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The Islamic State in Iraq

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Questions

What are the current and historical drivers of violent extremism in Iraq and what is the current state of play?

Contents

1. Summary

This rapid review synthesises the literature from academic, policy and NGO sources on the Islamic State's (IS) current and historical operations in Iraq, as well as the historic and current drivers of violent extremism in Iraq.

Although IS has been defeated territorially it remains active across Iraq, particularly in the rural parts of Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Anbar. It has also managed to set up a stronghold for its operations within the Hamrin mountain range (See Figure 3, page 8). IS has returned to the pre-2014 insurgency tactics and focuses its attention on targeted assassinations of government officials and key tribal and village officials seen to be working with the government. This has allowed IS to exert control over rural areas where it easily operates at night. At the same time, it carries out kidnappings and robberies in order to finance its operations. Analysts argue that IS is slowly building its physical and non-physical infrastructure in these areas in order to increase attacks and facilitate the spread of its operations. Although IS attacks have decreased during its current reorganisation phase, IS has focused its attention on higher quality targets. The large amount of finances IS managed to gain whilst holding territory enabled investment in legitimate and illegitimate businesses in Iraq as the Caliphate fell. This ensures that IS still gains funds in Iraq, although nowhere near the previous level.

Sunni grievances remain strong and some have only been exacerbated by the repercussions of the fight against IS. For instance, many remain displaced due to the lack of progress in reconstruction, leaving a feeling of isolation. Moreover, the antiterrorism operations and legal proceedings against those that are said to have colluded with IS leave Sunnis feeling targeted and abused through a collective punishment approach. This again opens up a space for IS to feed on Sunni grievances as the group can claim to offer an alternative, which can in turn gain them support. Additionally, the failure of the Iraqi government to offer security in rural Sunni areas allows for IS to gain support through fear of repercussions.

Key findings are as follows:

- Prior to the rise of IS, large protests against government policies towards Sunnis and the violence that these were met provided an opening for IS and can be seen as one of the key indicators to the rise of IS.
- There are a number of reasons why communities joined IS, including a history of Salafist-Jihadist movements and the failure of Iraqi Arab Sunni political institutional development. However, the combination of issues that led to Sunnis feeling marginalised and with little prospect of change provided IS with the space to operate.
- The lack of reconstruction, unjust use of anti-terrorism laws, unequal justice, lack of security and services, and the length of displacement is seen to continue to offer IS a space to operate.
- IS recruited youth both online and locally and with one of the youngest populations globally, Iraq needs effective efforts to counter violent extremism recruitment targeted at young people.
- Grievances remain strong in Sunni areas where little progress has been made with regards to reconstruction, whilst the security forces and justice apparatus are seen as targeting Sunnis.

- IS is most threatening in rural Sunni areas, particularly those surrounding the Hamrin mountains and it is from here that its operations are likely to grow.
- Tactically, IS' operations are similar to the pre-2014 insurgency tactics with a focus on targeting infrastructure, carrying out fake checkpoints and roadside ambushes, car jackings and the theft of truck cargoes for financing, roadside attacks to target militia commanders and tribal leaders, and targeted assassinations.
- IS is currently regrouping and building its infrastructure and networks for more broad attacks in the future and although the tactics remain similar to pre-2014 IS is focusing on less, but higher quality tactics, similar to 2008. IS has also introduced the use of drones and the digital caliphate is growing.
- IS maintains networks across the Sunni areas in Iraq, however, its strongest networks are in the Hamrin mountains and Hawija.
- Although IS maintains the aim of forming a caliphate, the leadership see the loss of territory as part of the process and its focus now is on building its network, routinely carrying out attacks, and preventing the state from gaining a hold in Sunni territories.
- There is little evidence of IS infiltrating refugee camps in Iraq, however, as many as 100,000 women and children who are seen as affiliated with IS remain in camps with little rights and face an uncertain future.
- IS remains the leading Sunni extremist group in Iraq, largely due to its actions against other groups during the height of it strength. However, groups like Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN) and Al Qaeda maintain networks and aim to take advantage of IS' losses.

2. Conditions on the ground

Where are grievances the greatest?

Conditions on the ground in Iraq are rapidly changing and to capture a current overview of conditions, this section draws on the most recent and relevant contextual analysis and draws heavily on Revkins work for the Institute for Integrated Transitions.

At its peak in 2014, IS controlled 20 major Iraqi cities with the total population of more than 5 million civilians (Revkin, 2018). IS recruited and trained fighters in these places, but it also provided health, agriculture, education, and municipal services and ran state-like institutions whose employees had to swear allegiance to the group without carrying weapons or performing military functions. Many residents in these areas had no choice but to cooperate with the group as to refuse would be treated as 'apostasy' and punishable by death (Revkin, 2018: 3). This large population left behind when IS retreated in 2017 is now regarded as complicit in terrorism by the Iraqi authorities and the government is faced with the challenge of reintegrating these communities into Iraqi society. However, the Iraqi authorities have taken 'a heavy-handed approach that fails to differentiate between voluntary and involuntary cooperation with IS, and between more serious crimes and lesser offenses' (Revkin, 2018: 3). Since 2013, the government has detained more than 19,000 individuals on terrorism-related charges, but the number of detainees accused of association with IS may be as high as 36,000 (Revkin, 2018: 18). Revkin (2018: 18) notes that 'Men, women, and children have been detained by Iraqi and KRG [Kurdistan Regional Government] authorities on suspicion of association with IS simply based on demographic traits (being a fighting-age male) or spatial proximity to Mosul and other contested areas.' As a result, Revkin (2018: 15) notes that 8,861 individuals have been convicted, at least 3,130 have been sentenced to death and at least 250 have been executed. Two mass hangings of 42 and 38 convicted IS members took place in September and December 2017 (Revkin, 2018: 15). Iraq's Prime Minister has also indicated that detainees as young as 16 may be facing capital punishment (Revkin, 2018). Not only fighters but also civilian employees of IS' bureaucracy are being prosecuted on terrorism-related charges (Revkin, 2018: 7) and courts do not differentiate between people who joined IS voluntarily and those who were forced into collaborating with the group, based on its total control of the territory and economy in the place they lived (Revkin, 2018).

