

CREST

Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats



# After Islamic State: Understanding the End of the Caliphate

WORKSHOP REPORT III

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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 third in a series addressing the potential implications of the demise of Islamic State's territory in Syria and Iraq. It brought together leading academics from around the globe to address these issues.

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### About CREST

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## TUNISIA AND MILITANCY IN NORTH AFRICA - GEORGE JOFFE

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The speaker was asked to consider the impact of the defeat of IS on the ideological appeal of both the IS 'brand' and the wider Islamic extremist movement from the perspective of North Africa and, in particular, Algeria. However, he challenged the premise of the question, arguing that it cannot be taken as a given that both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda (AQ) will, in fact, be defeated. Historically, jihadist movements have proved remarkably flexible in their ability to adjust to changing circumstances, transitioning from AQ's focus on the far enemy, through the nomadic jihads of Bosnia and Chechnya and a concept of 'leaderless jihad', to a contemporary savagery that involves exacerbating the Sunni-Shia divide. IS and its effort at state building is only the latest phase of this evolution. Jihadist movements retain a significant and effective presence in areas such as Syria, Yemen, Egypt, and the Sahel. How IS will develop in the future is an important question; it may become more locally embedded, as has occurred with Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), or it may take another form.

A key concern is why IS was so successful in the first place? Arguably, this is not a result of its religious ideology. Instead, IS strikes a chord with deep resentment that traces back to the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, and is a consequence of colonialism and cynical Western interference in the region. The West has supported autocracies and employed double standards, creating deeply held local animosity. The Arab Spring can be seen as a statement of the consequences of such antipathy. IS was never a purely jihadi movement, but instead has based its success on merging jihad and Ba'athist ideology.

Existing scholarship has offered various theories as to why people join jihadist movements. Experts such as Marc Sageman highlight the role of peer pressure. Others have focused on the eroticism of IS and the importance of male community and association; liberation, the role of mercenary and financial motives (IS offering employment where other opportunities are lacking), and regional social and sexual exclusion. This leads one to ask whether religion is merely a cynical cover? This argument does not appear accurate however, since so many people believe in the principles IS espouses. Instead, jihadist groups – out of all the post-colonial movements to emerge – offer a distinct form of cultural resonance and continuity. The caliphate has a spurious but attractive appeal to cultural authenticity. It is also no accident that Europe has been the main theatre of activity. The majority of recruits, especially in France and Belgium, have been second and third generation migrants from North African communities, and there are historical grievances linked to their support for IS.

A question also arises as to whether this is anything new? The Algerian civil war may serve as a precursor. Here there was a rejection of the existing political order and its replacement with something considered culturally authentic. The consequences of the end of the war were only addressed by reintegrating people back into society, not through any form of transitional justice or isolation of former participants. Algerian recruitment to IS has been low compared to Tunisia and Morocco, although there remains some residual terrorism that demonstrates the persistence of these movements. However, there remains the fundamental problem of the state; until economic and social needs are met, there will always be support for groups that challenge the existing order.

## Q&A

### **Is IS therefore an anti-colonial movement tapping into existing sentiment and historical grievance?**

IS has promised to reverse the Sykes-Picot agreement. This is somewhat ironic, for two reasons. First, the agreement is less significant than commonly assumed, with territorial boundaries actually more affected as a consequence of the Treaty of Versailles. Second, IS has recreated the same territorial divisions as existed post-World War II. It has a different ideology, but is still modelled on the state concept. It is not merely an anti-colonial movement, but also seeks revenge for what it regards as a European attack on regional culture.

### **Is IS' decline in part a case of conflict causing weariness, as happened in Algeria?**

To a degree, yes. Stability in Algeria is not the result of the efficiency of the security state, which in many ways has been highly inefficient. The scale of the violence during the civil war was devastating. Over 200,000 people died out of a population of 20-30 million. People became sickened by the violence and its legacy has been to significantly undercut any widespread support for AQ or IS. The Algerian state did eventually learn to respect rights and freedoms and today the country is much freer than it was pre-civil war.

### **Could IS be compared to the Taliban, in terms of the potential for moderation and absorbing other groups? Could IS' ideology allow for conformity to international norms or some form of diplomatic engagement?**

In talking about the possibility of IS becoming embedded and moderate, the speaker was referring principally to Jabhat al-Nusra and its break from the AQ model. It sought normalisation as an actor in the Syrian civil war. There is a question of good governance and the importance of IS demonstrating the superiority of its model, matching ideas of social justice. Eventually IS will have to engage with the external world, but this requires a reciprocal gesture from other states.

### **Most movements have pragmatic and idealist wings. With the proclamation of the caliphate alienating many governments in the Middle East, can IS walk back to a position where engagement is possible?**

The title of caliph and the notion of a caliphate is in some ways misleading. There are three dimensions to the caliphate: religious orthodoxy, defence, and administration. Thus it is more complex than commonly presumed. It is difficult for regional states to accept IS. However, the Moroccan state has long regarded itself as a caliphate, and Jordan has aspirations to such a role. It is a question of the degree to which any such caliphate would be prepared to collaborate with its neighbours and vice versa. At the moment, we are only at the start of this process.

