After Islamic State: Understanding the End of the Caliphate

WORKSHOP REPORT I

MAY 2017

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This report is the product of a CREST workshop held in October 2016. The workshop was hosted by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office and convened by Dr Cerwyn Moore, a CREST programme lead based at the University of Birmingham.

The workshop was the first of a series addressing the potential implications of the demise of Islamic State's (hereafter: IS) territory in Syria and Iraq. It brought together leading academics from around the globe to address these issues.

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IRAN AND SHI'ISM - MICHAEL AXWORTHY

Despite perceptions to the contrary, Iran is not set up for an expansionist adventure into Syria. Defence spending is currently low and the leadership are aware they siding with a minority in a sectarian conflict. An essential component for understanding Iranian thinking is the influence of the collective memory of the Iran-Iran war. The national psyche, is profoundly shaped by the death and suffering sustained during this conflict. This extends to the current regime.

One juncture in the war is particularly important for understanding the current situation. In 1982, Iran had managed to retake key losses, including the city of Khorramshahr, by successfully using 'human wave' tactics. Iran had the opportunity to negotiate a ceasefire but chose not to. There is now considerable debate and dispute over who advocated for continuing the conflict. The decision to do so is now seen as a mistake, the most damaging ever made, by most Iranians including those within the regime, given the costly losses incurred thereafter. As a result, post-1982 Iranian volunteers are less keen to extend further than defending Iranian soil. So for the Iranian Regime the lesson of 1982 is still extremely important and this explains their cautious approach.

From this viewpoint, the current situation provides opportunities but also danger for Iran. There is also unease regarding the alliance with Russia; Russian use of Iranian bases and the launch of Russian cruise missiles across Iranian territory have done nothing to decrease historical Iranian distrust of Russia. Iran is not well loved by the Shi'a communities in Iraq. Instead these communities have only turned to Iran for support because of a lack of other options. Whilst Iran is glad to see the downfall of IS they are still fearful for the future. In particular, they fear the potential bitterness of the Sunni community could leave room for al-Qaeda to exploit.

In conclusion, Iran is cautiously looking to assure its interests rather than seeking to achieve regional hegemony. Whilst the defeat of IS is welcomed, there is still significant fear that a new organisation will take its place through harnessing ongoing discontent.

Q&A

How will Iran's caution and defensive external posture affect Hezbollah and the other Shi'a militias it supports? Is support likely to decrease as the threat from IS does?

Would expect these relationships to continue as the Iranians see them as necessary to protect national and Shi'a interests. If Iraqi Shi'a communities find their security situation improving they may distance themselves from Iran. These communities would be very happy to do so given the right circumstances.

Will Iran impact upon the processes of reforming the Iraqi government?

It is hoped that Iran will help both publicly and privately, as a stable Iraq is in their interest. However, it is likely that the regime would back a strong, pro-Iran, Shi'a candidate in the event of one emerging. In any event Iran is likely to defer to the will and views of Iraqi Shi'as.

IRAQ - CHARLES TRIPP

Given the multitude of competing narratives in Iraq, it is important to consider what made IS' ideology resonate and become actionable with various different partisan elements. Intolerance and violence are not unique to a particular group, but rather the environment where violence is often used to distinguish oneself from 'the other' may be. IS is therefore not dissimilar to other players in Iraq including the government.

IS leaders have however, managed to draw together a broad range of interests since at least 2010. Whilst they don't all agree, the fact that IS has managed to unite them is still significant. Included are former Ba'athist officers who have influenced IS' vision of how the caliphate and combat forces should be organised. There are also members of various 'tribal groupings' or imagined communities that at certain points have committed massacres against and been the victims of massacres from other groups. In this way, another level of politics exists in Iraqi society. Whilst some of these individuals fought against both US forces and al-Qaeda (AQ) at different times they are still not all 'true believers' in regard to IS' ideology.

IS has also attracted opportunists and chancers from the criminal or semi-criminal class. As a result, many of those who took over Mosul had already been there for the previous 3 or 4 years and were already accustomed to violence. It is questionable whether these individuals will really sacrifice their lives to defend Mosul. Similarly, foreign fighters are not always 100 per cent certain of their commitment to IS and there are those for whom the reality does not match up to the vision they have been sold. When outside backers are added to the equation, the broader picture of the IS organisation is one that is both fractured and complex.

