



WHY TERRITORIAL LOSSES DONOT MEAN THE END FOR ISIS

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Why territorial losses do not mean the end for the Islamic State

When commanders of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), waved the victory flag of their forces at the iconic Al-Naim square in Raqqa, celebrations across the world ensued. ISIS, the global jihadist caliphate had been defeated. At its peak in 2014, the self-proclaimed Islamic State ruled over approximately nine million people across Syria and Iraq — equal to the entire country of Jordan. The group striking semblance to a nation state as the strongest, best-resourced and most ideologically potent terrorist quasi-state of the post-9/11 era. The organization that had taken the world by storm was going to find that defeating ISIS was to require the coming together of international powers, a multi-pronged military strategy, consistent monetary and on-ground assistance in droves and a concerted effort to understand the dynamics of the terror group that unilaterally declared a state in its name.

Today, its territory is all but gone — According to a June 2017 estimate by IHS Markit, a defense analysis firm, ISIS has lost 60 percent of its territory and a whopping 80 percent of its revenue since January 2015.

Thus, as the defeat of ISIL in Mosul in 2016 and Raqqa in October, 2017 to SDF forces garnered world attention solely by virtue of being the group's first headquarters and strategic capitals, the celebration appears premature. In essence, loss of these territories remains only an emblematic loss of the terror group's capital and strategically, the military defeat in either capitals as key operational centers for the group does not translate into minimizing the group's thriving capacity.

Indeed, studies by defense and security analysts cite that the terror group's operations from the beginning of its establishment and public foray in 2014 have not been conducted from its self-proclaimed capitals from the beginning, ISIS has directed its operations from the rough terrains in the desert between Syria and Iraq. It is now probable that core IS leadership have taken refuge in the sanctity of underground bases and tunnels within these

pockets, that are tough for SDF forces on ground to penetrate and navigate. Revenge operations, therefore, remain imminent and the sharp incline in the frequency of 'lone wolf' attacks in the West and Europe are witness to the return of foreign fighters to their countries of origin and the continuing albeit slow recruitment of new Jihadists. Even today, ISIS militants continue to have the ability to launch suicide bomb attacks in Baghdad and Damascus, with devastating results. Meanwhile, regional branches of the group continue to carry out attacks in Libya and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, despite a sharp decline in funding and morale of the decapitating ISIS force in the Middle East.

This is because despite the existential threat to ISIL's caliphate, defeating its ideology will be much harder. A comeback in a few years' time is wholly likely; ISIS succeeded in doing this before, after being defeated by the US and anti-Isis Sunni Arabs in 2006-08 but returning stronger than ever post 2011 when the political situation in the region favoured it once again.

Essentially, the elevated global appeal of the Islamic State lies in the fact that it is framed as a land you could go to live and thrive, not just somewhere to sacrifice life and body as a martyr. Today, as the ISIL brand loses its edge and depictions of the caliphate 'utopia' have evaporated in its online presence, it is interesting to note that as of November 2017, 92 per cent of its propaganda, literature and soft multimedia power, revolves around war, and war alone.

Experts privy to ISIS dynamics cite that that it is an oversimplification to assume that ISIS has lost its appeal. The Islamic State's media strategy has only shifted. The tactical means to achieve its strategic goals have been recalibrated. Instead of trying to cultivate mass appeal and draw new recruits to the caliphate territories – as it was in 2014, 2015 and, to a slightly lesser extent, 2016 and 2017 – it now appears to be focusing merely on survival.

ISIS is not eliminated, but is in retreat mode.

The stunning reversal of IS caliphate from an invincible quasi-state actor to a new configuration of its power distribution in the form of a resurging insurgency has been witnessed in the rise of asymmetric attacks that have paralyzed the Western and European countries in recent weeks. A majority of these attacks such as the October attack in New York or the London attacks in summer this year, have not been direct orchestrations of the Islamic State fighters but have been plotted and carried out by un-affiliated 'lone wolves' who commit acts of violence alone, without adhering to any command structure or monetary support but are essentially motivated by the established ideology of a terrorist group such as ISIS.

This means that while the crackdown on the caliphate's territorial control has been successful in diminishing the richest terror group in history in both its economic and structural networks, the Islamic State is configuring other ways to persist and evolve; IS leaders have become reliant on untrained, often ill equipped volunteers to take the mantle forward. This seemingly unsophisticated new tactic may prove to have equally dangerous repercussions; a cursory glance at recent lone wolf attackers and their motivations show that this new arsenal of terrorism appears to require minimal motivation and investment, far more difficult to detect compared with the vast cadres of trained militants in sleeper cells who have been forced to retreat into refuge.