Moreover, concerns have been raised over the speed with which the trials proceed, with some said to be as short as 10 minutes and with a conviction rate of ca. 98%. On top of the punitive counterterrorism policies implemented by the authorities, civilians also face extrajudicial punishments by private citizens and militias as revenge killings of suspected IS affiliates are common (Revkin, 2018). Often, individuals and families suspected of affiliation with IS are threatened with expulsion or forcibly evicted from their homes; for instance, in the Governorate of Salah al-Din, a list of the names of 113 individuals accused of association with IS and thus permanently banned from the community was published by local tribes (Revkin, 2018: 8). Tribes in other areas have introduced bans on returnees suspected of IS affiliation (Revkin, 2018). Moreover, state authorities are reported to be taking part in the forced eviction and displacement of individuals associated with IS - in Mosul, IS-affiliated families were ordered to leave their neighbourhoods, this was justified as necessary 'to avoid communal tensions' (Revkin, 2018: 8).

Based on Revkin's (2018) research and the survey of 1,409 residents of Mosul conducted for it, the example of Mosul demonstrates the extent of violence suffered by the civilians living under IS rule, as shown in Table 1. In the battle for Mosul, residents experienced heightened violence and 52% of survey respondents experienced serious property damage during the operation, whilst '22 percent reported that a member of their household was injured, and 13 percent reported that a member of their household was killed by one or more of the following forces: IS, the United States, the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service, the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Federal Police, and the PMF [Popular Mobilisation Force]' (Revkin, 2018: 11).[1] This poses a serious question about the highly punitive approach taken by the Iraqi and Kurdish authorities towards the populations governed by and associated with IS, as it is seen to be victimising a population that has already experienced significant violence and injustice. According to Revkin (2018: 6) 'the blanket stigmatisation of all individuals associated with IS - whether as combatants, civilian employees, family members, or merely residents of IS-controlled territory - has hindered the restoration of trust and social cohesion in areas retaken from IS.' Whilst the Iraqi security forces' collective punishment of Sunnis who live in areas previously controlled by the IS, combined with the failure to address the political and economic grievances that brought about the rise of IS in the first place can lead to a new insurgency (Revkin, 2018).

Table 1: IS violence and governance in Mosul, see: Revkin (2018:10)
https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/2768/2-LoP-Iraq-Case-Study.pdf

Similar arguments are echoed by Aziz Ahmad a member of the Kurdistan Region Security Council (2019). According to Ahmad (2019), Iraqi government forces have 'returned to some of the practices that originally fed the ingrained sense of local grievances'. Ahmad refers to the practices of arresting a large number of Sunnis under the anti-terrorism law, discriminatory practices at checkpoints, abusive practices, and indefinite detainment without trial or evidence. The use of the anti-terrorism law is a long-held grievance of the Sunni population, as it targets Sunnis and can be used without proper evidence. IS has been able to exploit these grievances to operate despite the loss of territory, as it gives it space to operate at night, particularly in and around Sunni villages. The failure to reconstruct territory won back from IS and return those displaced to their homes creates animosity amongst the Sunni population. When this is paired with the state policies of security and justice, poor economic condition and limited opportunities, these areas once again become vulnerable to IS extremism. Therefore, grievances remain greatest in the former territories held by IS, where the lack of reconstruction and abuses by security actors drive resentment. However, IS is currently focusing on rural areas, as it can easily operate and can utilise this territory to exploit grievances, gain supplies, network, and to target its operations (Ahmad, 2019).

Where are IS the most threatening?

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[1] The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) also known as the Hashd al-Shaabi, is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organisation composed of a number of militias. Although predominantly Shiite, there are also Sunni, Christian, Shabak, Yazidi, Turkmen, etc. militias.

Figure 1: Islamic State Attacks in Iraq by Year (January 2016 – October 2018), see: Markusen (2018:2) https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181130_Markusen_ISIS_layout_v5_0.pdf

As seen in Figure 1, IS is still active across the country with a focus in Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Anbar. Despite a decrease in IS attacks across the country in 2018, there were still more attacks than in 2016, see Figure 2. In Kirkuk and Salah al-Din there was actually an increase in IS attacks in 2018, making them the provinces where IS poses the biggest threat. In Kirkuk, IS more than doubled its attacks in 2018 (Markusen, 2018).

