After Islamic State: Understanding the End of the Caliphate

WORKSHOP REPORT IV

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This report is the product of a CREST-funded workshop. The workshop was convened by Dr Cerwyn Moore, a CREST Researcher based at the University of Birmingham.

The workshop was the fourth in 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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HOW LOSING TERRITORY EFFECTS IS'S IDEOLOGY - DR NELLY LAHOUD

The Islamic State (IS) has distinguished itself from other jihadi groups by capturing and governing territory. A number of questions about the group's long-term prospects arise then as it continues to lose territories.

To start with, how will territorial losses affect IS' ideological narrative? The leaders of the group promoted their proclaimed caliphate on the basis that it has acquired *tamkin* (territorial strength) because it is the outcome of God's Promise (Q.24:55). Accordingly, IS' legitimacy is firmly premised on territorial strengths.

Further, in a clearly orchestrated move, in November 2014, IS received and accepted pledges of allegiance, or *bay'ah*, from a number of jihadi groups located outside of Iraq and Syria. These groups were proclaimed as *wilayat*, or official IS provinces. The move was designed to mark IS' global reach. As success on the battlefield seemed to demonstrate, in the minds of some, the realisation of the divine promise, fighters from around the world were attracted to IS' burgeoning 'state'.

However, IS' military successes peaked less than a year after the proclamation of a universal Islamic state. In response to its losses, al-'Adnani crafted a narrative that shifted the parameters of defeat. He acknowledged that the group may return to 'roam in the desert', a reference to the stateless status its parent group, the Islamic State of Iraq, had met in 2007/2008. According to this new narrative, defeat will only come when the faithful lose the desire to fight and the Qur'an has been removed from the heart of all Muslims.

Notwithstanding the shifting narrative, the deaths of IS leaders and its ongoing territorial losses have undermined the legitimacy of the group as God's Promise. This has weakened the appeal of the group, which is reflected in the reduction of foreign fighters seeking to join.

However, it would be prudent not to exaggerate the demise of IS. The group will retain some degree of resilience for two reasons. The first, is the ongoing failure to achieve a political solution in Iraq. The conditions that gave birth to IS persist. Second, a question remains as to whether IS' provinces could sustain the group in future.

IS' process for proclaiming provinces is centralised and therefore all provinces and areas where 'soldiers of the caliphate' are referred to in IS media, e.g., Philippines, Somalia, remain in the 'official' orbit of IS. The emergence of these groups is not organic to IS core and their fate is therefore not dependent on IS's losses. In other words, the survival of its *wilayat* is also not dependant on IS' success in Iraq and Syria because they remain localised entities and their identities are not intrinsically linked to this territory. However, its provinces have not held territory in a significant manner. The challenge that arises out of these provinces is whether they will seek either to impress IS leaders and begin competing with each other. Such attempts would require the provinces to escalate their attacks, not just in their own regions, but also to mount attacks outside their regions, especially in the West. In doing so, their credentials as global groups would be strengthened.

For the international community, the challenge that jihadism presents is not its ability to win, rather the challenge is its inability to win. An aversion to any form of compromise from IS' leadership means that violent internal disagreements will occur. Dissident elements will necessarily be more violent and radical to eclipse their parent organisation, just as IS attempted to eclipse al-Qaeda (AQ) through the same means. From an analytical angle, violence is oxygen for new groups. Whilst IS' *wilayat* are likely to stay localised, if groups do want to outbid each other they need to carry out attacks on a global stage.

Q&A

Are there any differences in how IS is understood and interpreted by the Arab fighting community and fighters from elsewhere, in particular the IS' apocalyptic dimension of IS' ideology?

The apocalyptic element in IS' thinking is not as central as it is made out to be. In its Arabic statements and publications references are minor and not central to the group's message. In Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular, there is more interest in this element, and scholars of Indonesian jihadism have discussed this. However, in terms of other issues, recent official releases also show internal debates and disagreements. The issue of *takfir* demonstrates that there are some pragmatic elements within IS and the dispute has escalated to the extent that a number of *takfiri* ideologues have been eliminated.

Do variances, such as the use of female suicide bombers by ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) for example, demonstrate a lack of control from the central IS organisation over its wilayat? Will some of these provinces also retract their pledges of bay'ah if funding and support from IS dries up?

There is a distinction between female combatants and female suicide bombers. Jihadi groups have not made it lawful for women to partake in combat, arguing that women need to be accompanied by a *mahram*, a male relative (such as brother, father or husband). But jihadis have not objected to the use of female suicide bombers to the same degree, because they can marry the women before the operation, if need be.