This pivots the discussion on two factors;

One, in its consistent appeals to homebased followers in its online magazine, Rumiya, ISIS now puts forwards pleas to increase their activity within their respective states and abandon travel to external regions - proof that the might and capacity of the IS state has been massively effected. Two, for the estimated upwards of 30,000 battle-hardened foreign fighters from over 100 countries who travelled to join the ISIL call in the Syria-Iraq war, returning to their home states amidst high security and monitoring measures and possible

legal repercussions awaiting their return, means that attempting to integrate back into the fold of society is not a viable option.

ISIL leadership appears to trace and mold its responses to these external nuances. Previously, the mass lure of the ISIS campaign has hinged on its expansion and control over territory-- counterterrorist analysts now predict a shift from military operations to ideological warfare. Given that the radicalization of non-IS members through mere online propaganda videos and literature such as the Orlando shooter or the Nice shooting has proven to be successful, it is an alarming notion to consider that it hasn't only been the nation-state identity construct drawn up by ISIL, as is widely believed, that distinguished it from its predecessor movements such as Al-Qaeda or accounted for its global appeal.

ISIS is in fact hinged on intelligent psychological transnational appeal of an idea that has transcended language and socio-political barriers. Recently, ISIL called for its members to individually wage war within their own capacity and means. Its online literature even as early as the **July 2016 edition of Dabiq**, ISIS's English-language propaganda magazine, reflected ISIS quietly shifting priorities to survive and persist rather than confront and wage war, dubbing its 'media operatives' as 'martyrdom seeker(s) without a belt'. In crafting new terminology to communicate with its followers, ISIS can willfully control new interpretations of what it means to be a Jihadist today.

Thus, the slow rise of lone wolf attacks in the face of the Caliphates' wreckage is simultaneous. The aim behind these centrally directed international attacks, such as the ones orchestrated in popular state capitals, such as New York, Paris or Belgium, is to show potential funders and supporters that ISIS is still a successful investment that will remain deadly and relevant despite the loss of territory. An FBI briefing after the New York massacre reiterated what terror experts have been predicting all along-- it is likely that ISIS's territory continues to disappear but these attacks are likely to keep happening and perhaps even escalate.

It is crucial to remember however, that IS's ability to successfully communicate its façade of strength is solely dependent on the reactions it can gain from these attacks from the West. The group's placement as a global pariah to be feared and revered has been directly proportional to how state media and leadership have reacted to it. As long as ISIL can continue to pick up on these subtle external nuances of the changing global dynamics around it, IS in its timely responses to these overtures will always exist head and shoulders above its predecessor terrorist formations.

ISIS Media strategy

A closely linked issue that merits further attention is how the Islamic State's desired ideological trajectory was used to deny reality. It would appear that, in the context of the Islamic State—as in other totalitarian contexts—propaganda is a lens through which to refract undesirable developments such that they satisfy the fancies of true believers rather than derail them. Propaganda becomes, in that sense, more important than reality itself. Notwithstanding the massive losses it faced between 2015 and 2017, the Islamic State was unwavering in denying any communication of its defeat. This is a useful, current, and rare example of wartime totalitarian propaganda that could usefully be scrutinized on a comparative basis.

A better understanding of the online application of insurgent propaganda is crucial, for it lies at the heart of the Islamic State's approach to strategic communication and becomes relevant to a discussion on ISIL's future. As its territories hemorrhaged and its leadership disintegrated, the Islamic State was at pains to prove to supporters that it remained a potent and, broadly speaking, winning force (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016) The Islamic State recalibrated its ideological priorities in order to navigate through the seemingly existential challenges it faced across 2016 and 2017. It is a prudent conversation to engage in for policymakers, as to how insurgent groups have adapted to use their own narrative and propaganda to defend themselves against the very real challenges they face in the physical world.

The Quilliam Foundation. (Winter, C. (2015). pp. 30–37) also presents another interesting insight as to the mass appeal ISIS generated at its peak. In 2014, instead of framing its project with simple brutal militarism, like other Salafi-jihadists, ISIS sought to offer to would-be supporters a lifestyle choice, a utopian alternative and promise which was holistic in its surroundings. Aspects of civilian existence, no matter how mundane—from schooling, street-cleaning, and social welfare to wild bird conservation, fishing excursions, and grape agriculture allowed rapid and steady flow of *Utopia* propaganda, that appealed across gender, nationality, and socioeconomics. However, as the present data demonstrates, this millenarian promise was diluted with time, such that, by early 2017, it was no longer as central to the Islamic State brand as it once was.

