways it was similar in this way to al Qaeda that used a base in Afghanistan provided under the protection of the Taliban ruled country to undertake a campaign of terrorism elsewhere. In 2001 in the wake of the US led invasion of the country, Zarqawi led his group to Northern Iraq. From this base they moved to play a prominent role in insurgency that took up arms against the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In August that year, they brutally announced their presence on the battlefield with VBIED attacks on the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, the UN Headquarters, and the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf (a prominent Shia center). From here, the group slowly moved into greater prominence, eventually adopting the name al Qaeda in the Land of the two rivers (AQI) as it took on the role of being al Qaeda's representative in Iraq – something formalized in 2004 when Zarqawi formally pledged to AQ. At the height of its success in November 2005 it launched an attack in Amman, Jordan, targeting western hotels and killing some 60. In June 2006 Zarqawi was killed and a new leader took over with the group first changing its name to the Mujahedeen Shura Council and then the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The name change, all indicated

[1] This brief history skips over a lot, for a more detailed analysis of the group's history please see https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-group-that-calls-itself-a-state-understanding-the-evolution-and-challenges-of-the-islamic-state

that the organization was keen to demonstrate the focus and prioritization of Iraq as its main area of interest.

In 2011 the west withdrew from Iraq, but the group (now reduced but still very much active) continued to play a prominent role launching regular attacks against the regime in Baghdad. That same year, the Arab Spring took root in Syria transforming into a civil war in the country. The leadership of ISI sent a unit into Syria to exploit opportunities that might be available in the country for the group to grow. Led by one of the leader's key lieutenants Abu Muhammad al Jawlani, the group adopted the name Jabhat al Nusrah (JaN). Over time it developed into one of the more effective fighting forces in the civil war against the Assad regime. However, over time, the local group JaN started to find itself in conflict with ISI – ISI increasingly started to appear on the battlefield and sought to try to impose its will on the local populations where it was able to exert control. JaN sought a closer connection to al Qaeda core, while ISI instead increasingly wanted to strike an independent path. In April 2013, ISI's leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi made a pronouncement in which he claimed that JaN was in fact merely an affiliate of ISI and that ISI was going to change its name to ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham) absorbing its Syrian affiliate. JaN rejected this and instead turned around and declared greater independence from ISIS and continued to play a key role fighting on the ground against the Assad regime, while also fighting against ISIS.

The important aspect to note in this brief historical summary of the organization is that it has in very limited situations sought to launch external terrorist attacks. The 2005 attack in Amman is the sole case in which the group has been directly linked to a terrorist attack outside its immediate focus of interest in the Levant. During the period, Zarqawi claimed links to other plots, while authorities hinted links to his networks in an array of plots in Morocco, Turkey and Jordan – though the direct evidence of links was difficult to locate. With Zarqawi's death, the group seemed to refocus once again on its region, something that has held since then. Since its ascension as a player in the civil war in Syria, it has focused on growing and developing its caliphate in Syria and Iraq – with Raqqa and Mosul acting as the heart of the organization. And whilst the group continues to be focused on this as its primary area of attention – it has increasingly shown evidence of expanding, starting to pose a growing threat around the world. This has expressed itself differently so far in Europe and Asia, but given the globalization of national interests it is no longer possible to completely separate the two out.

ISIS Goes Out?

But whilst ISIS remains a group principally focused on its region, it can increasingly be found as a phenomenon that has resonances globally. In many ways it has displaced al Qaeda as the standard bearer of global terrorism. This is not a shift without consequences and the result has been that ISIS has slowly risen up as a concern globally with increasing evidence that its focus goes beyond the Levant. The principal lens through which most countries view this threat is the large numbers of foreign nationals who have been drawn to fight alongside the group – foreign terrorist fighters – that are currently seen as one of the most likely vectors through which a terrorist threat from the group is likely to emanate back home. These excitable young (for the most part) men and women are drawn to fight alongside the group against the Assad regime or to participate in the construction of the Islamic State the group claims to have founded. Looking back at history, every conflict with a jihadi aspect to it that has drawn foreign fighters in has subsequently produced a terrorist threat back home in some shape or form. This is not to say that every person drawn to Syria and Iraq will return as a terrorist, but it is naïve to assume that there is not the potential for this threat to mature.

Atop this potential threat, ISIS leadership has seen great value in advancing the lone actor terrorist narrative, actively seeking to stir up terrorist plots and attacks in the west through the advancement of a public narrative that declares that individuals should not come and fight alongside them, but instead launch attacks wherever they are based. This strategic narrative is one that was already present in al Qaeda's messaging, most prominently through al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) magazine *Inspire*, but it is something that ISIS seems able to have further advanced with much greater effectiveness than AQ.

At this stage, ISIS going out appears to be expressing itself in four different ways, something that is taking place in different contexts for different reasons.