### **How much of a role does race play in regional support for IS and attacks in the West?**

The current spate of attacks linked to migrant communities is not unique. Historically, there was a great deal of resentment in Algeria as a result of French colonialism, where Algerians were treated

as 'human dust' as one French commentator put it. The 1990s witnessed another campaign of attacks in France by Algerian groups as a by-product of the Algerian civil war. The historical legacy of colonialism manifests in cultural, physical and social terms which link closely to ideas of race and racism in French society.

### **What are IS's relations with the Naqshbandi, which would seem to be natural opponents?**

This dates back to the campaign of international sanctions against Iraq. Saddam Hussein understood the importance of mobilising different groups. As a result, he allowed certain Islamic movements to be tolerated. The Naqshbandi consequently grew as a faction within the Ba'athist party. With the 2003 invasion and the disastrous decision to disband the Ba'athist party, its remnants were united by the Naqshbandi order, which became a vehicle for preserving Ba'athist identity and, later, for engaging with IS.

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# LESSONS FROM THE MUJAHEDDEEN IN AFGHANISTAN - ELISABETH LEAKE

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The speaker sought to offer a historian's perspective of transnational mobilisations, exploring the lessons that can be learned from the fate of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan. In looking at international relations, we tend to focus on the state as the embodiment of politics. However, how actors try to negotiate the nature of the state, and how transnational activism manifests itself are both important questions. We thus need to consider two issues: the complications posed by border regions, and the issue of identity and what it means to be foreign.

When reflecting on the nature of the state and failed states, it is important to consider the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region. States have struggled to assert their authority in these areas, particularly with regard to the Durand Line. This line is discussed time and time again, but has never been properly enforced. The nature of the contemporary border has been influenced by three key events and processes: Soviet strategy towards the border; Pakistani support for the anti-Soviet mujahedeen; and Pashtun ethnic ties that straddle the border and dilute its importance. The Durand Line can serve as a template for thinking about the rejection of existing borders. There are spaces where alternative networks are available and make transnational movement without observation possible, which complicate perceptions of security.

The Soviet period also shows the difficulty of tracking foreign fighters. Lack of governance made it difficult to ascertain whether the mujahedeen were staying or going. The Mujahedeen were also a fragmented movement raising questions of what it means to be foreign when there is no visible state or border in place but there are ethnic affinities. Territorial fluidity makes measurement of numbers impossible. This is complicated by refugee flows, which may not be a mutually exclusive category. Multifaceted networks (Pashtun, Deobandi, Wahhabism) drove the Afghan struggle, and complicated considerations of who was considered foreign, where those who stayed belonged, and who left.

Furthermore, it is important to note that, even when people leave, their ideas can remain, as occurred with the Taliban. Institutional links with the Pakistani intelligence service also persisted. The Taliban also continued to rely on an educational curriculum and textbooks created by the mujahedeen. A critical weakness of Western, especially US, policy was an ambivalence to what happened after the Soviet withdrawal was announced. In the post-Soviet period, an ignorance among policymakers developed. It is important to acknowledge the impact of ideas remaining in theatre.

The Afghanistan/Pakistan border region remains a potential theatre for transnational activists to migrate to. Historically, the region has welcomed foreign fighters. We need to think of foreign fighters not as a concrete moment, but as a process. Whilst it is difficult to predict how groups will endure or expand, it is crucial to recognise that the possibility exists. The aftermath is equally important as the conflict period.



### Q&A

#### **Why do some conflicts and countries become hotspots for foreign fighters? What conditions led to the arrival of fighters from overseas in Afghanistan?**

Structural issues were of critical importance. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq came to power in Pakistan and the country tried to position itself as a leader in the Islamic world. Historically, it was Pakistan that had insisted on the Durand line as a border; with Zia-ul-Haq's ascension, that position became blurred. Thus, how countries interact is of critical importance.

#### **To what extent does the language of 'ungoverned' spaces and accompanying Western policy affect Pakistan's behaviour? How do people view these spaces?**

Ungoverned refers to the absence of the state, within a state-centred model. There are local modes of governance. Pakistan would also not admit that these areas are ungoverned. However, there has always been a paradox in the Pakistani government's approach to the region: development is pursued, but then, when local resistance occurs, there are bombings and drone strikes. There is building to integrate the area into a territorial space, and then destruction to assert sovereignty. Western policy has stalled rather than helped efforts. Every few years in the post-colonial era new initiatives appeared, there was resistance, a subsequent response from the Pakistani military and ultimately no continuity. This has been a persistent cycle.

#### **Why is Afghanistan seen as important to South Asian fighters?**

It is crucial to recognise that Afghanistan was never officially conquered, it was always ostensibly independent. As a result, it was one of the closest areas for Muslims outside of the British imperialist purview. There are also ethnic ties to the region.