Even with its diminished 2017 state, the group was producing hundreds of propaganda products a month for a virtual audience that seemed to be increasingly disengaged. Indeed, much of the time online, its media drifted into almost immediate obscurity, the rate of consumption slowing to a trickle. It is apparent from even a cursory glance at the data that the Islamic State’s media momentum collapsed between late summer 2015 and January 2017

In 2017’s Test archive, though, there were only 463 items of propaganda—in other words, there was a 48 percent drop in productivity from roughly 30 media products a day to just 15.

Notwithstanding this, the propaganda flood was kept up, a result of the fact that for the Islamic State, propaganda is more important as a strategic lever of control within the caliphate itself. Indeed, by 2017, its role in helping to enlist foreign supporters was only a secondary function. Instead, Islamic State in recent months directed its media focus at its close-knit civilian and military supporters in Iraq and Syria more than any other audience (ISIS’s offline propaganda strategy. *The Brookings Institution Markaz*). If one takes this into account, the group’s branding transition from *Utopia* and

towards Warfare over the course of 2016 is more logical, because the latter propaganda is more appropriate for sustaining internal morale than attracting external support.

The Quillam Foundation in its documentation of the “Virtual Caliphate” (2015), indicates that the data produced by the Islamic State brand was markedly less globalized in 2017 than in 2015. In the Control data, there were nearly a thousand propaganda events, originating from no fewer than nine states—in ascending order: Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Iraq. However, its 2017 archive contained a much smaller amount of propaganda, and it originated from only five states—in ascending order: Afghanistan, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. This is particularly important to note because it starkly contrasts with the group’s contemporaneous attempts to establish a more international presence for itself through the direction and inspiration of overseas terrorist operations.

Foreign fighters - Migration and small-scale territorial expansion

Because ISIS was able to peddle its ideology online, its outreach via its readily available multimedia became an invaluable recruitment tool, attracting fighters from across the Middle East and around the world, including Western and European states.

According to reports by the U.S. led coalition military wing fighting ISIS, the anti-ISIS offensives in Syria and Iraq have reduced the organization's ranks of fighting members, with the flow of foreign recruits having gone from about 1,500 fighters a month down to near zero today.

But analysts predict that even with the defeat of ISIS in key Levant territories, a resurgence in recruitment is very likely, especially among those who harbour anti-Western sentiments and the impact of brutal international coalition counterattacks with innumerable civilian deaths and destruction as

well as a population of those angered by the potential demise of an extremist group whose ideology they may not practically follow but sympathize with.

There are indications, including an **assessment by US counter-terrorism officials**, that some foreign fighters will stay in Syria and Iraq. The head of the UK security service MI5 also found that fewer than expected of the 800 Britons who joined IS **returned recently** and many are likely to stay in order to aid IS leadership in morphing into its predicted state of an insurgent force. Out of the few foreign fighters caught, they are being tried in Iraqi courts on terrorism charges creating legal and moral trepidations for their countries of origin.

Many other foreign fighters are choosing to return to their countries of origin. While some returnees may no longer engage in militant activities, others are **establishing clandestine networks** seeking to carry out attacks and, according to local circumstances, destabilise the country's political situation. North African countries are particularly vulnerable to the risk - nowhere more so than Tunisia, as about 6,000 of its citizens left to join IS - the highest per capita rate in the world. Arab Gulf countries may also suffer from this type of blowback

Of the large number of fighters now leaving the "caliphate", the 822km (510 mile) long border between Turkey and Syria has offered a lot of respite, despite Turkey's crackdown on alleged ISIS smuggling networks. But given the mountainous terrains and desert routes surrounding Iraq and Syria and IS's long established, sophisticated underground networks that are hard to locate and even more difficult to permeate, scores of ISIL fighters migrating to neighboring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have been reported. Their intentions upon leaving the Islamic State territory and assimilating in their new environments as they seek hiding from legal charges however are in doubt.

The potential end destinations for foreign fighters leaving Syria and Iraq are plentiful. There is evidence that some have joined the official wilayat, or "provinces", IS has established in **Yemen**, the **Sinai Peninsula**, the **North Caucasus** and **East Asia**. The group also has a strong presence in Libya, where the US suggested last year that it had **up to 6,500 fighters**, and several hundred in Afghanistan, where the US reported **killing at least 94 fighters** in an attack on underground tunnels.

There are also anecdotal indications of militants travelling to conflicts in far flung places such as the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, **Myanmar** and the **Philippines**.

The arrival of foreign fighters in these regions could strengthen the capabilities of local jihadist groups and change the course of sometimes devastating conflicts.