First, there are the '**Connected**' groups in other countries or regions – most prominently these have emerged in Libya, Afghanistan/Pakistan and Egypt, though numerous other smaller groups have pledged allegiance to the ISIS banner. In these three contexts, however, we can see that the group is actually appearing to be a coherent entity that is able to launch attacks, produce propaganda and appears to be undertaking something that looks similar to what the core is achieving in the Levant. The rationale behind letting such groups emerge is not clear for the core beyond the fact that it attracts more attention and shows the groups ideology to be a continually striving and victorious one – but the logic of them prominently appearing in these three places is practical: foreign fighters from these places have been going to the conflict in Syria/Iraq for longest and consequently strongest links have been developed. Additionally, these three areas offer ungoverned or under-governed spaces in which the group can properly take root. But having such

prominent affiliates acts to further destabilize a global response to ISIS in the Levant and strengthens the core.

Second, there are '**Directed**' terrorist plots. These are thus far very unclear in their expression due to incomplete information, though in a European context in particular there have been a growing number of attacks that appear to demonstrate some level of connectivity and direction by groups in Syria and Iraq. It remains deeply unclear the degree to which they are actually directed by ISIS senior leadership, but it seems possible that the evidence is increasingly pointing to plots in which individuals who have fought in Syria/Iraq are being redirected to launch attacks back in Europe in particular to help undermine public support for the anti-ISIS coalition. The most prominent example is in Belgium where a network disrupted in Verviers, Belgium appears to have been directed by ISIS associated individuals to launch an attack in Belgium.

Third, there are the '**Instigated**' plots. This expresses itself both directly from the battlefield, but also from aspirant supporters not based in the country. For example, in May 2015 two individuals drove to Garland, Texas in the United States to attack an event in which individuals were being encouraged to draw pictures of the prophet Muhammad. The two men were gunned down before they were able to launch their attack, but subsequently it emerged that they appeared to be in communication with a British fighter alongside ISIS in Syria who was stirring the men up to launch the attack. In a different context, a teenage Briton was arrested in April 2015 accused of acting in a similar fashion for a group of Australians – instigating them to launch an attack on ANZAC day 2015 against Australian security forces at home.

Fourth, there are the '**Sparks**' which are harder to properly define and reflect ISIS ability to project its narrative out in such a way that it can be picked up by any and sundry around the world. The sparks express themselves in a number of ways: for example, it can mean individuals deciding to launch attacks apparently in advance of ISIS ideology without any direct connection to the group – like the case of Brutschom Ziamani, a young Briton who was part of a radical community but decided to attempt to kill a British police officer with no clear direction beyond his own interpretation of ISIS messages. In other contexts, this can also express itself in the form of fighters who have sought to travel to join the group but are unable to – for example, the pair of attacks in Canada in late 2014 in which first Martin Couture-Rouleau and then two days later Michael Zehaf-Bibeau attacked official targets having encountered difficulties trying to travel to foreign battlefields.

Sparks can also appear in the form of more sophisticated attacks, when an individual foreign fighter will return from the battlefield and try to recruit a network around himself to launch some sort of a plot within his home country. It is not

clear that this is something that has been sanctioned or directed by the core, but nonetheless is in advance of the organization's ideology. An example of this is a network in Indonesia who were attempting to build a chlorine device in March 2015.

A final manner in which sparks can express themselves is in the form of groups pledging allegiance to the group without this having any clear or direct input from the core. Boko Haram, for example, has decided to latch its star to ISIS's banner, but this is something that group has done in the same manner that it has previously pledged connections to al Qaeda (or ISIS predecessor ISI). It is not clear that ISIS has sent many resources (beyond some possible media production support) to the group, but rather the group sees the ISIS star ascendant and wants to catch some of its reflected glory. This is something that can be seen globally in a number of other contexts where groups have pledged allegiance to the group while there is little evidence that the core has done much acknowledgement of the *bayat*.

It is therefore possible to see how ISIS is growing from a regional threat to a more global one – though the core of its concern remains its Levantine heart and the development of its claimed state there. The explanations for these external expressions are likely multifaceted. In some cases, it is likely opportunism by the group that sees an opportunity to either confuse the alliance fighting against it or to try to punish a specific actor that it identifies as weak. Within this context it is important to remember the jihadi narrative that assessed the 2004 Madrid bombings as being the reason why Spain withdrew from Iraq. The perception is that some countries would be susceptible to major internal political ructions in the event of a terrorist attack, which might lead to a change in political power and willingness to fight ISIS.

Furthermore, whilst at the moment the group clearly feels in a prominent and successful place, it is possible that under pressure it might react through lashing out with more focused and directed terrorist attacks. These could express themselves in a number of different contexts – from plots in neighboring Turkey or Jordan to plots against western or other prominent targets in Asia or Europe.

Finally, the group is able to thrive on the narrative of success. The more it appears around the world in different contexts, the more it seems to be an army on the move, winning victories and expanding globally. Success is attractive and breeds further success – it is therefore useful to the group to have a growing number of people and places with adherents pledging allegiance to the core.