Figure 2: Islamic State Attacks in Iraq by Province (January 2016 – October 2018), see: Markusen (2018:4) https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181130_Markusen_ISIS_layout_v5_0.pdf

IS has moved from Mosul to concentrate its activities around the provinces of Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Anbar. From rural territory IS is able to mount attacks against the Iraqi security services. It also carries out revenge attacks against those accused of betraying IS, making it all the more threatening to the population and at times also more likely to be supported. IS is currently focusing its campaign at the village level where it can operate relatively freely; executing village leaders who are seen to cooperate with the government slowly increases the territory where IS holds influence, albeit it is gained through force. The freedom of operation and the lack of security provided by the government makes these northern villages the area where IS is the most threatening (Ahmad, 2019).

Due to the security vacuum created as the Kurdish Peshmerga were forced to withdraw as a result of their referendum for independence in October 2017, there is a significant amount of ungoverned space and disputed territories in Kirkuk and Salah al-Din without an official military presence. IS has taken advantage of this and operate freely in these territories. For example, in the Hamrin mountains, an ungoverned and remote area south of Kirkuk and north of Tikrit, IS operates freely due to the lack of security services. Figure 3 demonstrates the number of IS attacks in the Hamrin mountains in 2018 (Markusen, 2018).

Figure 3: IS Attacks around Hamrin Mountains in 2018 (Jan-Oct), see: Markusen (2018:5) https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181130_Markusen_ISIS_layout_v5_0.pdf

The Hamrin mountain ranges, with its difficult territory to operate in, offers IS a base to train recruits and launch attacks. From this base IS can easily enter the areas around Kirkuk and Hawija to abduct Kurds and Arabs for ransom and target power lines and oil trucks, as well as police units defending critical infrastructure (Ahmad, 2019). It is argued that IS is exploiting remote, sparsely populated areas in order to establish physical and logistical infrastructure for its fighters and to offer shelter and food for its fighters. The infrastructure that IS is establishing

will enable it to have bases from which to plan and conduct operations and have an area to fall back to when under pressure (Spyer, 2018).

According to Knights (2018: 2) IS maintains permanent attack cells in at least 27 areas: 'Al-Qaim, Wadi Horan/Rutbah and Lake Tharthar/Hit/Ramadi in Anbar province; the southern Jallam Desert (southern of Samarra), Baiji, Sharqat, Pulkhana (near Tuz), and Mutabijah/Udaim in Salah al-Din province; Tarmiyah, Taji, Rashidiyah, Jurf as-Sakr/Latifiyah/Yusufiyah, Jisr Diyala/Madain, and Radwaniyah/Abu Ghraib in the Baghdad belts; Hawijah, Rashad, Zab, Dibis, Makhmour, and Ghaeda in or near Kirkuk province; Muqdadiyah, Jawlawla/Saadiyah/Qara Tapa, and Mandali in Diyala; and Mosul city, Qayyarah, Hatra, and the Iraq-Turkey Pipeline corridor southwest of Mosul, Badush, and Sinjar/Syrian border in Nineveh'. Knights also highlights that although low in number, IS' rural insurgency in Nineveh is marked by the more impactful nature of the actual attacks. However, like other analysts, Knights points to IS' activities being the strongest in rural Kirkuk where the group has managed to increase its activities.

3. Islamic State activities

Pre-2014 comparisons in operations and methods

The pattern of IS attacks in 2018 demonstrates a distinct change in tactics (see Figure 4), as opposed to 2016 and 2017 there was a significant increase in attacks on government and security forces targets, whilst there was a decrease in attacks against civilians (Markusen, 2018). Markusen (2018) argues that IS is regrouping and taking advantage of the current instability whilst refocusing its campaign against the government. IS has returned to the insurgent tactics of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) by seizing on local grievances and taking advantage of ungoverned areas. Utilising cell structures, IS has focused its activities on hit and run attacks, kidnappings for ransom, targeted assassinations, and bombings using improvised explosive devices.

Figure 4: Islamic State Attacks in Iraq by Target Type (January 2016 – October 2018), see: Markusen (2018:3) https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181130_Markusen_ISIS_layout_v5_0.pdf

Thus, according to Knights (2018: 1) IS is far from being defeated and have rather regrouped and changed tactics. In the first ten months of 2018, IS attempted to overrun 120 Iraqi security force checkpoints or outposts and executed 148 precise killings of official figures, such as village *mukhtars*, tribal heads, district council members, and security force leaders. In the same period, according to Knights (2018: 1), IS carried out 762 explosive events, demonstrating the extent of activities. Knights argues that although IS has returned to insurgency tactics, it has also slightly changed its tactics to focus on the quality rather than quantity of attacks and is focusing on a smaller area.

IS targets civilians who do not support them as well as pro-government Sunni militias in rural Kirkuk. IS operates unobstructed at night, as its activities have forced security forces to remain in their bases at night. The group is destroying farms with the aim of driving out pro-

government tribal leaders and depopulating key areas in order to increase operational security and take over farms. Tactically, IS has established a strong base in rural Kirkuk which has enabled the group to carry out a number of targeted attacks that have helped gain publicity. For instance, in February 2018, IS fighters dressed as PMF fighters to establish a fake vehicle checkpoint at Shariah bridge, near Hawija, which they then used to execute 27 PMF fighters (Knights, 2018).