CHANNELING THE RESURGENCE OF IS 2.0

The loss of much of its territory is a major blow to ISIS. The group and its adherents however, are already surfacing in various parts of the world and are likely to do so with even more frequency and vehemence in the near future.

IS will become a more decentralized organisation operating in a more asymmetric fashion, but it will not disappear.

The fall of the "caliphate" closes a chapter, but a new one is about to be opened.

The international coalition has overlooked the recent critical fact that their robust military offensive has not been accompanied by a parallel political effort. There are still deep wells of resentment and fear among Iraqi Sunnis,

and the Syrian civil war grinds on. Thus while the project of constructing an Islamic state has been defeated, the organization has not.

Isis can still do very great harm to Iraq, Syria and the broader region. But can it do similar harm to the West?

A theory posited by a section of security analysts is of the opinion that given that the group has and will continue to pose significant threats to the US, UK and Europe and vulnerable states like Philippines and Afghanistan, most IS affiliated groups find appeal in their immediate environments more than what they could hope to achieve with lone attacks thousands of miles away. It is probable that the threat of 'global jihad' will diminish as a result of the fallen caliphate and attacks on the Western front will diminish in number but will continue by ardent homegrown followers of the original IS brand.

There is also little chance that any other IS province may become a substitute base for the Caliphate. The unique religious and often turbulent and easily exploitable internal domestic situations within Iraq, Syria and much of Levant may not be easy for IS to replicate elsewhere in the world. However, the rise of hyper-religious sectarianism in Central Asia, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan should be cause for concern for policymakers in the region, as many economically impoverished, anti-establishment tribal groups could find a potent friend in the Islamic State as its providers.

The possibility of ISIS inspiring people across the world solely via its online propaganda stream would also be an overestimation. While analysts do believe that IS could effectively exist as a 'virtual caliphate', its ability to offer the same appeal to western recruits as before will be a tough challenge. European security intelligence has debated this issue numerous times but the analysis appears to boil down to the following – the appeal of IS to Western recruits particularly those from bigger cities like London, Birmingham, Antwerp, Paris or Berlin has always found meaning with 'young men of immigrant background with records for petty, and sometimes serious,

crime and a superficial knowledge of the faith they professed to follow.’ It is important to highlight that Isis was able to offer to the younger generation everything a street gang does –status, adventure, prestige and even financial and sexual opportunity – with the added bonus of redemption from past sins and ‘resolution of a complex identity crisis.’

The latter half of 2017 and the dawn of 2018 has stripped ISIL of the possibility of reaching out to the ‘young blood’

High Alert: Europe

A striking admission by the Global Coalition Against Daesh (ISIS), Colonel Ryan Dillon revealed that there is ‘an existing database of 26,000 terrorist fighters which are there to identify and action if they are identified trying to move outside of Iraq and Syria or throughout the world.”

European authorities consider the return of some of the estimated 6,000 European foreign fighters a major security concern. The territorial losses suffered by IS are not likely to affect the operational ability of these largely independent militants.

While many may show no sign of wishing to engage in further violent activities, there remains a valid concern that some may make use of their newly acquired skills. It is plausible that they use their widely established network of contacts and "warrior hero" status among unaffiliated jihad enthusiasts to plan small-scale terrorist attacks. Illegal immigration, such as by posing as refugees fleeing to Europe for refuge has allowed ISIL members in the past to enter territory and carry out attacks, such as the November Paris attacks in 2015.

While European authorities have reportedly upped their intelligence sharing measures with Turkey and Iraq’s government to better detect returning fighters entering their domains, the question remains; what of the Western

or European fighters with legitimate passports and legal entries to their home states?

Not only is detecting them a problem, but configuring a solution to deal with them is equally difficult. Outright arrests in states where due process and proving criminal activity without a shadow of a doubt is the norm, this creates complications for conjuring up actual evidence of a suspected militant's war crimes in a court of law. The UK Home Office for example, in stats released data in early 2017 that of the 400 British foreign fighters who had returned from Syria and Iraq, **only 54 were convicted**. Even if any concrete evidence is brought forth, it is brought in for a minor punishable or non-bailable offense which often means that many of ISIL fighters will only be jailed for five to seven year terms. Upon leaving detention, the chances of a fiercer, resolute and determined comeback by them are plentiful.

Legally, the issue poses a most serious quagmire to lawmakers rather than policy makers in the West to keep up with a constantly shifting threat environment.