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## FOREIGN FIGHTERS AFTER IS - AMARNATH AMARASINGAM

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Whilst foreign fighters are not a new phenomenon, there is something unique about the Syrian conflict in terms of the number and diversity of countries it has attracted fighters from. To understand how individuals will return, it is important to first understand why they left. There have been distinct waves of migration to Iraq and Syria by Western fighters. The first wave was less ideologically driven and was more concerned with getting rid of the Syrian dictator. They were also less hostile to the West than those who have later followed. The second wave has been constituted by those who see IS as a 'caliphate', one that should be defended and expanded. Many in the second wave are youths who want to be part of history in helping to re-establish the caliphate and are less focused on ousting Bashar al-Assad. Individuals from this group are more likely to be hard-core loyalists, who are happy to be martyrs, and will fight to the death. Those within the inner circle of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his top commanders, will likely remain in Iraq and Syria, and look to join the underground resistance of an 'ISIS, 2.0.' Other career jihadists are likely to move to other theatres where pockets will attempt to keep IS going. Potential destinations for these 'free agents' include Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan, and possibly Somalia.

Those who return to the West can be divided into three main categories. The first, and most dangerous group from a security perspective, are the operational returnees. These individuals are trained, programmed and dispatched to carry out lone-wolf style attacks in the West. They will also attempt to resuscitate dormant networks and recruit new members after returning. Second, will be those who are disillusioned with the entire jihad movement and decide to return home. These are those individuals that went to Syria in search of utopia, adventure, and an opportunity to express their religious identity but were ultimately left disappointed. Finally, those who made up the biggest proportion of research respondents, are those who have disengaged but are not disillusioned. These individuals may now be anti-IS but nevertheless remain committed to the jihad. As a result, they are likely to look for opportunities elsewhere, although this may not be immediately. Many have left for non-ideological reasons such as burning out from the stress of involvement or to get married or to start a family. These individuals also often take on the role of 'elders' in the communities they return to, educating and encouraging the next generation of potential fighters.

The online community remains a fairly important facet of IS' support. The internet provides the opportunity for followers and activists to remain connected and fosters a sense of online belonging. This is reflected in their reference to themselves as the 'Baqiya Community' or family. Twitter suspensions are now considered a kind of shahada (martyrdom), demonstrating individuals' willingness to take risks for the IS cause. The death of Elton Simpson in the Curtis Culwell Center attack in May 2015 had a large effect for some in the online community. Instead of being met with celebration, there was something of a backlash that IS needlessly wasted the life of an ill-prepared member of the online family.

Looking ahead, an important question to ask is how will die-hard supporters and the online community respond as IS loses territory? IS has also given much attention to producing the next

generation of fighters and supporters, emphasising the importance of child recruits and births within the caliphate. Western states need to reevaluate whether existing legal systems are ready to deal with returnees for the considerable future.

## Q&A

### **What are the likely destinations for fighters who decide to travel elsewhere to continue the jihad and is there much talk of old theatres such as Kashmir becoming potential destinations?**

Libya continues to appear high in the aspirations of those planning to travel elsewhere. There is continued talk of IS sleeper cells in Sirte being ready to strike in future. In Somalia, IS very strategically took control of a town to facilitate smuggling in weapons and then, recognising that they were not ready to hold territory, relinquished control. However, al-Shabaab will remain the key player in Somalia for the foreseeable future. However, IS' Khorasan Province are very much active and trying to increase their importance. In Bangladesh, a number of groups have links to IS leaders. The July 2016 Dhaka Bakery attack was practically live tweeted by IS associated Telegram accounts indicating that there is some form of link. It is natural that older networks will be tapped into. However, not all have aligned with IS with some choosing AQ instead.

### **In a North American context, it appears that the religiosity of those who have travelled is particularly intense. Have those who were ever going to return already done so?**

There are a number of North American returnees who are known to have come back from the region but the authorities do not have the required evidence to charge them with any particular crime. Many of these are traumatised by the acts they have committed or been forced to commit. We need to assess whether such figures pose a security threat or whether now they simply want to leave their involvement in militancy behind. Those that are still in Iraq and Syria now are likely to stay and fight it out. There are, however, a number of women and children who want to leave but are unable to.

### **It has been noted that it has become more difficult for fighters to also leave IS. Are those who have managed to leave still in contact with remaining IS fighters and are they assisting others to leave?**

There are organisations trying to get people out who are mostly funded by these individuals' parents or families. Recently, a group of friends travelled to Syria from England with most joining JN and one individual joining IS. When this IS fighter discussed moving to a different group he was imprisoned. His friends from JN subsequently mounted an operation to free him and even killed the IS members guarding him at the prison.

### **Have IS facilitated any travel for injured fighters to receive medical treatment?**

The speaker interviewed many injured fighters who were being treated in makeshift hospitals on the Syrian border. Many were very young and unlikely to pose a threat as transnational activists.

## **FOREIGN FIGHTERS AFTER IS - AMARNATH AMARASINGAM**

### **AFTER ISLAMIC STATE WORKSHOP SERIES III**

Whilst all were local Syrian fighters, there was an impression that Western fighters were also being treated nearby.