There is also something of a crisis of the 'Sunni community' in the sense that there has never been such a 'community', previously there was no need for it. However, with the development of sectarianism and sectarian conflict, particularly after 2003, there is currently exactly such a requirement. In this way, IS and AQ come out of efforts by many Sunnis to define who they are. As part of this, there is also an ongoing crisis of governmental authority. It is very easy to represent the government as a Shi'i regime and puppet of Iran even if it is not. As such, there is considerable feeling within the Sunni community that Sunni orthodoxy is under threat because of a predatory government. There are also communities of sedition, whole areas of the country that did not buy into the reconstruction of the Iraqi state. As a result, they have been subject to structural deprivation and exclusion. Corruption is rampant with those who try to expose this corruption, such as investigative journalists, targeted. In Iraqi society a common notion is that all internal actors are working for someone else.

The result is a huge space for 'identity entrepreneurs' to claim that they represent various communities best. Violence has become a way of defining yourself from 'the other'. The result is ambivalence to the violence that has been perpetrated against all communities. IS' violence then is not beyond the moral economy of what has already become the norm in Iraq. Violence is also not solely undertaken for political reasons. Criminal smuggling networks now rely on it for the

continuation of their operations.

There are three implications for post-IS Iraq. First, the elements that made up IS will persist as they are integral to Iraqi society and are often called forth by the nature of the Iraqi state. The ideology of these individuals will remain the same, meaning there will be some form of continuity. Second, governance of the state itself is unlikely to undergo any systemic changes. Driving out IS may make conditions worse as others look to maintain their positions by force. Finally, conflicts may shift elsewhere, to other political clashes and tensions. In particular, there is likely to be conflict between the Kurds and the Baghdad government and between central and provincial authorities. The result will be further mass demonstrations.

Q&A

Are there any realistic means to prevent a resurgence of the conditions that gave birth to IS?

Any such means will have to address the issue of the structures of power in Iraq and the landscape of Iraqi politics. In particular, there is need for reforms and for the means to crack down on corruption. However, in the past, any demonstrations have been violently put down. There are a number of well-intentioned groups pushing for reform but they have simply not been able to overcome the ways power is concentrated in Iraq.

Is Haider al-Abadi serious about reconciliation?

There is a sense that he is interested in reconciliation. In practical terms he realises that without wider support he is a hostage to Shi'i politics. However, to be pragmatic and win this support is difficult when his identity as a Shi'i leader and the Shi'i majority are seen as the problem. Any good intentions on his behalf may also disappear should his position become more secure.

Has violence been normalised historically or is this a relatively recent political culture?

The events of 1958 coup in Iraq may have appeared violent but few people were actually killed. The resulting trials were also mainly for show with the executions of many of those condemned to death not actually being carried out. As such, there is not a culture of violence, but there is currently a period when violence is tolerated. The moral economy of violence in Iraq has always fused blood feuds will tribalism. However, the violence has never been historically used in the same ways as we are seeing in its modern iterations. After 2003 the potential for violence is always there because of the amount of weaponry available. Events have then made this violence realisable and systematically effective.

JORDAN - JOAS WAGEMAKERS

By conservative estimates 2,000 individuals have travelled to Syria from Jordan, of which 300 have been killed. In terms of raw numbers, this makes Jordan the second largest Arab country sending fighters to IS. Initially most joined Jabhat al-Nusra but partly for geographic reasons more are now joining the Islamic State. Jabhat al-Nusra enjoyed a strong presence near Syria's southern border with Jordan but the Jordanian government has now sealed off this crossing point. Instead, most Jordanian recruits now transit into Syria via Turkey and as a result IS are the first group they encounter. This highlights that practical concerns as well as ideological considerations are key in determining the groups that individuals join.

Whilst the Jordanian regime has now closed the border with Syria it was slow to do so. Initially the government was happy to allow these individuals to leave. However, restrictive new anti-terror legislation has been introduced including longer sentences for those caught attempting to cross the border and the prosecution of family members who try to go with them. There have also been an increasing number of arrests of IS supporters internally, particularly since IS' high profile execution of a Jordanian fighter pilot. A number of religious measures have also been undertaken to promote 'moderate' Islam. The King and Queen in particular have played a role in advocating 'the true spirit of Islam'. Friday sermons have also been monitored and some mosques closed.

Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi has explained at great length what a 'perfect jihad' looks like. Jihad must be legitimate according to the shari'a (i.e., not against civilians) and done under the Jihadi-Salafi banner. Critically, Jihad must be effective and not wasteful. As a result, suicide bombings are permissible but only when they are effective. Jihad then must be a means to an end and not a means in itself.

The rivalry between al-Maqdisi's scholar-led jihad and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's fighter-driven, active-warfare approach, remains central in Jordanian Jihadi-Salafi thinking. IS is firmly the heir to al-Zarqawi's jihad. Al-Maqdisi has argued that whilst IS' success may have offered a genuine chance to set up an Islamic state, the extreme violence of the group is 'illegitimate' He has therefore portrayed IS as an organisation of zealous youngsters who only care about blowing themselves up. According to him, these policies will cause the downfall of the wider jihadi movement and are irresponsible even if they are legitimate. Al-Maqdisi for example, sees the 9/11 attacks as an unwise endeavour for the long-term future of the jihadi movement. Instead he advocates 'moderate' Jihadi-Salafism. As such, there is a greater propensity in Jordan to weigh the cost verses the benefit of any action. In this regard, the actions of IS are seen as not very pragmatic.

Competition between al-Qaeda and IS has also caused divisions within Jordanian Jihadi-Salafis. A number of preachers critical of IS have been beaten up and families are divided along IS and Jabhat Fath al-Sham lines. However, no senior Jihadi-Salafis or scholars have come out in support of IS. As a result, these individuals have been portrayed as 'armchair jihadis' who are happy to let others do the fighting. Despite al-Maqdisi admitting that he is a poor fighter, not that he has ever done much fighting; he still remains an easy figure to criticise as a result.

In terms of the situation in Jordan after IS' defeat in Iraq and Syria, AQ holds the best cards. Unlike IS, AQ has the deepest roots and the support of prominent scholars and backers. This, along with the fact that many IS backers have already travelled to Syria, explains why IS has suffered harsh criticism and been branded as a 'foreign' problem. The underlying political, economic and social conditions that have fuelled IS' rise will also remain. There is little prospect of governmental reform with the economy remaining weak and corruption widespread. Jordan also has to deal with the one million refugees it has taken in from Syria.

In conclusion, Jordanians have joined the Syrian jihad, primarily IS, in almost record numbers. In response, the regime has cracked down on IS with a number of military, religious and legal measures. However, without political change, domestic radicalisation, even after IS' eventual downfall, will continue. Debate over whether IS offers an opportunity to engage in a 'perfect jihad' has also caused significant divisions among Jordanian jihadis. In the long run, though, it appears the ultimate beneficiaries will be al-Qaeda supporters in Jordan and affiliated groups in Syria.

Q&A
What has the Jordanian state's response been to individuals returning from Syria?
The government's only real response to returnees has been arrest and imprisonment. This has extended to those who have travelled but have not engaged in violence, such as the family members of fighters. There have been no efforts at de-radicalisation similar to those in other countries such as Saudi Arabia. The reason for this is twofold. First, there is a lack of money available to do so. Second, anything that could appear to be a soft approach may be hard for the public to swallow after IS' graphic execution of the Jordanian fighter pilot.

Why have there been relatively few attacks in Jordan given its location and internal radical element?
Whilst there have been threats against Jordan there are several reasons that these have failed to materialise. First, Jordan is not viewed at the forefront of coalition against IS with little PR value in conducting attacks there. The King is also a Sunni Muslim at the very least. Other countries present more attractive options for attacks. In addition, those who have left for Syria are very careful to avoid anything that could invite a backlash, which threatens the Jordanian Jihadi-Salafi community. Many Jordanian scholars have the ears of the leaders of groups in Syria. Al-Maqdisi, for example has direct contact with the appointed mufti of Jabhat Fath al-Sham.

Have pro-IS scholars played up the effectiveness of IS' approach?
These figures have played up their success of putting into place something that AQ scholars have only talked about. This is also accompanied by apparent religious justifications from the Qur'an. However, the fruitfulness of IS' approach boils down to questions of what the aims of Jihad are – killing unbelievers (IS' approach) verses establishing a genuine Islamic state that is viable in the long term (AQ's reasoning).

ZAWAHIRI AND AL-QAEDA - DONALD HOLBROOK

With the collapse of IS' caliphate, Ayman al-Zawahiri has sought to use his public rhetoric to capitalise on this situation for al-Qaeda's benefit. In this narrative, Zawahiri refers to himself as a lover of knowledge but not a scholar. Instead, he has attempted to portray himself as a fighter and a thinker, prolific in both political activism and militancy. In his many works, he touches on legitimacy and unsustainability as the boundaries of the use of violence. In the last five years since June 2011 Zawahiri has produced some 70 statements and publications.