Even in November, 2017, news of deals brokered between the establishment forces such as the Syrian Democratic Forces and the IS fighters before the operation of retaking Raqqa meant that a majority of the fighters were allowed to disperse freely, without a due process of justice being initiated against them

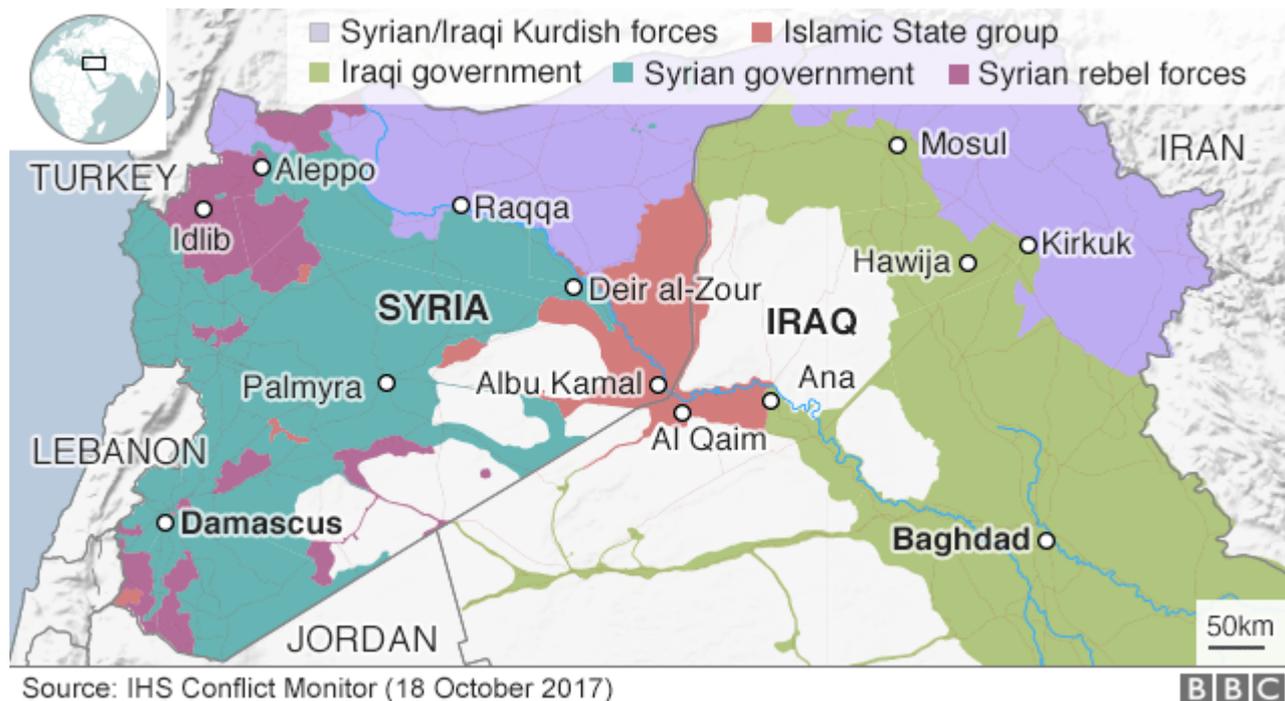
While legislations on criminal offenses vary from country to country, common problems today include the inability to introduce new anti-terrorism laws, which cannot be applied retrospectively. In most countries globally, joining a terrorist organization or partaking in a foreign conflict were not criminal offences at the time the citizens of these states travelled to the Middle East.

Of the returning fighters, even more complex is the issue of their children who were either born or raised in the ISIL 'Caliphate' with their view of the

world and their own place in it i highly eschewed and distorted. These minors are neither punishable under law nor can they be deported, but questions are raised as to what is being done by authorities to cater to their integration and social development once they are brought into the fold of Western society.

As a result, authorities find themselves at a precipice; with a greater inclination of Western populations to pressurize their government to 'do more' in terms of domestic policies and a wave of anti-refugee, anti-foreigner sentiments that have spiraled in states such as Germany and France with increasing momentum-- the hybrid identities of these returning ISIS followers who are neither of the West nor of their former ISIL Caliphate, posits them in a unique light. Their lives must be monitored closely by government agencies and the threat of the burgeoning number of homegrown sympathizers puts many thousands of lives under fear of immediate security threats.

Attempts to de-radicalize these militants by investing in programs to cater to their psychological and mental rehabilitation, as have been set up in Denmark and France and plans to initiate similar models by Canadian PM Justin Trudeau, have met with mixed reviews. A fluid reintegration of battle-hardened Jihadists in modern-day societies is perhaps oversimplifying the task at hand in front of these governments to both curb and alter a terrorist mindset. The appeal of these ideas domestically too remains very low as such measures are increasingly viewed as a compromise on the internal security of state citizens, whose acceptance of a former Jihadist's past will always be an unlikely, when measured against their concern for their own safety and security.