#### **How do fighters who have left IS for ideological reasons now view AQ?**

Even if they have left and now hate IS, most fighters still believe that AQ has sold out the jihadi movement. Their scorn towards Ayman al-Zawahiri often appears to continue after disengaging. For younger fighters the position may be slightly different as they have not experienced the full extent of the conflict between AQ and IS.

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## MILITANT IDEOLOGY AFTER IS - COLE BUNZEL

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The speaker echoed the general scepticism about whether it is correct to talk in terms of 'after' IS. The phenomenon of jihadism is underappreciated and, as a result, its end has been predicted many times. IS is an organisation with an extensive history and a long-term vision, and traces its roots to an ideological division within al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2006 between pragmatism and *takfir* inclined violence.

The main component of IS ideology is the concept of 'remaining.' There has been a great deal of focus on the apocalyptic component of ideology, but while this is important, it has been overplayed. The group will never declare the end of time at a specific date, and it has demonstrated ample flexibility with regard to apocalyptic prophecies. This can be seen, for example, in the battle for Dabiq and how it was framed. The ideology is now adapting to the group's current decline. 'Expanding' had been tagged on to its core concept, but for now it has returned to a focus on 'remaining'. IS has a vision of losing territory but retaining a state. The group's statements reference previous periods of difficulty, portraying the current situation as a necessary period of struggle. It may revert to a state that exists solely on paper. The group has said that, in that event, the generation of supporters who have lived in the shadow of IS' state will be the ones to bring about its revival.

There are two more reasons to be sceptical that IS will disappear. First, political instability and a power vacuum will remain. Second, the group has a global presence extending beyond the territory that it holds. Officially, IS has no capital and deliberately avoids designating a city as such; as a result, there is no capital that can be lost. It also has an online presence that is still highly productive, despite a general decline.

There are however, reasons for assuming that its decline will impact its appeal. Losing territory does not resonate with IS' claims for a state. However, as long as it holds territory, it will retain supporters. IS cites the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who held less territory in Medina than it does now. Crucially, the appeal of IS has always been limited and it does not seek to attract wider popular support in the way that AQ does; instead, it has sought to attract particularly committed individuals.

Several questions emerge from the decline of IS. Firstly, will we see more terrorism? This has already occurred, but IS cannot exist solely as a terrorist group; holding territory remains key to its ideology. IS, however, is less interested in attacking the West than in building a state, and portrays its attacks as defensive actions. Secondly, will there be reconciliation between AQ and IS? This seems highly unlikely given the depth of the divide, both ideologically and personally, that traces back to the 1990s. Zawahiri is routinely portrayed by IS as the leader of the 'Jews of jihad' and his leadership makes any unification unlikely. Similarly, AQ has presented IS as Kharijites, Ba'athists and extremists. A generation would likely need to pass before reconciliation is possible. AQ has also repeatedly pledged allegiance to the Taliban, whom IS regard as heretics. IS also rejects the entire scholarly apparatus of AQ.

## **MILITANT IDEOLOGY AFTER IS - COLE BUNZEL**

### **AFTER ISLAMIC STATE WORKSHOP SERIES III**

Further splits are more likely than unity. AQ scholars are splitting over the future of what used to be Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) following the latter's claim it no longer has ties to AQ. Initially, scholars and the media viewed this as a tactical move. Later, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi revealed that Zawahiri probably didn't endorse the move because he couldn't be reached in time. Contrary to expectations, JN refused to walk back the split. AQ have also accused JN of not sticking to Jihadi-Salafi principles and diluting the ideology in an effort to win broader support. For example, JN has walked back on its criticism of leaders like Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Abu Qatada al-Filastini has predicted splits in the jihadi movement. Similarly, Abu Hamza refers to JN as 'neo-jihadis' but has accepted that the jihad in Syria is likely to broaden.

## **Q&A**

### **Regarding the flexible interpretation of ideology, is there scope for IS to change its position on territory to maintain support?**

IS is unlikely to waver on its core principles. Definitive defeat is unlikely, but if that were to happen, then the remaining influential people could abandon it.

### **Internal splits have occurred within IS as some see it as too moderate. Could factions within IS go the other way and become more dogmatic?**

Throughout Islamic history, empires have attributed their defeats to a failure to follow God's law. This has not happened with IS yet; instead, it has blamed a conspiracy. It is difficult to look inside the movement and see potential splits that would spell the end of the group.

### **Is adaptation more likely through a change in ideology or internal splintering?**

It is more likely that IS will continue to exist. It is important not to underestimate the appeal of unity offered by the caliphate. Doctrinally, violating bay'ah to a caliph is a ticket to hell.

### **Are the irreconcilable differences between IS and AQ limited to Syria, or do they exist globally?**

A lot of the debate is elitist in nature and limited to the leadership. As soon as individuals join either of the two groups they are taught not to regard the other as part of the jihad. There is a small possibility that these divisions may subside somewhat when the current leadership changes but for now both sides are committed to imposing the divide.

