A Return to Insurgency in Iraq:
The Islamic State's transition to insurgency and the Iraqi mistakes that have aided it
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Abstract

In response to the inevitable destruction of its territorial caliphate, the Islamic State (IS) has transitioned to an insurgency in Iraq. This insurgency is active and increasingly well entrenched. The Iraqi government has made a series of problematic decisions which have enabled IS and bolstered its narrative. However, if the Iraqi government were to rectify these mistakes it has an opportunity to significantly decrease support for the Islamic State.

Introduction

Claims of the Islamic State's demise have been greatly exaggerated. While IS's territorial caliphate has been dismantled, it survives in its affiliate network and as an insurgency. In Iraq IS has successfully transitioned back to an insurgency. It is conducting attacks on a regular basis in several providences. The Iraqi insurgency is well established, and the Islamic State is prepared for a long war of attrition. The Iraqi government has enabled the Islamic State's survival and recovery through four problematic decisions. The Iraqi government has pursued a policy of retributive justice and security forces have engaged in unpunished extrajudicial violence. The Iraqi government has created large internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and detention camps that are prime IS recruiting grounds. The Iraqi government has failed to provide adequate infrastructure and services to citizens. Finally, the Iraqi government has not invested in local security forces. If the Iraqi government continues these behaviors it is unlikely that it will be able to successfully destroy or contain IS.

Return to Insurgency

The Islamic State's conventional defeats have substantially weakened it. The organization has lost leaders, resources, fighters, and prestige. Waging open warfare exposed IS to the superior conventional forces of its foes. The loss of territory has reduced IS's revenue streams and its ability to present itself as a state. At its peak IS commanded approximately 45,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria (Mitchell, 2018). A report from the summer of 2018 stated that the US Department of Defense estimated that IS had 15,000-17,100 fighters in Iraq (Lead Inspector General). IS's fighting force may have atrophied further but what remains still represents a significant threat due to IS's decision to revert to insurgency. Insurgent warfare is an inherently asymmetric strategy and does not require IS to achieve military preponderance. It is important to remember that IS's predecessor organization the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was once reduced to less than 700 fighters (Callimachi, 2019). Failure to capitalize on this weakness allowed ISI to regroup and lead directly to the rise of the Islamic State. The same mistake must not be repeated; IS cannot be allowed to recuperate and re-entrench itself.

In 2017 the Prime Minister of Iraq proclaimed victory over the Islamic State (Coker & Hassan). Although his statement was inaccurate, he was correct in asserting that IS's ability to hold territory conventionally was at an end. However, IS had already begun to transition back to an insurgency. Islamic State leadership had long prepared for the inevitable destruction of its physical caliphate. Hassan (2018) argues that the group was discussing a desert-based insurgency as early as summer 2016. Evidence for this can be found in how IS moved to adjust its propaganda and prepare followers for the transition to insurgency. In a May 2016 address, the spokesman at the time Abu Muhammad al-Adnani publicly announced the organization's expectation that it would lose all cities and its plan to return to insurgency (Hassan, 2018). This adjustment can also be seen in military behavior. After the fall of Mosul, the organization became significantly less willing to fight conventionally and repeatedly ceded territory. As IS demonstrated at Baghouz it still could mount significant defensive efforts when it chose to.

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Instead, the leadership prioritized conserving men and material for insurgent operations (Hassan, 2018). The Islamic State has also been preparing financially for insurgency. It smuggled up $400 million out of Iraq and has transitioned to revenue streams which do not require territorial control such as kidnapping for ransom, smuggling, and extortion (Clarke, 2018). Extortion is a particularly important source of revenue for IS as it also serves to assert a level of control over the local population. These extensive preparations indicate that the transition to insurgency was part of a planned decision and not purely due to degraded capability.