ISIS in the Middle East and Central Asia

The recent military offensive has not been accompanied by a parallel political effort. Resurgence of the seeds of ISIL ideology deeply embedded in war-torn Syria is imminent and with the lackluster approach to peace talks and reconstruction of post-ISIL states or within the deeply sectarian crises of Iraq, there is fear that the root causes that allowed ISIS to spread within the masses, have not been addressed.

Research on the drivers of violent extremism indicates that marginalized segments of the population are particularly vulnerable to the appeal of extremist groups in part because they do not believe that there are viable, nonviolent means of alleviating grievances. The provincial capital is now under the **control** of Hayat Tahrir Al Sham after Ahrar Al Sham withdrew, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The ideology of ISIS will live on-- sustained by the deep sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia in the region, differences deliberately fostered by ISIS massacres over the last three years. Some Sunni Arab youth whom ISIS

took great care to propagandize during its years in power will remain true to its cause. The very fact that so many Sunni majority areas have been occupied by Iraqi and Syrian government troops or militiamen may provoke disaffection among the Sunni population.

History – particularly the exodus of extremists from Afghanistan in the early 1990s and then again in 2002 – suggests that those from across the Islamic world will have a very powerful impact. But so far the much feared wave of violence perpetrated by ISIS veterans returning from the Middle East has not occurred.

In Afghanistan alone between 1996 and 2001, some 10,000 to 20,000 people received jihadist training, many under the guidance of Osama Bin Laden.

After the fall of the Taliban regime, many of those fighters dispersed around the world, taking their radical ideology and knowledge with them.

Jihadists, know perfectly how to adapt to new conditions. They will create new structures and forms of action adapted to their environment, and become increasingly difficult to combat.

Terrorism experts cite that there is still cause for optimism. The three key challenges that undermined the ISIS state-building project also face every other militant group, and always will. Neither veteran jihadis such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, who leads al-Qaida, nor the young blood of ISIL leadership has found a way to overcome them. Any increase in bloody and brutal terrorist activities, as ISIS demonstrated in 2016 and 2017, is often inversely proportional to a terror group's appeal to suddenly disenchanted masses.

If al-Qaida or any other group seized a swath of the Middle East today and attempted to govern it as ISIS did, it would face the same outcome: bloody and expensive failure. And if unilaterally seizing territory is no longer an option, there is need for spectacular terrorism to mobilize and radicalize

followers, which historically as long-term strategy has had some results, but has not proved to be a strategy of sustained efficacy.

History also provides an alternate scenario; The complete elimination of a functional Al Qaeda was heralded by the US after killing bin Laden, but the fragmentation of Al Qaeda led to something worse. There is a pressing need to continually monitor older jihadists from wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq who could return to violence at any time, spurred by the space now open to them after ISIL defeat.

There is always a risk of being one step behind in the war.

Jason Bourke in a recent Guardian article noted the following – “There have been four big waves of Islamist militancy over the past 50 years. The first two – in the late 1970s and early 80s, and then in the early 90s – remained largely limited to the Muslim world. The third and the fourth – from the mid-90s through to 2010, and from then until now – have combined great violence in Muslim-majority countries with a series of spectacular attacks in the west. All four have followed a similar trajectory: a slow, unnoticed period of growth, a spectacular event bringing the new threat to public attention, a phase of brutal struggle, then retreat.”

An eschewed priority for international coalitions has been to focus and concern themselves as the victors of a conflict first while the last phase of a terrorist threat is declining. In demonstrating such behavior, there is an opportunity missed to charter the course of the first phase of any off-shoots of growing threats that may just be beginning.

The twin blasts in Baghdad in the beginning week of January 2018 are testament to the fact that ISIL is likely to worsen violence against civilians in their immediate surrounding regions, in desperate attempts to leave their dying mark behind. It is the targeting of civilians that is a swift measure to undermine security and stability after the recapture of territory – highlighting that the new post-ISIL government still can't protect civilians.

Hence, while the defeat of ISIL's so-called Caliphate is cause for celebration but the imprints of the shoes it leaves behind in its former cities that now stand virtually in rubbles, may not be too hard to fill by any alternate ideology that spearheads civilian frustrations and anger at their new circumstances.