### **To what extent does the online fan base exist independent of the actual movement?**

Online supporters are very committed. It is likely that anyone who comes out in support of an alternative will be quickly and roundly condemned by the others, limiting the space for dissent.

**How doctrinally important is this caliph?**

Originally, the biography of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was played up. This has happened less in recent years, with much less coverage of him and few statements. There appears to be an effort to anonymise the caliph in case of his death. However, when the caliph is killed, divisions can emerge. Unlike some previous caliphs in history, Baghdadi has not publically nominated a successor. Killing a succession of caliphs in particular could undermine the group.

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# MILITANT MOBILISATION AFTER THE ISLAMIC STATE - JOEL BUSER

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The speaker sought to understand the potential implications of the decline of IS from the perspective of research into social movements. There have been huge amounts of research into the emergence and growth of social movements; however, how movements maintain momentum has received less attention, and research into their decline has received less attention still. The process of decline can vary greatly. As movements experience setbacks, they lose support, but this can happen in different ways. The process of how individuals join movements often shapes their journey out.

For example, non-ideological pathways into groups often lead to quicker disengagement, whereas those who are more ideologically engaged may remain active in a broader activist community. As movements start to lose traction, there may be some form of renegotiation of their relationship with other movements. We also often see attempts to reconstruct a sense of collective agency, which is important for mobilisation and for activists' sense of self. New alliances can arrest decline, and there is often a need to reenergise a movement as routine activities become less attractive to members.

Four intersecting processes at the micro- and meso-levels occur in response to movement failure or decline:

1. First, there is a redefinition of the problem. Definitions and scopes may be scaled up or down, resulting in a broader or narrower focus. This might be in terms of geographical focus i.e., localisation vs globalisation of the problem. It might also be in terms of how 'problems are linked together e.g., activists might (seek to) link together issues that were previously not deemed to be connected (thereby generating alliance-building opportunities). During this process, being able to keep the focus of blame (both for the problem and for setbacks) on external actors can help avoid factionalism and keep a movement united.
2. Second, new 'movement theories' of action are developed. Activists may not only adapt tactically, but may also undertake a more fundamental evaluation of their theories of how change can be achieved, which may have profound implications for their strategies of action. For example, in the 1990s the British National Party shifted to a position of electoral engagement and away from their 'march and grow' strategy. This shift can also occur in the other direction, towards militancy, particularly where the 'setbacks' are associated with feelings of rage and frustration. New movement theories may generate new interpretations of what constitutes 'success'. Such redefinition of 'success' can provide a useful defensive mechanism for groups as it helps to stave off feelings of failure and the demoralisation that that entails. A further outcome of the new movement theories can be the emergence of new/alternate, potentially less costly, opportunities for action or involvement, which may help to sustain an activist community.



3. Third, movements can seek to renegotiate their collective identities. This can lead to new alliances as reframing allows for new ties to form with groups with which those identities resonate. Personal dynamics can accelerate the decline of a movement, and personal histories play a role in limiting action. We all have 'collective memory anchors' that are crucial for sustaining collective identity over time but which also limit creativity in the renegotiation of identities. Opponents can also play a role in this identity negotiation. For example, opponents of the far right have drawn attention to the nationalist pasts of movements that have sought to distance themselves from negative associations with the far right.
4. Finally, there are likely to be changes in a group's emotional culture. Movements don't simply 'tap into' existing public sentiments but create and legitimise particular sets of emotions. Social movements train activists and supporters to develop particular emotional responses. Particular emotions tend to be associated with particular types and styles of action. As such, shifts in a group's emotional culture or 'repertoire' are likely to be conducive to different forms of collective action. When groups suffer setbacks, it can become difficult to sustain feelings of agency, empowerment and even hope that are often integral to processes of mobilisation. This can simply give way to despair, which is likely to undermine collective action. However, emotional adaptation may also occur. For example, feelings of despair and disconsolation might be overcome, or at least (temporarily) displaced, by feelings of anger, rage, contempt etc. – feelings that are likely to reenergise collective action and give rise to more militant forms of action. Feelings of despair and loss might also be inhibited by evoking feelings of duty, honour or dignity, which could also help to sustain commitment to the cause. Scholars of social movements are moving beyond analysis of simple and dominant emotions to more complex and dynamic understandings of emotions – e.g., exploring chains of emotions.

At the individual and group level, movement decline is a time of emotional turbulence. An important part of disengagement is that people generate new ties outside of the movements. The end of a wave of contentious politics is not about one side winning, but about renormalisation and re-routinisation of social relations.

### Q&A

#### **Are reintegration and rehabilitation more logical responses to IS fighters returning to Western countries over criminalisation?**

It is important to recognise that there are a different types of rehabilitation; the choice is not a binary one between criminalisation and rehabilitation. For example, in Italy spaces were created within prisons to make it easier for those who had been involved in violent groups to distance themselves from other members of those groups and begin the process of realigning their social ties.