Rather than targeting hardened facilities such as police stations or military headquarters, IS focuses on targeting infrastructure such as highways, electricity transmission lines, and pipelines, as well as carrying out fake checkpoints and roadside ambushes. IS also utilises car jackings and the theft of truck cargoes to finance its activities. Roadside attacks have allowed IS to target militia commanders and tribal leaders while they are lightly protected. At the same time, IS' night time activities have proven largely successful, particularly through the assassinations of local community leaders, which act to intimidate whole communities. Similar to the pre-2014 operations, assassinations remain the most effective and efficient tactic, and these assassinations have been focused in the area IS has consolidated its operations. For example, there were 103 IS assassinations in southern Nineveh, rural Kirkuk, and northern Diyala in the first 10 months of 2018 (Knights, 2018: 7).

IS has also returned to using roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs), however, these are homemade unsophisticated devices that are usually triggered by pressure plates, rather than more precise methods. Another tactic involves engaging with security forces and then using IEDs or ambushes when chased (Knights, 2018).

IS' current tactics are similar to those pre-2014, as through targeted assassinations and control of rural areas IS is once again demonstrating to the population that the authorities cannot provide security. Once again, IS utilises this to gain support, as Sunnis are either intrigued by the ideologies, the taking control from the state, or have little choice due to the lack of protection from the state security forces (Knights, 2017).

Figure 5 demonstrates the stability of IS attacks across 2018, with an average of 75 attacks a month. However, Knights (2018: 2) put this figure significantly higher at 127.1 attacks a month in Anbar, the Baghdad belts, Salah al-Din, Diyala, Nineveh, and Kirkuk alone.[2]

Figure 5: Islamic State Attacks in Iraq by Month (January 2016 – October 2018), see: Markusen (2018:3) https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181130_Markusen_ISIS_layout_v5_0.pdf

There are also suggestions that based on its self-presentation in *Al-Naba*, the weekly Arabic language newsletter that the group both publishes online and distributes to fighters and individuals living within its territory, IS has been reorganising and consolidating (Dodwell, Milton & Al-'Ubaydi, 2018). IS has previously listed each of its military operations separately, but more recently it has chosen to group operations into larger geographic segments, only

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[2] Knights has his own database which includes qualitative evidence of smaller attacks.

listing its Iraq and Syria attacks into two entities (Dodwell et al., 2018). The consolidating of IS is likely a response to continued losses, financing challenges, and other difficulties and, according to Dodwell et al. (2018), steps of consolidating mean moving from having a large number of smaller administrative units into a small number of larger administrative units to remove unnecessary redundancies, save money, and potentially allow for more focused efforts. Once called 'the world's richest terrorist organization' by the United Nations, having lost most of the territory it held in 2014, IS has also lost an estimated 80% of the income it gained by capturing territory and acting as a de facto state, collecting taxes and tariffs from the populations under its rule (Mansour & Al-Hashimi, 2018).

Hassan (2017) argues that towards the end of 2017 it was clear that IS had changed strategies as they quickly withdrew from urban centres when attacked with little fight. He argues that articles published between September and October 2017 in *Al-Naba* articulate the reasoning behind changing tactics. The articles argue that IS faced heavy losses due to the precision of air attacks and that IS should move away from engaging forces backed by air support. They go on to argue that IS should adopt a counter-strategy and not engage in sustained clashes in urban centres. In another article in *Al-Naba,* it is argued that IS had switched to insurgency tactics like in the spring of 2008 under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in order to preserve what was left of its manpower. The change in tactics involve small units attacking from behind enemy lines or through quick raids.

Hassan (2017) argues that IS has returned to the tactics as laid out in the 2010 document entitled the *Strategic Plan for the Consolidation of the Political Standing of the Islamic State of Iraq.* The document suggested three courses of action for insurgency:

1. Targeting Iraqis (particularly Sunnis) enrolling in the military and police forces and using propaganda to portray enrolment in state agencies as shameful and sinful.
2. Sustained attacks following Sun Tzu's maxim "reduce the hostile chiefs by inflicting damage on them; and make trouble for them, and keep them constantly engaged."
3. Focus on assassination attacks on important government, tribal and security actors.

IS is also re-establishing the northern supply routes used during the original insurgency era to smuggle fighters and weapons into the rest of Iraq (Ahmad, 2019). The return to previous insurgency tactics is also seen in the vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack that killed three people at the *Abu Layla* restaurant in Mosul on 9 November 2018. However, this is not part of a large-scale campaign and rather IS is regrouping and rebuilding its structures (Spyer, 2018).

Changes to financial model

IS took control of the old smuggling routes when it conquered parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, making an estimated $1 million per day from the war economy (Mansour & Al-Hashimi, 2018). Corruption in Iraq and Syria allows IS to continue to finance insurgency - Mansour and Al-Hashimi (2018) estimate that IS smuggled ca. $400 million out of Iraq and Syria during its retreat. Taking advantage of Baghdad's lack of control over the informal economy, with these funds IS smuggled money out of Iraq and invested in Iraqi markets. There is evidence that suggests complicity of political parties and well-connected individuals from Iraq and neighbouring countries in enabling this black market to prevail. According to Mansour and Al-

Hashimi (2018), as IS returns to its insurgent roots, it has also invested at least $250 million in legitimate businesses. It has sought to invest in enterprises in both Baghdad and liberated areas, where it relies on middlemen, many of whom are tribal leaders or businessmen, who have clean records and cannot be easily linked to the IS (Mansour & Al-Hashimi, 2018). Front companies include a range of businesses, from car dealerships to currency exchanges. Hundreds of small IS-linked exchange houses are said to now operate in Baghdad and these entities allow IS to convert Iraqi dinars into U.S dollars, a currency that has a further reach globally (Mansour & Al-Hashimi, 2018).