In terms of the likelihood of different provinces defecting, the answer probably depends on the extent to which IS funding was responsible for facilitating their activities. There are groups who would still want to remain aligned with IS even without funding because the IS brand is the most important factor that such allegiance brings. The prospect of a *wilayat* attempting to rescind its *bay'ah* is very exciting from an Islamic legal standpoint. Would others follow? It would be very interesting from a political theory point of view, especially if a notable scholar gives support to this withdrawal. However, as stated, if IS' provinces do want to compete, they will seek to demonstrate their credentials by outbidding one another through even more violent attacks on the global stage.

If one of IS' provinces, such as its Libyan wilayat, tried to sell itself as a better base for the IS leadership than Iraq or Syria, would IS retain the same appeal to fighters and supporters globally if it did make such a move?

During the battle of Mosul, al-Baghdadi called on supporters to give their backing to IS' provinces. If he is still alive, we are unlikely to see further public appearances from him in Iraq and Syria because of security concerns. Somewhere like Libya could then prove attractive. It would not trouble al-Baghdadi if he were in Libya, nor would it significantly impact on the credibility of the group.

Does territory in Iraq and Syria hold special symbolism for IS?

The leader needs to be from Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet. Whilst there is some relevance to holding on to Iraqi and Syrian soil, the greater symbolism is that the group lost and its narrative was premised on its ability to win territory and to show that God's promise has been fulfilled. This can be directed from anywhere and IS can always promise that they will again come back from the desert and reclaim this territory.

Given the continuing reports of al-Baghdadi's death, would it not be beneficial for him to provide at least some proof of life, if not be more visible?

Al-Baghdadi only needs to be visible for people to pledge allegiance to him rather than at all times. IS' supporters understand the security concerns around him. It would certainly be good for morale if al-Baghdadi could make appearances. However, the real problem is if there is a need to appoint a successor, there is a legal obligation to appear publically for existing pledges to be renewed and new pledges taken. If he is in fact dead, sometimes the group does not immediately acknowledge that a person has been killed, as was the case with Abu Omar al-Shishani. (Note: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gave an audio statement in the last week 2017 proving that he was still alive at that point).

Has IS' online presence been impacted by its territorial losses?

IS' online presence has been affected. The group has always sought to have outputs in different languages with some publications written and released in non-Arabic first and only then later translated into Arabic. However, as IS has found its territory degraded, the richness of its non-Arabic publications, especially its English language magazines, have declined. Many articles are now simply translated copies of older pieces first published in Arabic issues rather than original content. IS has also asked its soldiers not to use social media. Having fighters posting online risks further instances of internal differences being made public.

What does losing not only territory, but also the argument with al-Qaeda regarding the appropriateness of establishing a state, mean for relations between the two groups?

In understanding IS' appearance as a caliphate, it should be recognised that the group does not want to be a state in the sense of being a player in the international system. Rather, the whole exercise was intended as a means to upstage and oust al-Qaeda as the de facto leader of the global Jihadi movement. For all of its apparent successes, as compared to AQ, IS has not been able to get any of

the groups who pledged *bay'ah* to AQ to transfer their pledge. Even where IS has made significant public overtures to groups, such as it has done with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabaab, this has still not taken place.

In response to the challenge of IS, AQ has tried to publically belittle IS' leadership. AQ can now build a narrative framing itself as the underdog and IS as the bully who has had their day. Many of the AQ leadership who had been detained in Iran now want to continue their struggle. Bin Laden's son, Hamza, has released several powerful and articulate public statements, although they have not generated much attention. Former AQ military commander, Saif al Adel, who may prove a more engaging and charismatic public figure than Ayman al-Zawahiri, has also been reportedly released by the Iranian regime.

Much however depends on AQ's remaining capacity, particularly its finances. AQ has always looked to carry out grand scale attacks in the West and they are unlikely to want to carry out operations on a similar small scale to those recently carried out under the banner of IS. The AQ network endures, and will do so in the future, although it may have less capability to act in the operational manner it desires.