## **MILITANT MOBILISATION AFTER THE ISLAMIC STATE - JOEL BUSER**

### **AFTER ISLAMIC STATE WORKSHOP SERIES III**

#### **As an observation, elements of AQ decided to unilaterally concentrate only on local issues whilst playing lip service to the message of the top leadership.**

Whilst not an expert on AQ, from the situation described, AQ does appear to have 're-localised'. The results of such process can be something of a fragmentation as different elements end up pursuing their own aims and issues. Movements often become almost loose umbrellas which often causes contestation when individuals come in and attempt to re-establish hierarchical control.

#### **Are there common points of fracture when movements decline? For example, when considering ethnic identities.**

Ethnic identities can provide points of fracture within movements and become salient at different points of a movement's decline. Identities can gain prominence, particularly as activists start to define sub-groups (usually through processes of apportioning blame for failure). This could be ethnic identities, sectarian identities, regional identities, sexual identities etc., depending on the group. It is really any type of identity that enables the credible production of a sub-group.

#### **Can technology sustain ties between members?**

The role of technology is interesting. On the one hand, it seems that it can have the effect of sustaining ties or even reconnecting individuals who have become estranged in movements and would otherwise have ceased to have contact with one another. On the other hand, however, social media also makes personal disputes more likely to take place in public and spread quickly within membership, which is likely to have a particularly corrosive effect on intra-movement relations and accelerating movement fragmentation.

#### **Does emotional turbulence always occur as individuals are disengaging?**

Emotional turbulence precedes the exit of some individuals. Many often feel that they don't fully fit in with the rest of the movement. Some people may resolve these feelings on exit by engaging with other (sometimes radically different) movements/groups or forms of activism, which may or may not be militant.

#### **What are the implications for the speed of disengagement?**

People do move on to other groups. There are people who will in effect bounce from group to group for several years – often people who miss the excitement and a sense of belonging when they are not in an activist scene.

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## **BUILDING A CALIPHATE AFTER IS - MARA REVKIN**

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The speaker again echoed the point that it is incorrect to view the defeat of IS as inevitable: IS is not so much collapsing as adapting. However, its decline has important implications for the group. Much depends on the behaviour of IS and those groups opposing it. IS advances the argument that it provides good governance, in contrast to the corruption and deteriorating infrastructure elsewhere. IS has offered a social contract that appeals to locals. Over time, however, IS has been prone to the same corruption and poor governance as the Iraqi government, causing reputational damage. Two IS judges were executed for misapplying Sharia, and IS fighters have been punished for theft and corruption. These phenomena appear to be on the increase, just as airstrikes undermine IS' infrastructure. IS continues to extract taxes despite no longer providing the services these levies are intended to fund.

Many civilians who trusted or were ambivalent to IS have now become extremely critical. However, local attitudes to the Iraqi authorities are equally problematic. The Iraqi government is not seen to represent the population. There is also significant fear of Shia 'liberators' given the Sunni-Shia divide, with retributions already taking place against suspected IS supporters. All male internally displaced peoples (IDPs) in Kurdish areas are regarded as potential terrorists and are required to be screened. In reality, many civilians complied with IS to stay alive. IS regards tax evasion as apostasy, resulting in collection figures of near 100% from a population fearful of repercussions for non-payment. However, under Iraqi law, paying taxes to IS can be interpreted as financing terrorism. Civilians thus find themselves at risk of arrest on the basis of the utility bills they have been forced to pay. Such Iraqi policies could have a radicalising effect.

IS has declared provinces in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. In these provinces, it has sought to replicate its governance structures, but has only been partially successful. There are two potential hypotheses as to the impact of IS encountering difficulties in its core territories for its affiliates. Firstly, affiliate provinces may be strengthened, as the ranks of local affiliates are swelled by those leaving Syria and Iraq. Secondly, they may be weakened, as a result of defections to rival groups, power struggles, and their economic dependence on the centre.

IS is becoming increasingly paranoid, violent, and undisciplined. The calls for foreign attacks are likely to increase to distract from its problems in Iraq and Syria. IS lacks top-down command of all of its supporters, and as a result, may not be able to control targeting. Without its territory, IS faces the challenge of attracting new followers and retaining existing ones, whilst simultaneously compensating for the loss of oil and tax revenues.

## **Q&A**

### **Do people become more sympathetic to IS ideology having spent several years living under the 'caliphate'?**

In the first few months of IS rule, the borders of the 'caliphate' were relatively open and people could enter and exit freely, although IS eventually began to restrict and eventually imposed a complete ban on out-migration. So in the early stages of IS rule, we saw a sorting process in which people who accepted IS governance as legitimate or were simply willing to give it a chance stayed, while those who disagreed with IS left. It's important to keep in mind that civilians living in areas taken over by IS were comparing its system of governance to the previous status quo which was either (1) a chaotic security vacuum in which multiple armed groups were competing for power or (2) a repressive dictatorship in the case of Syria and a sectarian, corrupt democracy in the case of Iraq. In its initial outreach to civilians, IS campaigned on a platform of good governance and Islamic justice, and promised that people would be treated fairly and guaranteed security as long as they followed the rules. Although IS's legal system was extremely harsh and punitive, some people appreciated the predictability and order that it brought to previously lawless conflict areas.