Today the Islamic State today has fully transitioned back to insurgency. By the end of October 2018 IS had launched at least 1,270 attacks (Knights, 2018). The organization has established itself in the rural areas of Iraq and the ungoverned zones near the Syrian border (Hassan, 2018). IS generally avoids hardened targets such as police stations instead choosing to strike unguarded targets (Knights, 2018). Even if IS cannot conventionally contest security forces it still exerts a significant degree of control over the regions it operates in. Night time checkpoints are common as well as targeted assassinations of problematic local leaders (Hassan, 2018). Killing prominent opposition leaders is an essential element in IS's attempt to reestablish itself as an insurgency. By doing so IS seeks to intimidate rural communities into compliance and deter cooperation with security forces. IS focuses such operations in the areas it seeks to establish strongholds in. According to Knight (2018) "In southern Nineveh, rural Kirkuk, and northern Diyala, there were 103 targeted assassinations in the first 10 months of 2018 (75% of all Islamic State assassinations during that period)." Furthermore, as an insurgency IS reach is greater than as a conventional force (Hassan, 2018). IS never conquered the Diyala Governorate but it is now one of the centers of the new insurgency (Knights, 2018). The Islamic State no longer seeks decisive confrontations but an extended war of attrition. The Iraqi government and its security forces must adapt to this new phase of the conflict.

Counterproductive Iraqi Decisions

The Iraqi government has made several decisions which have aided the Islamic State. If these policies remain unchanged, they will significantly hinder anti-IS efforts. The Islamic State presents itself as the sole champion of the Iraqi Sunni population in a hostile world. According to this narrative, the central Iraqi government is a sectarian Shia intuition which conspires with dark foreign forces to keep the Sunni populace oppressed and powerless. Cooperation with the Iraqi government is impossible as it is fundamentally hostile to Sunnis and thus violent resistance is the only option. The problems described below each benefit IS in their own unique way, but the common link is that they strengthen IS's narrative. The Iraqi government must not allow IS to brand it as a hostile out-group actor for that is the path to mass radicalization (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008).

According to Munqith al-Dagher, one of Iraq's premier pollsters, dissatisfaction and distrust of the central government have always been the Islamic State's greatest sources of support in Iraq, not religious fervor (2015). This is fortunate as it means that it is within the Iraqi government's ability to reduce IS's domestic appeal. If IS's support was truly religious in nature

the problem would be significantly more difficult to resolve. Instead, the Iraqi government has the ability and responsibility to restrict IS's support base by resolving locals' grievances. By addressing the problematic behaviors described below the Iraqi government can make significant progress in its struggle against IS.

Cycle of Revenge

Iraqi military and paramilitary forces have engaged in widespread extrajudicial violence. Systematic executions of suspected IS members were especially common during the fall of Mosul. Human Rights Watch's June 4, 2017 article reporting that the bodies of 26 blindfolded and handcuffed men had been found and that security forces had been implicated was typical for the period. According to a 2018 report from the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial summary or arbitrary executions many of these extrajudicial executions were conducted by popular mobilization forces (PMF). The popular mobilization forces are a paramilitary organization aligned with the Iraqi government comprised of numerous militias. Many of the PMF militias explicitly identify as Shia. Thus, their excesses are particularly inflammatory and likely to inflame sectarian tensions. Security forces have also "disappeared" large numbers of people (OHCHR, 2017). Some are released, often alleging abuses during their detentions, but many remain missing. Iraq currently has the largest number of missing persons in the world due largely to forced disappearances (Human Rights Council, 2018).