What Can Be Done?

With this threat backdrop, it is useful to explore what opportunities might exist for greater cooperation and collaboration between partners in Asia and Europe to

counter a threat that both are currently facing in a number of different ways. A great deal of transnational cooperation is needed to counter a threat like ISIS, but attention must be paid to the local contexts in which the group is emerging and ensuring that the responses that are being crafted are ones that are responsive to specific environments rather than generalized responses. These require a detailed understanding of the nature of the threat in each location and the local drivers of radicalization. Maintaining this in mind, some broad areas for cooperation that offer themselves for immediate consideration include:

Foreign Terrorist Fighter networks

Countering the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) networks: by their nature FTF networks are transnational, crossing numerous international borders. Enhancing cooperation and cross-border intelligence sharing is crucial to help counter the threat as well as helping countries monitor the numbers of individuals they have leaving from their countries to fighting in Syria and Iraq. Such networks sometimes use false passports, and will often use support networks spread around the world. This requires a coordinated transnational response.

Radicalisation

On the ideological end of the scale, seeing what lessons can be learned in countering radicalization in each other's contexts can provide a useful set of experiences that might help others counter the phenomenon. Of course, radicalisation is a complicated phenomenon and what motivates individuals to go and fight from one context is often very different to how they are drawn in another context. In many ways, there are as many motivations for why people go to fight as there are people who have gone to fight. The response therefore has to be equally site specific and localized – focused around understanding and responding to the very specific local drivers of radicalization. While in one region a sense of injustice against the local government might be a the heart of individuals anger and willingness to go fight alongside ISIS, in another context it might be much more about an individual preacher who is spreading radical messages. And in a third context it might be a combination of both. The response therefore has to be equally nuanced and responsive. But this also means that many different things are being tried in different environments some of which are proving successful, and finding ways of capturing the lessons learned from such experiences is something that Asia and Europe could specifically cooperate on to try to develop a more coherent global database of such efforts to help other's craft more effective responses. Beyond this transnational practical learning, there is a need to understand how ISIS is able to draw on sectarian and ethnic divisions to recruit and radicalize – the key point of

learning being that other local tensions can often drive ISIS success in a particular region.

Local Capacity building

The conflict in Syria and Iraq is the brightest light on the jihadi map drawing to itself moths from around the world. By one count, some 90 countries are represented on the battlefield fighting alongside ISIS, including citizens from across Europe, Latin and North America, Africa, and across Asia – from China and Japan to Australia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia. ISIS siren song is something that has found audiences globally. For some locations, this is a new threat that has little precedent, leading to unprepared local security forces. Work can be done to help develop local forces to counter this threat – be this in terms of practical support in terms of training and equipping, to more fundamental training efforts to try to improve local police standing in communities. One key problem is a lack of understanding by security forces in some countries of the value of countering violent extremism through non-violent or criminal justice methods. Effective counter-radicalisation programs, for example, can require trying to engage with radical communities rather than arresting them – there has been some evidence of such successes in Europe and trying to establish some knowledge transfer in this regard could help develop a local capacity in security forces to deal with the problem of radicalisation in the longer term.

These areas offer themselves as the most immediate sources of cooperation when trying to counter the threat of ISIS. Clearly, the most effective long-term response will be to reduce the group's operating space in Syria and Iraq and ultimately eliminating its core and this is something that also has a transnational component to it. In Iraq the solution lies somewhere between building local capacity and finding ways in which the currently dominant Shia government can make its Sunni populations feel like they have a stake in modern Iraq. In Syria, the key lies in bringing the civil war to some resolution and it is clear that there are a number of external powers that could play a role in this regard.

One aspect that is often focused on for greater cooperation in the cyber space – while some transnational cooperation is clearly needed to take down certain videos or websites spreading ISIS ideologies, it is dangerous to focus single-mindedly on the internet as the source of the threat. The internet is merely a tool for groups like ISIS rather than a driver of the threat. Consequently focusing on it as the source will lead to failure. Some counter-messaging work online is important and work needs to be done to undertake the nature of this threat – but at the same time, focusing single-mindedly on it will miss some important nuance.

Conclusion

Given the lack of much seeming resolution in the Levant and the continuing flow of foreign terrorist fighters to join the group from around the world, ISIS is going to be a problem both Asia and Europe will find themselves dealing with for the immediate future. Finding ways to both counter its growing external menace as well as helping resolve long-standing problems in the Levant while challenging are the only ultimate solution to this problem. Focusing on learning lessons from each other's experiences, building capacity in countries that currently lack it and strengthening networks to counter transnational networks of FTFs offer an immediate set of areas for cooperation that will stunt the group's capacity to cause misery and death globally. This solution is not permanent, but it is a management tool that at this point is the best mid-term solution that is available.