Technology

The commercialisation of drone technology has allowed the IS to purchase cheap drones and the group has made significant advances in drone usage as it has staged between 60 and over 100 attacks per month from aerial drones in Iraq and Syria in 2017. IS has been using drones for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and to drop explosives (Jones et al., 2018). The group has also used drones to drop small grenades on enemy forces and in January 2017, Iraqi forces shot down grenade-launching and mortar-dropping drones in Mosul. IS also started using drones to launch improvised explosive devices, strapping bombs and cameras to commercial drones and landing them in enemy territory (Jones et al., 2018: 30-31).

The group has also been taking advantage of encrypted communications and in August 2015, it released a guide in its French online magazine *Dar al-Islam*, stressing the importance of secure communications. The guide instructed users how to connect to the Tor network to hide IP addresses and locations and encrypt emails (Jones et al., 2018: 35). There is also some limited evidence of the use of virtual currencies by the IS (Jones et al., 2018: 38).

IS has become skilled at cyber operations and several hacker teams have conducted cyber operations directly or indirectly for the group; these include: Cyber Caliphate Army, Ghost Caliphate Section, Kalachnikov E-Security, and Sons of the Caliphate Arms (Jones et al., 2018: 41). These groups united in 2016 in the United Cyber Caliphate (UCC), whose leader, Hussain al-Britani, a British hacker who travelled to Syria was killed in a drone strike. From December 2016 to January 2017, two pro-IS cyber accounts were involved in distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks and the UCC claimed credit for seven DDoS attacks in December 2016. Another pro-ISIS group launched a DDoS tool, named "Caliphate Cannon," that prioritized military, economic, and education targets. The United Cyber Caliphate also claimed responsibility for other operations aimed at disrupting services and spreading IS propaganda (Jones et al., 2018: 41).

Network Strength

IS is currently rebuilding its networks in multiple strongholds and linking them together, preparing for future operations in Iraq (Wallace, 2019). Figure 6 maps out and lists the post-caliphate operations of IS. Following the military escalation between the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iraqi PMF against Iraqi Kurdistan along the Disputed Internal Boundaries in October 2017 security gaps emerged that enabled IS to resurge around Hawija. By December 2017, IS began to conduct and claim insurgent attacks against the ISF and PMF, by May 2018, it had expanded its local operations to extortion and the destruction of crops generating revenue

and undermining confidence in the security forces. The ISF failed to clear IS from Hawija despite major clearing operations in April 2018. By September 2018, IS had reportedly established permanent infrastructure including training camps, militant housing and courts in Hamrin (Wallace, 2019). Since July 2018, IS accelerated its efforts to re-establish a support zone in Northern Diyala Province. This was reinforced by moving fighters from Kirkuk Province to Diyala Province via the Hamrin Mountains (Wallace, 2019). IS also operates safe houses near Lake Hamrin that send fighters further on into the Diyala River Valley. A member of the Diyala Provincial Council issued a call for a state of emergency and tribal mobilisation near Khanaqin in November 2018, but local security forces have been ineffective in responding. In January 2019, local officials confirmed that IS *de facto* controls several villages near Muqdadiyah (Wallace, 2019).

Figure 6: IS Re-establishes Strongholds in Iraq, see: Wallace (2019)
http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2019/03/isis-re-establishes-historic-sanctuary.html

IS is also escalating its operations in Buhriz Subdistrict south of Baqubah, where it increased rates of attacks against security forces, local tribal figures, and commercial sites in January 2019. IS is likely to use its presence in Buhriz to attack both south into Baghdad and north into Baqubah, from which it could ultimately move farther along the Diyala River Valley and link to its support zones in Northern Diyala Province (Wallace, 2019). IS remained present in the Northern Baghdad Belts, which were not adequately cleared by the ISF and PMF and since October 2018 it has also established several cells near Karmah in Anbar Province (Wallace, 2019). IS has also re-established a support zone near Amariyat al-Fallujah. In January 2019 The ISF discovered elaborate network of tunnels into Fallujah from the direction of Amariyat al-Fallujah, which were likely used by IS to infiltrate cells into the city. In February 2019, over 180 individuals connected to IS were arrested in Fallujah. Since December 2018, IS has also started using its support zone in Amariyat al-Fallujah to move south towards Jurf al-Sakhar and Northern Babil Province and several IS militants were detained at checkpoints along the highways connecting Babil Province to Baghdad since December 2018 (Wallace, 2019).

Furthermore, IS has freedom of movement in the Jazeera Desert which it continues to use to transport fighters and materials (as well as drugs and money) between Syria, Anbar Province, and Salah al-Din Province. Reportedly, over 1,000 IS fighters have crossed the Iraq-Syrian Border through the Jazeera Desert since September 2018. To protect its supply routes IS has carried out attacks against security forces patrolling the Jazeera Desert north of Al-Qaim (Wallace, 2019). The anti-IS forces never successfully cleared IS from the Badush Mountains, which likely received an influx of fighters and material as IS exited Mosul in 2017. Raids by the elite Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) have also not been effective in clearing IS from its safe haven in the region (Wallace, 2019).