The thrust of his master narrative in this period has been threefold:

A. SUCCESSION

In presenting himself as the heir to the allegiance pledged to Osama Bin Laden and the Afghan 'Islamic Emirate', Zawahiri has painted IS leaders as oath breakers acting without legitimacy. He is especially critical of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for convincing others to break oaths. Zawahiri is then prepping ground for these networks to remain aligned to AQ after the downfall of IS.

B. MOMENTUM

In presenting AQ's continuing relevance Zawahiri has reframed AQ as a social movement that inspires acts of violence rather than a more tangible operational command responsible for directing attacks. This reframing has two further components. First, in Zawahiri's message to Western audiences he claims that AQ continue to inspire attacks. In this way, AQ's messages are not significantly different to IS' appeals to the West. Second, IS members are cast as modern day Kharijites. Whilst Syria still provides the best option for creating an Islamic state, the IS model is unsustainable. Instead Jabhat al-Nusra provides a viable alternative that will triumph in the long run.

C. CONTINUITY OF THE AQ MODEL

Finally, Zawahiri puts forward a number of 'general guidelines for the jihadi activities'. These outline how Jihad should be conducted in a way that builds on AQ's model, which retains the support of local constituents. In stark contrast to IS documents, sustainability is a key concern here. All of these frames try to appeal to middle constituents and portray IS as occupying the extremist fringe. This is a long-standing issue with Zawahiri and he harks back to his efforts to reign in Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq.

There has been acknowledgement internally within AQ that its use of violence has often gone too far. This is also a problem with the allegiance system with limited means to control what affiliated groups do. However, in this sense, IS' violent actions are useful for promoting Zawahiri's ideas of restrain. They present an external actor to chastise for being too extreme rather than having to criticise and potentially damage relations with an affiliated group when they go too far. Zawahiri makes clear that the purpose of any violence should always be questioned.

Q&A

Has Zawahiri generally changed his views or has there always been a moderate element that is now only fully emerging?

In terms of a longitudinal analysis, there is a sense of change in Zawahiri's views. The use of violence is certainly something he has pondered a lot. In his publications circa 2004 there was certainly more of an appetite for violence. By 2013 there is something of a come down in this rhetoric with a careful tone, caveats and questions about the purpose of violence. At this point he is also taking significant advice from scholars. In all of Zawahiri's public rhetoric it is questions regarding the legitimacy of violence where his thinking appears has changed the most.

At what point do coalition air strikes against AQ leaders circumvent this ideological injunction to engage in indiscriminate violence?

Whether these leaders will live by what they say is contentious, especially if local circumstances become unfavourable. The reasons for attacking will likely be collaborative though rather than a sectarian issue alone. We have seen AQ go back on such pronouncements and they will do the same if necessity dictates.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

In discussing the response of different governments regarding citizens from their countries travelling to Syria, it is clear that there are similarities in the policies employed elsewhere. In particular, the Russian and initial Jordanian approach to 'opening the door' for these individuals to leave for Syria.

Research on Chechnya and the North Caucasus has also highlighted that we need to be very careful in how we look at so-called 'foreign fighters'. This label often obscures the dual roles these individuals often occupy as well as their diverse motivations. Syria mirrors the North Caucasus in the sense that it is a conflict including with groups bases around ethnic lines and languages. However, actors still move between groups. As Russia 'drained the swamp' in Chechnya foreign fighters then moved to Ingushetia and Dagestan. A number of these foreign fighters stood out due to their Arabic appearance. The most enduring were those who could blend in such as Jordanian-Chechens and Turkish-Chechens. By marrying into local communities these individuals also increased their resilience to Russian efforts.

In regard to Syria, Russia's approach has merged short-term opportunism as part of longer game in supporting the Assad regime. From their perspective, the conflict is centrally an issue of sovereignty. As a result, we may see Russia engage elsewhere such as Central Asia.