Over time, however, reports of rule violations and corruption by IS's own members have increased, undermining whatever legitimacy and credibility the group had established with civilians. At the same time, people living in these areas have suffered huge personal, economic and human capital losses (e.g., interrupted education) that will make reintegration more difficult, and liberating forces have had a tendency to collectively punish civilians who are viewed as complicit in IS's rise to power. Presuming that civilians are terrorist sympathisers or collaborators simply because they lived in areas controlled by IS creates barriers to reintegration and may ultimately increase sympathy for extremism.

### **Is there anything relating to infrastructure and governance that is specific to foreign fighters?**

IS definitely has divisions of labour in which recruits with particular skills or backgrounds are preferred for particular roles. In some cases, locals are preferred. For example, IS specifically recruits tax collectors from the local population because locals are familiar with the population's asset distribution. Judges, however, are usually foreigners—often Saudis—because they are perceived as more neutral (they are unlikely to favour local tribes or other interest groups).

### **What is the process for switching from IS to Jabhat al-Nusra?**

Although IS and Jabhat al-Nusra are at war, these groups do accept defectors from the other side as long as they can sufficiently prove their loyalty. One of my interviewees – a former IS fighter who switched sides to JN – said that a number of his former fellow IS fighters were thinking about defecting to JN because they are frustrated with battlefield losses, civilian casualties, and the preferential treatment that IS gives to foreign fighters.

### **What do Syrian and Iraqi fighters think of the foreign fighters?**

Most of my interviewees are Syrian IS fighters who abandoned the group and are now in Turkey. Many of these cited preferential treatment given to foreign fighters as a reason for desertion. Many joined for non-ideological reasons, and became uncomfortable with IS's extremism and harsh treatment of Syrian civilians. Although IS claims that local and foreign fighters receive the same salaries (adjusted for number of wives and children), in practice, Syrian fighters claim that foreigners are more likely to receive special perks and privileges, such as free housing and cell phones.

### **What is the education process for children?**

When IS took over schools in Iraq and Syria, it introduced a new curriculum designed to prepare boys for eventual military service and girls for roles as wives and mothers. IS required segregated classrooms but did not hire additional teachers, so in many cases, this resulted in a dramatic reduction in class-time for children (for example, at one formerly IS-controlled elementary school I visited on the outskirts of Mosul, girls only attended school for the morning and boys in the afternoon, whereas previously, both girls and boys had had a full day of classes. Many civilians were afraid to send their children to school, so while indoctrination and brainwashing was a big problem, a bigger problem was actually high drop-out rates and years-long interruptions in education.

### **What are the methodological challenges to conducting surveys of the local population?**

Some Iraqi research firms have conducted telephone-based surveys in IS-controlled territory, but such surveys raise serious methodological and ethical issues. It's difficult to obtain a random sample, and civilians who participate in such surveys face the risk of retaliation by IS. There are also door-to-door surveys being conducted in areas recently liberated from IS, including Mosul. While random sampling is possible with these surveys, responses are likely biased in favour of the Iraqi government or other liberating force because it is dangerous for civilians to express any sympathy for IS.

### **How has IS explained its governance changes, such as closing the borders, and what are the consequences of those changes?**

IS has been quite successful at blame-shifting, highlighting the number of civilians killed by the Iraqi government, the Syrian regime, or the international coalition. When IS executes alleged spies, it claims to be protecting civilians. People in civil war environments have different priorities than those living in stable democracies. In these settings, security and protection are more important than civil liberties like freedom of speech. IS recognised early on that it could build support by portraying itself as a defender and protector of Muslims against Western aggression, even if this protection came with a highly authoritarian and radical system of governance, because of the heightened importance of security in conflict environments.

#### **To what extent can IS learn from its experiences and mistakes in governance? What would they do differently?**

There is evidence that they recognise the problems of expanding too rapidly and the dangers of affiliates failing. The leadership appears to be interested in knowledge-exchange between provinces, and sharing personnel to standardise procedures. IS has relaxed taxes in some areas in response to local economic hardships, such as poor harvests.

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## SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

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### DR AMARNATH AMARASINGAM

*Research Fellow, George Washington University*

Amarnath Amarasingam is a Fellow at The George Washington University's Program on Extremism and the Co-Director of a study of Western foreign fighters based at the University of Waterloo. He is the author of *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (2015). Amarasingam is an experienced field researcher, having conducted hundreds of interviews for his PhD dissertation on social movement activism, organisational dynamics, and youth identity in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. He also conducted over 50 interviews with former fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers) throughout the former war zones of Sri Lanka in 2012 and 2013. At the Turkey-Syria border, Amarasingam spoke with dozens of injured fighters, refugees, as well as former and current activists of the Syrian revolution.