It is far too early to talk about the end of IS - either in Iraq and Syria, or as a "virtual caliphate" - but nor should we ignore the fact that it is reeling

By 2017, a wide number of security analysts and journals predicted the outcome that ISIS at its near-end in the Middle East was now looking to rebrand and establish itself in the Central Asia, areas of the Caucasus, the Arabian Peninsula, northern and sub-Saharan Africa and in Southeast Asia, especially in the southern Philippines. The latest example being the bombing attempt by a Bangladeshi ISIS recruit in New York City. It is interesting to note that up until 2017, Tunisians constituted the single **largest** group of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria, Iraq and Libya and roughly 6,000 Tunisians left home to join the ranks of **ISIS**, the **highest** per capita rate in the world.

A report from the Soufan Group, a security intelligence consultancy based in Washington, D.C finds however that Russia has replaced Tunisia as the top exporter of foreign fighters to the ranks of the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria with upwards to 3200 fighters, according to new figures, followed closely Saudi Arabia—second on the list— Jordan (3,000), Tunisia and France (1910)

While the report concedes that estimates are unlikely to increase because of the heavy military presence in Iraq and Syria, Russian security services have long worried about the threat of returning Russian nationals and citizens from former Soviet, Central Asian republics such as Chechnya and Dagestan.

Given that ISIS has its own affiliate in the Northern Caucasus region, known as the Caucasus Province in the past few years, the advent of these ISIS 'statelets' in foreign countries are reflective of the increased measures taken by the group's leadership to prevent fighters flocking to Iraq and Syria. Pockets of territory, instead have been established via which foreign fighters can operate outside of the group's self-styled caliphate. The report cites Libya, Afghanistan and Southeast Asia—where jihadis holed up in the southern Philippine city of Marawi for five months—as a prime example and while ISIS presence in Libya and Tunisia may have survived the loss of territory on their coasts, it is their permeable borders that ensure that fighters are at liberty to travel back and forth, almost at will, continuously recruiting fighters from neighboring countries.

More potently, as cited in innumerable global analysis of ISIS's resurgence, fingers are being pointed towards a new dawn for ISIS South Asia, where the group has now looked to outsourcing its deadly attacks on the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan to local splinter groups, including the Pakistani Taliban. A 2017 UNSC (http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/573) report finds" that ISIS is vying with the more established Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) for dominance in Afghanistan. But despite its best efforts at recruitment in the past three years and claiming responsibility for a string of high-profile attacks in both countries, It is "a major challenge" for ISIS to expand in a country where the Taliban have been living and fighting for years, often "with the support of [the] tribal system and [shared] ethnic ties with Afghanistan".

A report published by the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) (November,2017) alleged that the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan does not mean that militants from the Middle East have migrated to the land-locked country. The foundation of ISIS in Afghanistan appears to be 'driven by the defections from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other loose Taliban groups [aiming] to rebrand themselves in a successful manner.'

While ISIS lived off of a steady influx of "external support" and financing, its success in the Middle East and particularly its expansion in Syria and Iraq appealed to groups with grievances against sectarian regimes in power, whereas the landscape in Afghanistan is 'totally different.' The reality on ground posits the view that for ISIS to expand its footprints in the Af-Pak region, it would be an uphill battle to unsettle the Taliban who have live and fought in the land for years and are privy to the region's political and social dynamics, with strong alliances in place with tribal systems that allow them to share ethnic ties with Afghanistan. In August 2017, reports from Kabul-based security agencies cited the Afghan Taliban and ISIS militants locked in combat throughout Afghanistan, vying for the ability to extort and plunder the civilian population

ISIS then, merely "comes off as another foreign entity trying to encroach on the Afghan space'

In Pakistan, ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K denoting the ISIS South Asian affiliate) appears to have taken root. Nestled in the mountainous areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, *Khorasan* refers to a centuries-old description of Afghanistan and surrounding areas of Central Asia and Iran, a primer perhaps for the region that ISIS now eyes for its next pool of recruits and a region where it has already intensified its recruiting drive and terror attacks nationwide. ISIS in South Asia then, is a new entrant in an already overcrowded terrorism theatre and resultantly, has not found it easy to make institutionalized inroads as it did in Iraq and Syria.

Many security analysts concur that Pakistan, a country with an unprecedented youth bulge, could be a massive recruitment pool for ISIS. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy alleged in a recent 2017 report that TTP, the strongest al-Qaeda-linked non-state actor in Pakistan, has been careful in its relationship with and treatment of ISIS. While some factions have decided to remain closer to al-Qaeda, other factions such as the Islamic Union of Uzbekistan (IMU), which shifted from tribal areas of Pakistan to the Nangarhar province in Afghanistan, have pledged allegiance to ISIS. This outcome, in particular, stems from the wrath of the Afghan Taliban, which launched a major offensive encompassing several eastern Afghan provinces, effectively wiping out most of IMU's cadre. Likewise, the Afghan Taliban's onslaught against ISIS in these eastern provinces - coupled with US and Afghan forces' retaliatory airstrikes and military operations after the July 2017 Kabul suicide attack - significantly weakened ISIS in Afghanistan.