A large number of individuals have travelled from Tunisia to join IS, which presents two main points of interest. First, in Tunisia both legal and illegal migration has become a common route of escape from poverty. Joining groups such as IS then feeds into wider ideas of finding a better life elsewhere and a place in the world. For the disempowered, especially in Tunisia, violence becomes a means of empowerment. Second, after the revolution, the Islamist coalition had to balance a broad spectrum of interests ranging from secularists to these who want an Islamic state. As such, the Ministry of Interior was happy to facilitate the travel of a lot of these more radical Islamists to Syria. It is important then to remember that there are many push as well as pull factors to consider. Social, economic and political inequalities will remain after the demise of IS. As such, violence will remain a part of real or imaged empowerment for those on the lowest rung of society.

Members of the Jihadi-Salafi movement face some soul-searching and a difficult choice in future to decide whether to recognise or reject that IS was ever a part of their movement. AQ supporters must decide whether to shame those who sided with IS or instead treat them as misguided prodigal sons who can be brought back into the fold. In addition, the personal dimension will likely mean that ex-IS supporters will not readily take chastisement from figures such as al-Maqdisi even if they admit they were wrong in backing IS. However, figures such as Abu Qatada al-Filastini are of greater use outside of prison, as assets to criticise IS.

Much strength of IS has been in its prestige. With its demise in Iraq a similar reverse in Syria can only be envisioned. The underlying conditions for the creation of IS will continue to exist, in particular the poor governance and injustice that has led some people has to resort to IS as a last resort. IS

and jihadi groups are very well versed in reaching to those who are disadvantaged. Any long-term solution will have to address these issues otherwise another group may take the place of IS.

Q&A

Where does the ideological movement that has so bought into IS' state building efforts go if this project cannot be successfully undertaken in Iraq and Syria? Will they attempt such undertaking elsewhere?

It was always a grandiose notion to try and rebuild the Caliphate. In light of IS' downfall, ideas regarding the near and far enemy may reappear as groups focus on their local conditions but still try to appeal to supporters in the West. As such, the far enemy will still retain importance at the symbolic level and is still very much part of the plan. The visible effect of violence may create fear within Western publics but this violence is at the same time very polarising internally within the jihadi movement. We only have to look back to recent history for example of the fierce competition between jihadi groups in the period immediately preceding the emergence of AQ.

If it is Western-backed Kurdish forces who push IS out of Iraq will there be a sense that the Iraqi government has been further disempowered?

The government in Iraq is already viewed as a 'Shi'a-Western' coalition within the Sunni-Arab community. The involvement of the West then provides someone to blame for civilian deaths and refugees and fits very well into existing narratives. Sunni Muslims in Iraq do perceive themselves as unfairly treated and even if this is not born out in reality, these people still genuinely feel it.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

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Michael Axworthy is a Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. Before becoming an academic Michael held the post of Head of the Iran Section, in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), from 1998-2000. He left the FCO in 2000. He frequently writes on contemporary Iran and Shi'ism. His books include authored *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran* (Hurst Books, 2007), *Revolutionary Iran* (Penguin Books, 2014) and *Iran: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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AFTER ISLAMIC STATE

This report was produced out of CREST's Actors and Narratives programme.This Programme examines the narratives of people who get involved in, and disengage from, terrorism. It is led by Dr Cerwyn Moore at the University of Birmingham.

This series of reports addresses the issues that arise as Islamic State's territory declines. They draw on a series of seminars that pulled together international experts to address the regional, ideological and strategic challenges of life after the Islamic State.

Some of these presentations are also available in *CREST Security Review*, Issue 4 – 'After Islamic State' which is available from the CREST website here: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/csr/

The second report, *After Islamic State: Workshop Report II,* highlighted Russia and Yemen with a special focus on foreign fighters.

The third report, *After Islamic State: Workshop Report III,* examines Tunisia, Afghanistan as well highlighting militant ideology, militant mobilisation and building a caliphate.

The fourth report, *After Islamic State: Workshop Report IV,* looks at how losing territory effects IS's ideology, with a special focus on Algeria and jihadi culture.
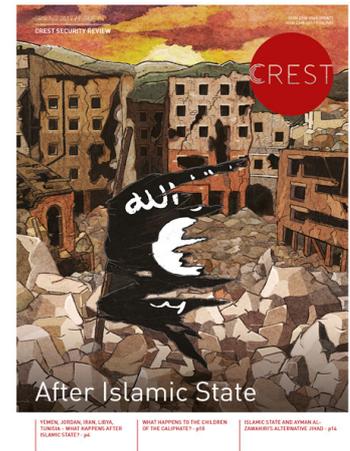
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