In Mosul itself, IS maintained a network of 'sleeper cells' after the city was recaptured. An IS network in Mosul was likely behind the two vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks that took place in the city in November 2018 and February 2019. IS is said to also maintain VBIED capabilities in Eastern Mosul including in the Gogjali District. According to

Wallace (2019) IS is also recruiting and building attack networks in Iraqi Kurdistan; in October 2018, security forces arrested eight members of an IS financing network in Erbil.

Aims and future

Despite the loss of virtually all territory in Iraq and Syria, IS' primary goal remains establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate that extends from the Middle East into Africa, Europe, and Asia. However, with its decline in territorial control, IS leaders have shifted from governing territory to developing a long-term ideological programme, engaging in propaganda, fund-raising, recruitment, and communication on social media and other forums (Jones et al., 2018). As a result, IS has established a "virtual caliphate" by communicating through social media and encrypted communication, allowing its networks to share information and tactics, engage in propaganda and recruit new members (Jones et al., 2018).

IS has previously highlighted its aim of moving to a desert strategy in the case of the demise of the caliphate and it was argued that the change of tactic only means depleting the enemy in another way. In moving to a desert-based insurgency IS' aim is to prevent the building of security or social structures capable of challenging IS' presence. Through continuous attacks the aim is to debilitate the state structures through a war of attrition (Hassan, 2017).

At the same time, under the current conditions, IS is unlikely to re-emerge with the same strength as it did in in 2013-2014. Zelin (2017) notes that 'if and when IS reclaims territory, it will probably be more akin to an archipelago of strongholds than the large swaths of land it once took so rapidly.' This, according to Zelin, is because:

- The region is unlikely to see the kind of foreign fighter mobilisation IS benefited from in 2012-2015; given the international clampdown on foreign fighters IS has access to much less potential manpower to help rebuild its governance architecture and fighting capacity.
- The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq will not tolerate a massive IS rebuilding effort, especially those aligned with Iran and any new IS initiative is thus likely to involve much smaller pockets of territory and also generate a speedy military response, making potential gains more difficult to sustain (Zelin, 2017).

Figure 6, which discusses current network strength appears to at least partially confirm these predictions.

Presence in refugee camps

There is no evidence suggesting that IS operates inside Iraq's refugee camps. At the same time, as many as 100,000 women and children, whose fathers, sons or husbands are alleged to have joined IS are kept in the refugee camps as *de facto* prisons, stripped of nearly all rights, facing grim conditions, and uncertain futures (Wille, 2018). The central government is said to have sanctioned this camp detention policy, without any active 'reconciliation strategy or plan to remove the obstacles facing these families and facilitate their safe and dignified return home, or local integration elsewhere' (Wille, 2018).

4. Tipping points and motivations

Historical indicators of community vulnerability

Mosul is a good site to examine indicators of community vulnerability, as IS managed to gain control of the city very easily. Mosul long had a problem with extremism, and this was not addressed by either the US or the governments that followed. Instead, during Nouri al-Maliki's time as Prime Minister (2006-2014) Sunnis were largely marginalised only helping to feed extremism in the city. The nature of the protests against the government was a clear sign of general dissatisfaction of the population with the governance. However, these protests were met with violence, again, acting to feed extremism in the city. The population's relationship with the armed forces was also extremely negative with them protesting the treatment and corruption of the armed forces. This generally demonstrated the deterioration of the relationship between the population and the government as well as how the population did not feel represented or protected by the armed forces. The level and style of the protests against the government prior to IS' rise was a clear indicator of the communities vulnerability to an organisation like IS, however, it is the government's violent response to the legitimate protests that can be seen as a tipping point that IS was able to take advantage of (O'Driscoll, 2016).

Guthrie (2018) notes that 'drivers of violent extremism in a specific context can be considered as either push factors or pull factors' whereby push factors 'negative political, social and cultural characteristics that can create the impetus for violent extremism'. Such factors can include poverty, illiteracy, weak governance and marginalisation (Guthrie, 2018). As this report has demonstrated the push factors have been significant for the Sunni community. On the other hand, pull factors are positive elements such as 'charismatic recruiters, appealing communications, and material benefits' (Guthrie, 2018).

Extremist groups such as the IS frequently seek to recruit young people, who are vulnerable to indoctrination, both locally and online. In Iraq, IS has used local recruiters as well as 'sophisticated online strategies to recruit children and youth, whom it refers to as "cubs of the caliphate" (Guthrie, 2018). Examinations of IS online activities have showed a number of detailed strategies used to recruit youth in Iraq and Guthrie (2018) reports that in February 2016 IS had at least 1,500 child fighters. Offline, IS used for example local information centres; in Mosul the group set up such centres around the city to recruit youth. It is at these centres that IS members distributed printed and video materials about their operations to men and boys (Guthrie, 2018). With one of the youngest populations on the planet, Iraq needs effective policies to countering violent extremism (CVE). For CVE efforts aimed at youth to be to be effective 'they must include a wide set of actors working in collaboration to address push and pull factors ranging from the local community level to the national level' (Guthrie, 2018).

