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Islamic State: why so resilient?

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Ten years after the attacks in London on 7 July 2005 (7/7) and nearly fourteen years after those in New York on 11 September 2001 (9/11) which provoked the "war on terror", there is no end in sight to this long conflict. Today, the proto-caliphate of Islamic State – the latest manifestation of the al-Qaida idea – has done more than just survive its first year. It is entrenched in Syria and Iraq, has a growing presence in Libya, and is linked to extreme groups in other countries, not least Afghanistan where the powerful Hezb-e-Islami militia led by former prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has pledged allegiance.

Islamic State is proving much more resilient than expected, and it is worth pausing at this time of anniversaries to ask why.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the new caliphate, Islamic State, at Friday prayers at the main mosque in Mosul on 4 July 2014. But the initial announcement had actually been made five days earlier, on 29 June, when it was picked up by Al-Jazeera and a few other media outlets. The declaration followed the rapid takeover of much of northwest Iraq by the new movement, culminating in the collapse of Iraqi army units and the seizure of Iraq's second city, Mosul.

Within two months, the United States started airstrikes against Islamic State units in Iraq, and was later joined by many other states including Britain, France, Canada, Jordan, Saudi Arabia

and the United Arab Emirates. The US then extended its bombing to Syria, with a handful of coalition partners joining in, notably France, Canada and Jordan. At present, Britain is not yet involved in Syrian airstrikes, but the impact of the Sousse massacre and the secrecy surrounding Britain's use of drones suggest that that might change (see "Britain's information-light war", 25 June 2015). The government is certainly trying to win support for an extension of its involvement.

It is reported that in the ten months to 22 June 2015, these coalition operations attacked as many as 7,655 targets. A total of 15,800 sorties had cost an estimated \$9 million a day, and they resulted in the killing of around 1,000 Islamic State fighters a month. (see "Islamic State vs Britain", 2 July 2015).

Yet it's clear that Islamic State has far from been destroyed by these attacks, and in many places is even thriving. It continues to attract as many as a thousand new recruits each month from across the region and the wider world; most come from North Africa and the Middle East, but many hundreds travel from the UK, France, Belgium, other western European countries and north America.

A little noticed element is the arrival of about a thousand Russians in the ranks of Islamic State, mostly from the Muslim populations of the north Caucasus where the Caucasus Emirate continues to pose problems for Vladimir Putin's government. It is also frequently overlooked that there are at least 15 million Muslims in Russia, with close to two million in Moscow alone. Russian security units are forceful in their suppression of extreme Islamist outgrowths, but this has not eradicated their capacity to inflict damage.

Islamic State may experience some reversals, but its inroads have included parts of Libya, the taking of Ramadi (capital of Iraq's Anbar province), as well as the current assaults on Kobane and Hasaka in Syria.

Even more significant is the manner in which Islamic State has consolidated its organizational hold on towns and cities across the substantial territory it has overrun. Since taking over the key city of Ramadi, for example, IS – as well as imposing a rigid and brutal order – has also restored power, repaired roads, and ensured that food and other markets are functioning.

The Ba'ath connection

Many of the more thoughtful western military analysts worry that Islamic State is here to stay, probably for years and possibly for decades. To understand both why the entity still appears to be robust, and to assess its prospects, it is crucial to explain the background to the tough competence and organization it has shown.

A principle reason lies in three distinctive components of the movement, which work together in a synergistic manner. The first, which most analysis focuses on, is religion, especially an eschatological dimension that looks beyond this earthly life. It certainly makes Islamic State distinctive as a transnational revolutionary movement, but in this respect it is not so different to al-Qaida. The other elements are more significant.

The second is the wide-ranging paramilitary experience acquired by Islamic State fighters in many different war-zones: in particular Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Libya, as well of course Iraq and Syria. There is a hard core of Iraqis, many of them survivors of the intense western special-forces operations of Task Force 145 in Iraq in the mid-2000s (see "Islamic State...a formidable foe", *The Conversation*, 12 June 2014). More recently, the fighters' ability to operate in the face of an intense and continual air war, with thousands of raids over a ten-month period, provides further valuable experience.

The third component is the sheer technocratic competence of many of the Iraqis who form a hard core of managers and leaders in the urban areas under Islamic State control. An insight into their capabilities is provided by an important article in *Der Spiegel* which reports the discovery of a collection of papers held by Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi (better known as Haji Bakr), a former colonel in Saddam Hussein's airforce intelligence organisation, who was killed in 2014. The collection included a 31-page blueprint outlining how to gradually take over a territory and establish rigid control.

The detailed plans include a most revealing description of the process of infiltrating towns and villages long before any kind of military assault, where those involved identify opponents to be killed but also potential collaborators. In advance there will be planning for the organisation of courts, transport, food distribution, education and health services, and taxation; once the location is overrun, these would be implemented with brutal efficiency.

Haji Bakr's blueprint is significant because by showing the sequence in detail, it underlines the additional factor that sets Islamic State apart from al-Qaida. This is its organizational capability, which in turn is a direct result of the involvement of Saddam Hussein-era Ba'athists at the center of the movement.

This mix of extreme religious intensity, wide-ranging paramilitary experience, and technocratic assurance and competence born of decades of Ba'athist organisation, is what sets Islamic State apart and makes it the most formidable political movement to be seen in the Middle East since the growth of Arab nationalism in the early 1950s.

Islamic State seems as resilient as ever. The Pentagon admits that the war will last for years. The main response of the US and its allies to the phenomenon remains yet more bombing. As the fifteenth year of the "war on terror" approaches, and a decade after 7/7, there is no end in sight.