Extrajudicial violence creates a backlash effect that strengthens the Islamic State. There is a significant and expanding literature that supports the backlash thesis which holds that overly harsh counterterrorism policies can strengthen terrorist groups (Faria & Arce, 2012). Extrajudicial violence is extreme enough to provoke this effect as well as trigger more conventional routes of radicalization. Prior work has identified personal victimhood and political grievance as causes for individual radicalization in addition to mass radicalization due to conflict with an outgroup (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Extrajudicial violence by state forces facilitates all these paths to radicalization. When the relatives of those slain seek vengeance it is the Islamic State that they will turn to. Furthermore, every death widens the perceived gap between the local population and the central government. How can people trust the government that stood by as their relatives were killed by its security forces? Ultimately, in an insurgency the objective is the support of the local population. Abuses by the security forces alienate the contested population decreasing intelligence flow and increasing insurgent support. The massacres during and after the fall of Mosul are particularly problematic as research indicates that mass killings are strongly associated with increased terrorist violence (Avdan & Uzonyi, 2017). These events polarize society and become a rallying cry for anti-government forces.

The Iraqi judicial system has also been the scene of significant abuses. The Iraqi government's determination to hold members of IS accountable is laudable but its current course of action is not. Trials are perfunctory, evidence is optional and death by hanging common (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). The scale of the problem is daunting. From February to late August of 2017 the Nineveh counterterrorism court alone initiated the trials of 5,500 ISIS

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suspects (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). The individuals brought to trial are frequently arrested in dragnet operations or due to unsubstantiated accusations. For instance, PMF forces separated out approximately 1,300 men and boys from a refugee caravan fleeing Falluja in June 2016 (Human Rights Council, 2018). Of that number approximately half were later found to have been transferred to government custody and the other half remain missing (Human Rights Council, 2018). The accused rarely have proper legal counsel, in part because the Iraqi government has harassed defense lawyers and threatened to charge them as terrorists (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Treatment of detainees is also problematic. Due to the policy of mass internment the Iraqi judicial and detainment systems are overloaded. Even those found innocent frequently spend months in overcrowded prisons (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). There is evidence of widespread torture of detainees (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). There is also the potential prison radicalization issue. It is true that the prison radicalization threat is often overstated (Jones, 2014). However, the way Iraq is managing prisoners seems designed to facilitate prison radicalization. Large numbers of low threat detainees (those arrested in mass operations and those arrested for nonviolent crimes) are being held alongside hardened jihadis (Human Rights Watch, 2017a). The terrorist population is not so diluted as to be ineffective. The trauma of prison is amplified by the poor treatment of prisoners encouraging group bonding amongst prisoners as a support and coping mechanism. This increased cohesion due to isolation and external threats facilitates radicalization (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). The torture of prisoners is liable to accelerate this process as it creates clear group grievances against the state and its security forces that IS adherents can exploit.

The wanton abuse of the Iraqi judicial system is perhaps even more dangerous than extrajudicial violence. It clearly establishes the central government as an enemy of the Sunni population. There is no deniability or separation as with the instances of extrajudicial violence. The formal institutions of the central government are clearly unfairly executing Sunnis. Furthermore, the arbitrary nature of the judicial process clearly signals that innocence is no protection. This disincentives loyalty to the central government as it is not rewarded and reduces the perceived price of supporting IS. The Sunni population was already primed to be distrustful of the Iraqi government before the latest excesses (al-Dagher, 2015). A populace that distrusts the judicial system is unlikely to cooperate with security services. Which means that counterinsurgency operations will lack crucial intelligence. In response, the Iraqi security forces may choose to utilize less discriminant methods which will only advance the cycle of distrust.

The Iraqi government must restore faith in the legitimacy of its judicial institutions. Trials of suspected IS members should continue but with proper rule of law and standards of evidence. Moreover, the Iraqi government should prosecute those responsible for some of the most extreme extrajudicial violence. Doing so may be costly politically but it demonstrates that the government is not a purely sectarian actor and is truly committed to achieving justice. If handled properly trials of IS members could be a potent weapon against the organization. The government should take the opportunity to publicize IS's abuses of the community it claims to protect and drive a

wedge between the two. Additionally, credible trials present the Iraqi government to brand IS as criminals instead of martyrs.