Reasons Iraqis joined IS and risks of repeat

According to Jones et al. (2018) Sunni Arab disenfranchisement has been one of the most important sources of recruits for the IS. At the same time, the UN in Iraq argues that Iraq's long history of unevenly distributed economic and social dividends led to a strong sense of injustice and resentment among disparate groups in Iraqi society. Additionally, armed conflicts

have led to a rift between sectarian communities. IS was able to take advantage of these factors and offer and outlet for anger, and response to injustices.[3]

The actions of Nouri al-Maliki (Prime Minister, 2006-2014), particularly between 2010 and 2014, left Sunnis isolated within governance institutions as he rid himself of political opponents, with little political representation. Protests were met with violence and the armed forces acted with impunity and were often accused of bribery and theft in Sunni communities. Sunni political actors also offered little by means of representation, and accusations of corruption marred many. Growing anger with little means of outlet, was easily harnessed by violent extremists who claimed to offer the Sunni population an alternative to the government (O'Driscoll, 2017).

Osama Gharizi and Haidar Al-Ibrahimi (2018) argue that the following factors gave rise to the emergence of IS: tribes and tribalism, political marginalisation of Sunnis, sectarian policies that reinforced community cleavages, economic deprivation, and ineffective governance. The importance of tribes cannot be underestimated, as the majority of Iraq's population, 75%, is a close associate, or a member of one of the approximately 150 clans in the country (Hassan, 2008). The strength of tribes varies relatively to the condition of the Iraqi state, when state's power is strong, tribes are more likely to subordinate to its institutions, whilst weak state institutions result in enhanced power of tribal leaders giving them more influence over issues of security, armed mobilisation, political identity and justice (Ghaziri & Al-Ibrahimi, 2018).

The tribes have considerable influence and tribalism is central to the Sunni political identity. Tribes and tribalism are also most prominent in Sunni areas (Anbar, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, Nineveh), as well the southern Shia province of Basra. In 2007-2008, Iraq's tribal Awakening was a key component of the US strategy that has largely been credited for its role in the dramatic reduction of violence across the country (Benraad, 2011). However, Maliki's rule, brought about more Sunni tribal marginalization, and in particular his decision to block Sunni tribesmen who fought in the awakening from joining the security forces was a dangerous move. The US-led coalition had promised Sunni tribal integration with state forces, which was understood as key in preventing the re-emergence of extremism in Sunni areas. Thus, Maliki's move alienated Sunnis further and opened the avenues for the expansion of IS in Sunni areas (Ghaziri & Al-Ibrahimi, 2018). Tribal Mobilisation Forces remain active, but there is no plan for their integration into the military, this is in the context of expanding number of armed actors involved in security in Iraq since 2014, with the 120,000, largely Shiite, fighters of Popular Mobilisation Forces joining the Iraqi Security Forces, Federal Police and Peshmerga in the fight against IS (Ghaziri & Al-Ibrahimi, 2018).

At the same time, the internal divisions within the Iraqi society need to be considered in relation to the failures in governance at the central level; Mercy Corps point out that 'a major factor in IS' rise was not immutable sectarian division but rather an absence of inclusive, responsive and accountable governance' (Mercy Corps, 2016: 2). To illustrate this point Mercy Corps show how following the resignation of Maliki on the 14th of August 2014, the level of support for "armed opposition groups (militias, terrorist groups)" dropped notably among Sunnis from 49 percent to 26 percent, as demonstrated in Figure 7. This suggests that sectarian identity

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[3] http://uniraqrrp.org/storage/rrps/February2018/lsn7NEPcNZCFWqIzbniu.pdf

politics was not the main driver of support for armed violence, but rather as Sunnis' confidence in the government's ability to provide security and services grew, they also became less likely to support extremists. Mercy Corps' report (2016) stresses the need for better and fairer governance and the growth of active civil society as key in preventing radicalisation, and support for IS-like entities in the future. Similarly, Jones, et al. (2018: 48) identify a 'fragile state with weak or ineffective governing institutions' as factors that heighten the probability that insurgent groups such as the IS are able to establish a sanctuary.

In addition, whilst Mercy Corps' research (2016) finds that sectarianism has been overestimated as a driver of Iraq's instability, it also warns that 'the manipulation of sectarian differences by armed actors in the context of ongoing violence' can nevertheless deepen sectarian divisions and fuel the conflict, which can in turn, further polarize groups, creating a 'feedback loop between sectarianism and violence' (Mercy Corps, 2016: 32).

Figure 7: Support for armed groups among Iraqi Sunnis, see: Mercy Corps (2016:16) https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Investing%20in%20Iraqs%20Peace_Final%20Report.pdf

Moreover, there are a number of risk factors in Iraq that contribute to instability that IS takes advantage of, these include: corruption and political turmoil, tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, unpoliced and ungoverned space, anger at the actions of the PMF, economic issues, and humanitarian grievances in IS-liberated areas. Corruption is a significant challenge in Iraq as it drives inequalities and disenfranchises the population (Markusen, 2018). In Transparency International's 2018 corruption ranking, Iraq ranked 168 out of 180 countries, scoring an 18 on a scale of 0-100.[4] Additionally, 58.71% of the Iraqi population is said to be under the age of 25 and Iraq's national youth unemployment rate is 16.06%, however, these figures are likely to be even higher in Sunni majority provinces affected by the fight against IS (Markusen, 2018: 5). At the same time, those displaced are also less likely to be in employment, whilst in June 2018 UNICEF claimed that nearly 3.5 million children do not attend school or attend it only irregularly, and more than 600,000 displaced children have missed an entire year of schooling (Sparks, 2018). The slow pace of reconstruction following the territorial defeat of IS also leads to anger towards Baghdad. The failure to open up opportunities for the youth and address the number of issues that further disenfranchises the population only acts to provide IS with an opportunity to recruit. Although the PMF is not only a Shiite force, many Shiite units occupy Sunni urban areas and provide security, however, they are not seen to provide equal security to Sunnis and Shiites, and they do not provide security in many rural areas. The presence of the PMF and the perceived unfair treatment allows for IS to build a rhetoric where they are seen to be a force against the PMF, which can increase IS' recruitment and operations. Poor relations and political competition between Baghdad and Erbil also have security implications, as coordinated efforts are needed to successfully tackle IS insurgency, particularly in the disputed territories (Markusen, 2018).