LESSONS FROM ALGERIA - DR JAMES MCDOUGALL

The presentation focused on the fallout of jihadi violence as the Algerian conflict wound down in the 1990s and the extent to which this may provide examples for what may happen in Iraq and Syria. Like Syria and Iraq, the Algerian conflict was also the result of the sudden crisis of an authoritarian state. Algerian jihadism, however, has always had a strong nationalist dimension. The narrative it advanced spoke of a nation state that had gone astray and Algerian Islamism in the early 1990s attempted to claim the inheritance of the revolution against the French. Only after 2001, and then 2003, did Algerian jihadis see themselves primarily as part of the wider transnational Salafi-jihadi movement. To the extent that there is an apocalyptic dimension to IS' ideology, this element has largely been absent from Algerian jihadi thinking until very recently. Even then it has only been employed in a very limited sense.

Another relevant dimension comes in the form of a question; why did Algeria remain relatively stable and not experience its own iteration of the Arab Spring in 2011? One answer is that Algeria has already had a similar experience in 1988 and 1989. As a result, there was a low mobilisation of Islamists in 2011 because many within Algerian society felt that they had already seen such 'revolution' before.

IS' unique selling point has been the combination of actual territorial control with the eschatological dimension of its ideology. However, neither of these were present in Algeria. Instead, the Algerian jihad had multiple strands and tendencies within it. There were those who were interested in reintroducing banned political players into a political process, whilst others were part of a brand of jihadi activism reimported from Afghanistan. This is also reflected in how militants broke from the jihad when it wound down. Those whose goals were compatible within the existing state structure, were reabsorbed into a multiparty political structure after 1997. Others, who were not interested in the political process, separated into radical but ever smaller splinter groups. Others still, have opted out of political participation altogether and sought to channel their religiosity in other ways, most notably though personal piety or Islamic spirituality. Some former militants have been absorbed into the revival of Algerian Sufi movements.

The integrative capacity of Algerian society meant that there were various homes those people could gravitate to. The growth of Salafi piety in Algerian daily life assisted demobilisation. There was also an enormous capability on the behalf of the Algerian state to reintegrate people once the conflict stopped. A ruthless clique within the government ensured that any means necessary could be employed to win the war by repressive means, but broader institutional strength and financial muscle also meant that the majority of jihadists and their social base were effectively demobilised.

Iraq and Syria today appear to have less capability to reintegrate jihadis. In Algeria, amnesty arrangements worked well but this was as much the result of the re-integrative capacity of society at the local, family and community level as it was a function of the state and legal system. Algeria was thus able to demobilise, if not 'deradicalise', a large number of those who had been involved in,

or supportive of, Islamist violence. It is unlikely this will be possible in Iraq and Syria for a number of reasons, including the sectarian turn that broader politics as well as jihadi violence have taken, the refugee crisis, and economic problems. The two states certainly have less ability to spend in the way that Algeria could a decade ago.

In regard to those who did not take a less radical path, some were simply exhausted and others were bought off by the regime. Armed Islamic Group (GIA) franchises by the late 1990s were local violent entrepreneurs. Similarly, militants in Iraq and Syria might be bought off or enter other economic niches.

In Algeria, because the insurgency was ground down to a low level, but political and societal issues were left unresolved, opportunities for jihadi groups to re-emerge remain. It is very difficult to identify who these groups are made up of however. The emergence of new neighbouring jihadi fronts, such as in Libya and the Sahara/Sahel, have offered opportunities for the re-emergence of jihadi activism. This is likely to also happen with IS, or its more dispersed, decentralised successors, in Iraq and Syria.

Q&A

Algeria has been keen to promote its success in reintegrating militants but what lessons can be learnt from their strategy, in particular their use of amnesties and economic incentives? Was this labelled as a co-option at the time and did those jihadist elements involved face questions over their credibility going forward?

Whenever a movement is integrated into the political process it provides an opportunity for others to become more radical and claim that those cooperating have been bought off or lost any credibility. However, in Algeria, the process of reintegration was made easier because of the long-standing existence of legalist/entryist Islamist political parties. These parties always argued that they would work within the state apparatus and advocated a non-violent approach following the 1992 coup. As a result, they are able to claim today that they have always stuck to their principles and claim that it is the violent elements who have brought the most suffering on the people.

Can you expand on how the Algerian regime has exploited 'Sufism'? And what do you mean by 'Sufi elements' of Jihad?

The Algerian and Moroccan governments have invested in local institutions and pushed them as being a traditional, authentic, specifically Maghrebi, version of Islam and a counterweight to Wahhabism. Underlying these efforts is the premise that Sufism is a less violent and more manageable form of Islam as well as more locally authentic: it is of course historically not true that Sufi movements are inherently non-violent. Several observers have pointed to elements of Sufi traditions in jihadi culture, e.g., especially in reference to dreams. The revival of Sufism in Algeria also has its political uses, albeit non-violent ones, most notably the potential to rally Sufi communities as electoral networks.