Displaced and Detained Populations

The devastation of the campaign against IS left many internally displaced. The internally displaced Sunni population could be fertile IS recruiting ground. During the battle of Mosul IS was already recruiting from displaced civilian populations (Hassan, 2018). Displaced persons camps are particularly attractive to IS recruiters as they provide a concentrated audience with few ties. Furthermore, conditions in the camps are often poor which leads to dissatisfaction with the central government. More problematic still are allegations that security forces are abusing the civilian populace in IDP camps (Mosul Eye, 2017). Such behavior guarantees that the populace sees security forces as enemies and jailors instead of liberators and protectors. The central government must prioritize getting displaced citizens back to their homes. If they fail to do so they present IS with concentrations of increasingly dissatisfied potential recruits with few ties that would prevent them from joining.

The Iraqi government has also established large-scale internment for supposedly Islamic State affiliated families. Although not officially imprisoned the families are forcibly relocated into IDP camps which security forces prevent them from leaving (Wille, 2018). Doing so creates a permanent support base for IS by inhibiting individuals' ability to rejoin Iraqi society. Many of those detained in these camps are guilty only by association or of being in the wrong place at the wrong time (Wille, 2018). Furthermore, it is likely that these camps are vectors for large-scale radicalization. Just as Camp Bucca served to radicalize much of IS's current leadership the new detention camps may create the next generation of insurgent leadership. This is especially likely as the Iraqi government has chosen to detain children in these camps (Wille, 2018). The decision to hold these families in IDP camps facilitates the radicalization of actually displaced individuals in addition to the families being detained. The Iraqi government has created a dilemma for itself. It must either indefinitely keep a large population detained on little evidence or it must release a population that it has alienated and radicalized. The only way to minimize the damage is to selectively release as many detainees as possible and leave only those whom the government is certain are clear danger. In particular, the children must be brought out of the camps before IS gains a new generation of aggrieved supporters.

Failure to Provide Services

The Islamic State and its predecessor organizations have long exploited the central government's failure to provide reliable infrastructure and civil services. Prior research indicates that low state capacity and weak civil institutions correlate with increased terrorist activity (Hendrix & Young, 2014). Iraqi infrastructure has historically been poor as sanctions, economic mismanagement and wars have left lasting damage. In the 1980s Iraq was one of the most developed Middle East countries in terms of infrastructure and social services (Beeher, 2006). However, by 2006 the once proud nation was in disrepair. That year A US report found that only

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a quarter of the Iraqi population had access to potable water (Beeher, 2006). Failure to provide reliable infrastructure and services reduces local faith in government, making IS a more attractive alternative.

The Islamic State spent a significant amount of effort and money providing services to areas under their control. IS organized a DMV, ran a garbage collection system, and provided utilities (Callimachi, 2018). This behavior is not unique to the Islamic State criminal and insurgent organizations often fill the void when states fail to provide services. Doing so signals that the group is more capable than the government and allows it to co-opt locals. Since the Iraqi government has historically underperformed it is easier for IS to surpass it.

IS often intentionally worsens problems seeking to further discredit the government. Supply of electricity provides an illustrative example. Iraq regularly experiences protests, of an often-violent nature, when insufficient electrical infrastructure leaves many without any cooling during Iraq's brutally hot summer (Barnard 2015; Mohammed, 2018). The Islamic State has repeatedly attacked power plants and parts of the power distribution system (Al Jazeera, 2017; Ali, 2018). The IS attacks are focused on sections of the electricity infrastructure that supply Sunni communities. Although Shia communities also see similar issues and protests, IS has not sought to systematically attack their power infrastructure. This indicates that the attacks on the power infrastructure are not intended as a means of punishing the local population, but to further exploit an existing local grievance with the government. After these attacks IS can point the lack of power as proof of the government's inability to provide basic services. More importantly, such attacks increase general discontent with the central government. It is this general feeling that the central government does not care for the local population that IS exploits.