In a study done by Sanad for Peacebuilding and Social Inquiry (2018) in Nineveh which included 62 key informant interviews and 601 surveys, faith and material gain was seen as

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[4] https://www.transparency.org/country/IRQ

the main drivers of violent extremism, which goes against many of the other analyses of drivers of violent extremism. Being ordered by community leaders to join IS was also seen by those surveyed as being a relatively high factor.

Figure 8: Mosul Centre - top drivers that explain why people joined IS, see: Sanad for Peacebuilding and Social Inquiry (2018:17) https://www.social-inquiry.org/reports-1/2019/1/31/ideas-are-more-dangerous-than-deeds-street-level-perspectives-of-violent-extremism-in-nineveh-governorate-iraq

Figure 9: Hamidaniya - top drivers that explain why people joined IS, see: Sanad for Peacebuilding and Social Inquiry (2018:17) https://www.social-inquiry.org/reports-1/2019/1/31/ideas-are-more-dangerous-than-deeds-street-level-perspectives-of-violent-extremism-in-nineveh-governorate-iraq

Figure 10: Sinjar - top drivers that explain why people joined IS, see: Sanad for Peacebuilding and Social Inquiry (2018:17) https://www.social-inquiry.org/reports-1/2019/1/31/ideas-are-more-dangerous-than-deeds-street-level-perspectives-of-violent-extremism-in-nineveh-governorate-iraq

Figure 11: Qayyarah - top drivers that explain why people joined IS, see: Sanad for Peacebuilding and Social Inquiry (2018:18) https://www.social-inquiry.org/reports-1/2019/1/31/ideas-are-more-dangerous-than-deeds-street-level-perspectives-of-violent-extremism-in-nineveh-governorate-iraq

In key informant interviews with teachers and administrators a concern was shown for the vulnerability of students, as tensions between communities were visible and many Sunni Arabs get called IS members by other students. Increased tensions and acts of revenge by students are thought to push some students out opening up pathways to extremism (Sanad for Peacebuilding and Social Inquiry, 2018).

The Iraqi military in 2014 was in poor condition with regards to training, capabilities, discipline, and command and did not have the capabilities of fighting a force such as IS. Additionally, corruption was a major factor in the poor capabilities of the Iraqi army, as there were a number of ghost fighters and equipment and provisions were often sold (Dodge, 2014). It is argued that unless the Iraqi army keeps itself well-trained and equipped with a working command structure, a force such as IS could once again take advantage of its weakness (Pollack, 2019).

Finally, IS has been called 'a symptom of the failure of Iraqi Arab Sunni politics institutional development', in whose vacuum the recruitment of disaffected Arab Sunnis, including leaders, many of whom were former military officers under Saddam Hussein, took place (al-Marashi, 2018). Following 2008, IS came to serve as 'the most viable vehicle for these ex-officers to reassert their power' in places they came from such as Mosul, Ramadi, Fallujah, Rawa, Hit,

Tal 'Afar, and Tikrit (al-Marashi, 2018). Most of IS' leaders were Iraqi Arab and Turkmen Sunnis with military or security-related careers, with al-Baghdadi's religious career being an exception (al-Marashi, 2018). According to al-Marashi (2018), while IS has been defeated, Iraq's Sunni Arabs still lack institutional alternatives. For al-Marashi (2018), the challenge also lies in the 'militarization' and 'sectarianization' of young Sunni Arabs who were recruited by the IS. The group provided these youth with a sense of empowerment and belonging, alongside material benefits. This fuelled the development of heightened sectarian identity and is also likely to be an issue of future demobilization and reintegration (al-Marashi, 2018).

5. Other groups

Despite the IS' losses of territory in Iraq and Syria, an increasingly diffuse Salafi-jihadist movement is far from defeated (Jones, et al., 2018: 21). At the same time no clear newcomers have been identified on the Iraqi stage recently (Jones, et al, 2018: 52-58). Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN), which initially joined forces with IS, has been in direct competition with them since 2014. Although IS managed to assassinate a number of JRTN members and push them underground, they still maintain a network and are likely to re emerge given the opportunity. In 2016 JRTN's rhetoric around it being an alternative to IS increased and there was suggestions it had begun targeting IS fighters. At the same time, Al Qaeda also maintains a network in Iraq, and although it has not launched a full insurgency, it is thought that it is operating quietly (Anagnostos et al., 2016).

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Key websites

- Institute for the Study of War: http://www.understandingwar.org/
- Center for Strategic and International Studies: https://www.csis.org/
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