How are relations between the Tuareg and the Algerian nation state?

In the Algerian nation state, there have been tensions with groups in the south where there is generally a historically weak identification with the nation state. The Tuareg were not meaningfully integrated into the independent Algerian state until the 1970s. They have always also enjoyed a degree of autonomy, especially in regard to trade across national borders. The Tuareg also enjoy transnational kinship links, in Mali and Niger in particular, that predate Algeria's independence. Border-strengthening in the Sahara, problematic as it is in any event, carries the risk of disrupting and alienating local interests as well as interdicting jihadi-supporting economic and militant activity.

JIHADI CULTURE - DR GILBERT RAMSAY

By the speaker's own conception, 'jihadi culture' is of considerable interest. Jihadi culture may refer to art and aesthetics, leisure and play. This is particularly interesting when undertaken by those without military experience or who are not engaged in militancy. Thomas Hegghammer's understanding of jihadi culture is everything that isn't of straightforward practical value. Ideology, strategy, theology, military knowledge aren't culture, but music, design, storytelling, dream interpretation etc are. In the book Dr Ramsay published some years ago, *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web* he tried to read online jihadism *as* subculture. Because of this, as Hegghammer has pointed out, what Ramsay take's to be 'culture' is often rather broader than Hegghammer's conception. This is because Ramsay assumes that cultural identity can be constructed out of things which don't look obviously 'cultural'.

People take symbols and engage in fandom to assert themselves on the internet. The black flag of IS, for example, has been adopted as a cultural moniker online. As far back as the disagreement between Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, over the extent to which theologians should dictate the actions of fighters in the field, jihadi supporters have taken to the internet to offer their support for one side or the other.

In his conception of jihadi culture, Thomas Hegghammer conceives two overlapping circles, one representing strategy and pragmatism and the other theology. A third circle, that incorporates elements of the two, exists that concerns aesthetics, leisure and play. This third category presents something of a problem for jihadi leaders. It can't be fully recognised given that as fundamentalists they are naturally suspicious of cultural practices for their own sake, but at the same time these activities also cannot be excluded, especially if these groups hold state-building ambitions. These activities represent core tenets of human behaviour. There is also something of a struggle in Islamic theology about humour. The Prophet was known as quite a playful character. However, scholars have tried to reel in this portrayal, arguing that he did not laugh as much as suggested but rather smiled instead.

Jihadi culture is important because it regards ambiguity. Culture can appear when there are gaps for group members to fill and is often useful in fostering trust and shared meaning within groups. Images of Ibn al-Khattab, for example, have been used by many groups online. His likeness holds significance and carries a particular credence in the Jihadi-Salafism sphere but does not confer support for a particular group. Jihadi culture then is about the indeterminacy and space between the official line that the leadership of groups attempt to project and those things that jihadis say and do that don't necessarily undercut this sanctioned message.

Looking at recruitment for Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and IS in Jordan, research on local communities has found that a key driver for people joining these groups, which is often overlooked, is boredom. Marginalised individuals who lacked sports and things to do have been provided with opportunities for recreation and fun by IS. Jihad is also not meant to be a puritanical experience, it

is meant to be joyous and an adventure. Looking at jihadi publications, it is nevertheless surprising just how much humorous material there is out there.

There are a number of classical jihadi stories and anecdotes. One particular compilation comes from someone who fought in Afghanistan and details efforts to annoy Soviets soldiers as a form of relief and relaxation on the front line. The fighter talks about making a swimming pool for the Mujahedeen and how he asked for permission to provoke the Soviets into bombing an area so that the resulting craters could be turned into pools. A diving board was also fashioned from the blade of a downed helicopter. Through humorous quips the Soviets are then portrayed as having done the Mujahedeen a favour.

The story is illustrative of jihadi humour and there are underlying parallels in many such anecdotes such as mocking and outsmarting the enemy. Many jokes also reinforce stereotypes of fighters from different countries, with Egyptians being witty and clever characters and Chechens depicted as highly militaristic. It is interesting to examine how jihadi humour has changed. In its contemporary forms, jihadi humour is much more sectarian and highlights issues regarding identity. Many jokes revolve around the moment of killing and are used to reinforce differences between killer and victim, who in reality may be very similar. In this way, jihadis' use of humour almost conforms to Sigmund Freud's thesis that jokes (especially those found particularly funny) are often 'tendentious': meaning that they express subject matter, the discussion of which would normally be subject to repression.