Of the problems listed this is the hardest to resolve. The Iraqi government claims that reconstruction will cost $88 billion, an already significant figure (Chmaytelli & Hagagy, 2018). However, others assert that actual cost is more likely around $198 billion (Gunter, 2018). Furthermore, the Iraqi government relies heavily on oil revenue to finance the rebuilding and oil prices are low (Gunter, 2018). Thus, a slow and difficult rebuilding process is inevitable. However, the Iraqi government can make positive changes. Firstly, it must increase infrastructure security in areas of IS activity. This signals commitment to the local populace and will reduce the Islamic States ability to worsen the situation. For IS the key is not that the infrastructure situation is poor but that the populace blames the government for the situation and believes IS can do better. Thus, the government should seek to invert IS's narrative and position itself as the defender of infrastructure. Secondly, the Iraqi government must quickly make tangible improvements to citizens lives in contested areas. The liberation of IS held territory is an opportunity for the Iraqi government to reinvent itself as a positive force. Since this opportunity is fleeting speed is more important than scale. Finally, the Iraqi government should not let the rebuilding crisis go to waste. Rebuilding will require a great deal of unskilled labor. The Iraqi government would be wise to use this opportunity to employ idle youth who might otherwise be recruited by IS.

Failure to Rebuild Local Security Institutions

The Iraqi government has not significantly invested in rebuilding local security forces. Instead, it has preferred to use PMF paramilitaries as a holding force (Knights, 2016). This is a two-fold mistake. First, as previously mentioned IS greatest fear is local Sunnis joining the security forces. Security forces have been most successful when they have cooperated with and integrated the local Sunni population. Islamic State leadership largely attributes the defeat of its predecessor organization ISI in 2008-2009 to the Sahwat (Hassan, 2018). The Sahwat were Sunni tribal paramilitary forces that assisted in the struggle against the Islamic State of Iraq. In many ways the story of Sahwat is prophetic. Incredibly successful against ISI forces they were ultimately disbanded by the Maliki government which refused to integrate them into the national security forces. This inevitably led to the security vacuum which IS exploited in its rise to power. Secondly relying upon non-local security forces creates a clear division between the populace and the security forces. Instead of the situation being the central government and locals fighting together against IS it becomes the central government sending its forces to police the locals. In this second narrative, it is easy for IS to insert itself as the representative of the local population and the vehicle of liberation. Using PMF fighters to provide security in contested territory is particularly problematic due to their tainted reputation.

The central government does not have enough security resources to fully control the rural areas which IS now bases itself. There are large ungoverned zones in Iraq that provide the Islamic State with a secure area to rest, train and store equipment (Hassan, 2018). Areas such as the Diyala delta are characterized by rough terrain, rural nature and potentially supportive Sunni populations (Knights, 2016). By refusing to build up local security forces the central Iraqi government only worsens its manpower deficiency. Building local security forces engages locals in the security process and enhances their ability to defend themselves. IS's insurgency is primarily rural in nature which means that targets are geographically dispersed. Equally dispersed local security forces are necessary to provide comprehensive security and compliment the more concentrated central government forces. IS has made targeting village leaders who do not support the group a priority (Knights, 2018). So far IS has been successful in this campaign of terror. Local security units would degrade IS's ability to conduct such attacks and thus their ability to exert control over rural communities.

Conclusion

The Islamic State has been injured but not destroyed. In Iraq it has successfully transitioned to insurgency and is rapidly re-establishing itself. The Iraqi government has enabled this by feeding the IS narrative that the central government is intrinsically hostile to the Sunni population and only IS can protect and care for them. Domestic Iraqi support for IS generally stems from the populace's disappointment in and distrust of the central government and its security forces. Therefore, if the Iraqi government were to address the populace's grievances it could significantly degrade IS support base. It is essential that foreign partners understand that the struggle against IS has not ended and provide the Iraqi government with the support it

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requires. Further research on how IS's international affiliates interact with the Iraqi insurgency could help guide further suggestions.

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