### COLE BUNZEL

*PhD Student, Near Eastern Studies, Princeton*

Cole's research focuses on the history of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, as well as the Jihadi-Salafi movement underpinning such groups as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group. His dissertation examines the origins and evolution of Wahhabism, as a religious doctrine and political movement, from its emergence in the mid-eighteenth century in central Arabia to the present day. Drawing on a wealth of mostly untapped primary sources, including rare manuscripts, it looks in particular at the most controversial ideas in Wahhabi doctrine – *takfīr*, *al-walā'*, *wa'l-barā'*, and *jihād*—and assesses their change over time. It also considers the appropriation of the exclusivist and militant resources of Wahhabism by the modern Jihadi-Salafi movement beginning in the 1980s. In doing so, it seeks to give a more complete picture of the ideological background of Sunni radicalism in the Arab world. His works include *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State*, Brookings Institution, March 2015 and *The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States*, Carnegie Endowment, February 2016.

### DR JOEL BUSER

*Research Fellow, Coventry University*

Joel Buser is a Research Fellow based in the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, at Coventry University. His most recent research has focused on anti-minority mobilisations, and specifically on anti-Muslim protest. His research addresses questions about how and why people become involved in anti-minority protest, and what sustains, energises or undermines such protests.

## **SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES**

### **AFTER ISLAMIC STATE WORKSHOP SERIES III**

In his work, Dr Busher examines the rituals that shape and comprise our everyday lives; the cognitive and moral orders that we make, break and patch together again; and the emotional rhythms of our lives. The broad aim of his research is to document and enhance understanding of those elements of lived experience that give rise to, exacerbate or mitigate divisive social relations. He has published widely on these issues, often drawing on the case of far right activism in the UK. At present, his research encompasses three main areas: 1) the ecology of forms of anti-minority or anti-outsider activism; 2) the evolution of responses to anti-minority or anti-outsider activism by state and civil society actors; and 3) how practitioners negotiate their way through the implementation of counter-terrorism legislation.

### **PROFESSOR GEORGE JOFFE**

*Research Fellow, Cambridge University*

George Joffe is a Research Fellow at Cambridge University's Centre of International Studies and a Visiting Professor of Geography at King's College London. He extensively researched conflict and governance in the Middle East and North Africa, with recent publications focusing on the revival of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Arab Spring and Tunisian media. Professor Joffe previously served as the Deputy Director and Director of Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) between 1997-2000.

### **DR ELISABETH LEAKE**

*Lecturer, University of Leeds*

Elisabeth completed her BA and MA in history at Yale University in 2009 before moving to the University of Cambridge for her doctoral studies. She subsequently held a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship at Royal Holloway, University of London, from 2013-16. Her research focuses on the intersections between South Asian and international history. She examines state building in postcolonial India and Pakistan and both countries' interactions with foreign powers such as the United States and Great Britain. Elisabeth is particularly interested in borderlands as spaces of contested sovereignty where local non-state actors come into conflict with state authorities and foreign interests. Her first book is a history of the northwest frontier tribal area of the Indian subcontinent (what is now Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area) in the context of decolonisation and the global Cold War. It considers why this region has remained largely autonomous in the twentieth century, as well as why the region has persisted in interesting state actors in South Asia and the West. Elisabeth is currently working on an international history of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and a comparative study of borderlands autonomy movements and state building in postcolonial South Asia.



**MARA REVKIN**

*PhD Student, Department of Political Science, Yale*

Mara Revkin is a Resident Fellow with the Abdallah S. Kamel Center for the Study of Islamic Law and Civilisation at Yale Law School, from which she received her J.D. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in Political Science at Yale University where her research focuses on governance and state building by armed groups in the Middle East. Her dissertation on Islamic State (IS) governance and law making involves surveys and interviews with civilians and combatants from IS-controlled areas of Iraq and Syria. She is currently conducting fieldwork in south-eastern Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon for her dissertation and for a United Nations project on the recruitment of children by armed groups. Her work has been published in the Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law, the Annual Review of Law and Social Science, and the UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law, among others. After receiving her B.A. in Political Science and Arabic from Swarthmore College, she served as a Fulbright Fellow in Jordan and Oman (2009-2010), and as a Junior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2010-2011).



## 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.

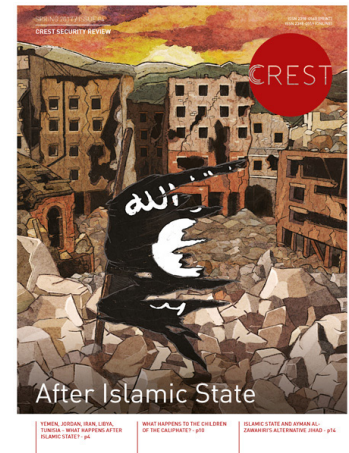
This series of reports addresses the issues that arise as Islamic State's territory declines. They draw on a series of seminars that pulled together international experts to address the regional, ideological and strategic challenges of life after the Islamic State.

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](http://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 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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The logo graphic consists of a solid red circle on the left, with three concentric red arcs of varying thicknesses extending from its right side, creating a stylized 'C' shape.

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