Counterterrorism specialists allege that ISIS will probably attempt to invest in its network in Pakistani cities. ISIS claimed the deadly August 9 suicide attack in Quetta that killed 70, and a December Christmas attack on Pakistan's Christian community, indicating that they are trying to make a strong public impression. Although ISIS may be suffering due to the military operations on

both sides of the borders, it will attempt to capitalize on ‘an enormous potential recruitment pool: ‘Pakistani Islamist groups’ that seem to be slowly integrating into Pakistan’s domestic political fold. The report concludes with a harrowing prediction, one voiced by many political observers in the region; that despite a severe crackdown by Pakistani government on any potential ISIL cells and alliances operating, ISIS’ network in Pakistan will continue to grow in the near future at a steady rate.

Looking towards solutions

What will change for Isis under the new configuration of power distribution in north-eastern Syria are the tactics it will use. With the group losing urban territory, it is moving increasingly in the direction of becoming an insurgency. Asymmetric attacks are likely to increase in frequency in areas that ISIS has now lost. After all, ISIS came into existence partly because of social, economic and political grievances that pushed people in its direction, either because they thought it would be a better alternative to their rulers or because they sought in it a way to exact revenge on those rulers. This underlines the importance of not focusing too narrowly on the military defeat of ISIS in Raqqa as the indicator of survival for this group.

Above all else, the social, economic and political dynamics on the ground in Raqqa and other areas that have been won back from ISIS will play an important role in determining whether there will be resurgence for the group or others like it in future.

Governments around the world are asking about the completeness and permanence of the victory over ISIS and whether the movement will try to demonstrate that it is undefeated by stepping up terror attacks abroad. Even if the role of ISIS in these atrocities is by way of inspiration rather than

organization-- they keep its name in the news and show that it still has followers willing to die for its beliefs.

While ISIS so far has managed to retain its power hierarchy and direct its activities from the top, the increasing pace of moving towards an insurgency model, means that it is likely that ISIS will transform and give birth to different offshoots. Foreign fighters who have nowhere to go outside Syria and Iraq are likely to remain attracted to whatever group they can pragmatically join.

This scenario is reminiscent of the evolution of al-Qaeda, where the organisation set up franchises in different locations, each with their own set of priorities. And like al-Qaeda before it, ISIS is also likely to step up activating its supporters around the world to engage in opportunistic attacks as a way to assert its presence. This becomes increasingly likely since ISIS has often used such opportunistic attacks as a way to compensate for loss of territory in Iraq and Syria.

In Iraq, the success of ISIS can be directly tied to the marginalization of the country's Sunni population. With the defeat of ISIS in Iraq, it is crucial that the coalition powers now help key provinces previously under its control to build more inclusive, effective governing institutions that are driven by the needs and aspirations of the Iraqi people, and not external actors seeking to expand their influence or regional hegemony. In Libya, effective governance by municipal councils is making communities more resilient to groups like ISIS even in the face of continued political discord at the national level.

In America, if President Trump overreacts by singling out Muslims for discriminatory policies, or if there are a wave of anti-Muslim hate crimes across the US, ISIS will have new fuel for its narrative that the West and Islam are incompatible.

A more measured response, experts say, is more likely to defuse ISIS's strength in the long term than any crackdown. The group's new strategy can be more effectively countered by continuing to quietly roll back the group's territorial holdings and using normal law enforcement mechanisms to arrest its sympathizers than by harsh new immigration policies and civil liberty restrictions.

Washington and its coalition partners could have marginally accelerated that struggle by taking a less incremental approach to counter-ISIS military operations from June 2014 onward, but by then ISIS's rise was a fact to be dealt with rather than an eventuality to be averted.

By supporting legitimate governance that responds to citizens' needs and provides effective mechanisms for debate, decision making, and conflict resolution, democracy and governance assistance helps countries emerge from conflict and prevents extremist groups from further undermining weak governing systems.

Ultimately, lasting stability must be driven from the ground up rather than the top down. By pursuing a smart foreign assistance approach that supports citizens in the development of representative and accountable institutions, we can help countries build resilience to violent extremism, and in doing so, create a more stable region consistent with interests of all stakeholders.