In conclusion, jihad is meant to be something remembered with affection. However, what is currently emerging are struggles that are more problematic and confused. This may raise questions for the future appeal of jihad.

Q&A

Is the use of humour, particular at the point of killing, a tactic for dehumanising those deemed 'the enemy'?

Jihadi jokes certainly do employ the language of dehumanisation, as do epithets in official propaganda. However, both demonstrate how the psychology of dehumanisation is not as simple as often assumed. There is also a difference between dehumanising another group as opposed to toxifying them. When toxified, people are not even thought of as animals but rather something akin to a virus, toxin or plague. This is when people are usually thought of as needing to be eliminated. In IS rhetoric, Shiites are often referred to as being such a plague.

Terms such as 'pig' or 'dog' in Arabic are often used not to dehumanise an entire people but rather to confer a moral judgement onto them. These terms are often used when IS talks about different groups having betrayed them. However, the rhetoric still does not confer the idea that these traitors should be wiped out. There is also a difference in the use of such referent terms at the colloquial and official level.

What is the difference between jihadi humour and classic dark military humour that relates to people in conflict situations more generally?

There is not a lot written academically on the subject of humour in conflict situations. We also often expect that humour during conflict is likely to be subversive. However, tales from the First World War reveal that most humour was broadly supportive of the official military line. In a similar vein, most jihadi jokes don't challenge the formal positions of their groups, although there are occasional jokes that are irreligious. In this way, jokes may appear to trivialise the subject somewhat.

Is the online fanfare that comes in the wake of attacks in the West something that is seen as positive by IS supporters or just the pursuit of fanboys?

Fanboys are always subversive to some extent because they add their own twist to a group's propaganda, however subtle. This can then lead to embarrassment for the central group if fanboys overstep the mark. The internet is not all that important in terms of mobilisation simply because if IS lose territory on the ground they will also lose the culture war. IS' visually slick social media strategy has been widely heralded but as many of these examples demonstrate it can also prove somewhat harmful.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

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Nelly's recent research has focused on the ideology and evolution of al-Qaeda and the group that calls itself the 'Islamic State'. She was the lead author of *Letters from Abbottabad* (CTC: May 2012), the report that analysed de-classified documents captured in Osama bin Ladin's compound. Other recent publications include *The Evolution of Modern Jihadism* (ORE, August 2016); *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (CTC: December 2014); 'The Neglected Sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women From Jihad,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*; *Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (CTC: December 2013); and *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (Columbia University Press/Hurst, 2010).

DR JAMES MCDOUGALL
University of Oxford

James McDougall is Fellow and Tutor in modern history at Trinity College, Oxford. His research covers Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, African, and modern Islamic history, especially North Africa, and modern France, the French colonial empire, and its aftereffects. His publications include *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and co-edited volumes with anthropologists and political scientists (*Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in northwest Africa*, Indiana UP 2012, and *Global and Local in Algeria and Morocco*, Routledge, 2015). His most recent book is *A History of Algeria* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

DR GILBERT RAMSAY
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Gilbert Ramsay obtained his PhD from St Andrews in 2012, which has since been published as the book, *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web* (Bloomsbury). Dr Ramsay takes an interdisciplinary interest in the intersection of culture, technology, and violence – with a particular focus on Jihadi-Salafism. He has published widely in these areas, with recent work using IS propaganda as a starting point for rethinking debates on the role of dehumanisation in violent atrocity. He is presently working on a new book, *The Laughing Jihad*, exploring the place of Arabic humour aimed at jihadists, but also by jihadists and salafists in contemporary Middle Eastern conflict.

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 first report in the series, *After Islamic State: Workshop Report I,* focused on Iraq, Iran, Jordan and Syria. It also placed a spotlight on Ayman al-Zawahiri and what Zawahiri's writings signify for al-Qaeda's development and plans.

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.
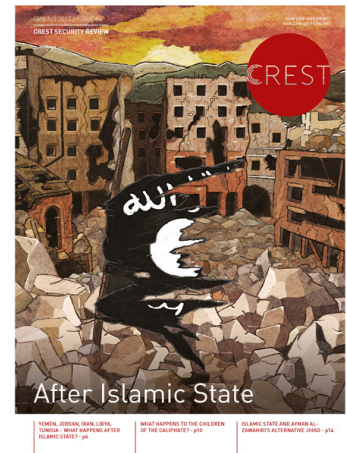
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