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Counterterrorism
Ministry of Justice and Security

A perspective on the transformation of ISIS following the fall of the 'caliphate'

Continuation of roles, transformation of threats

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A perspective on the transformation of ISIS following the fall of the 'caliphate'

Introduction – end of the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been under heavy pressure for a long time. Their losses continue to pile up and the end of the so-called 'caliphate' is nigh.¹ Following the fall of the 'caliphate', ISIS will carry out its existing roles in a different way – as a proto-state, Sunni insurgency, terrorist group, criminal organisation, and/or jihadist ideology – and consequently, the potential and actual threats posed by ISIS will change. This analysis attempts to monitor both these developments based on two central research questions: which possible paths could ISIS take in its development following the fall of the 'caliphate', and what threats do these development paths pose? The possible development paths have been investigated and inventoried based on literature studies and written/verbal reactions from both domestic and international academics and government partners of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

The analyses is explorative by nature and inventarises possible development paths on the bases of extensive research of scientific literature, as well as public and government reports. The analyses

does not pretend to give the answers on the research questions at hand. Its main goal is to serve as a discussion paper in our discussions with national and international governmental and non-governmental partners: in particular also the academic community and think tanks. Moreover, because of its explorative and investigative character this analyses does not represent the point of view of the Dutch government.

The end of the 'caliphate' will come about once ISIS no longer controls any territory in Iraq and Syria and the current governance structure in cities and other inhabited areas has disappeared. A definitive victory over ISIS can only be declared once ISIS no longer issues any calls to action, and therefore no longer poses a threat. ISIS will only be completely defeated once it has not only been driven out of the remaining territory it controls, but is also incapable of carrying out terrorist campaigns, guerrilla warfare or a propaganda war.³ The first goal is in sight, although for the time being, ISIS otherwise continues to make its voice heard.

The 'caliphate', as it has existed in Iraq and Syria over the past three years, is disappearing. However, ISIS is further developing as a terrorist organisation, a Sunni insurgency, and a criminal

1 The 'caliphate' is an Islamic utopia, primarily located in the region in which Sunni Islam originated. On 29 June 2014, ISIS declared a 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. Caliphates are traditionally headed by a caliph, and accordingly, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi awarded himself this title. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

2 'Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? They have options', Colin P. Clarke and Armanath Amarasinga, *The Atlantic*, 6 March 2017. Legally speaking, it was never a state; 'Ruling by The Hague Court' (ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2017:6927, 27 June 2017).

3 'In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction', Hararo J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, *War on the Rocks*, 27 September 2017.

organisation. Its jihadist⁴ ideology⁵ plays a key role in the first two of these manifestations. Although ISIS is still heavily under siege, journalist and ISIS expert Hassan Hassan said in the summer of 2017 that the organisation is now stronger than it was prior to its major military victories in June 2014.⁶

Although they seemingly have no chance of victory, ISIS will not surrender. The rigid and absolutist nature of ISIS ideology leaves very little room for compromise. There are plenty of other reasons why the chances of a negotiated compromise are nihil, in particular the fact that moderate leaders – who simply do not exist within ISIS – are essential to such negotiations. Furthermore, the governments of Iraq and Syria, and the international community as a whole – including the Netherlands⁷ – do not view ISIS as a legitimate negotiating partner.⁸

ISIS will fight on and tell its combatants that Allah commands them to do the same. The combatants believe they will not be judged on the results of their efforts, but on what they are prepared to do for the cause. This mindset is decisive in the group's interpretation of success and its rationalisation for continuing this seemingly unwinnable war. The resilient defence of Mosul and Raqqa can be seen as a propaganda exercise.⁹ In May 2016, the former spokesman

of ISIS, Abu Muhammed al-Adnani (Taha Falaha), summed it up as follows:

You will never be victorious. You will be defeated," he told the Americans. "Do you think that victory comes by killing one leader or another? That would be a fake victory!

*Or do you consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of territory? Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq [in 2007-8] and were in the desert without any city or land? And would we be defeated, and you victorious, if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa, or even all the cities, and we were to return to our previous situation? Absolutely not!*¹⁰

*Defeat, argued Adnani, is the loss of the will and desire to fight. You will be victorious, America, and the mujahideen will be defeated only if you can remove the Qur'an from the hearts of the mujahideen*¹¹

ISIS defines defeat in very different terms to the anti-ISIS coalition, as the former group will spin its military defeats into stories of deprivation, heroism and martyrdom that represent tests set for the faithful by Allah and are therefore only temporary setbacks.¹²

This has major strategic consequences for both parties. ISIS's loss of territory may seem like a victory to the coalition, but to ISIS, it is a return to a previous phase, where they became a Sunni insurgency consisting of a combination of guerrilla warfare,¹³ terrorism,¹⁴ and banditry.¹⁵ ISIS calls these setbacks an inevitable crisis that its combatants must endure before the final victory that is their divine predestination or 'qadar'.

With this in mind, fighting for martyrdom is the highest possible honour for individual combatants. This partly explains why the many thousands of dead combatants have not deterred ISIS. On the contrary, the dead are envied, as they have been delivered from this life as martyrs. Despite this, many combatants have deserted

4 In the Koran, the basic meaning of the word 'jihad' is 'striving toward a worthy goal'. Its primary meaning is ethical: human beings have a divine mission to struggle against the evil inside them. A second meaning is to strive for the interests of Islam and the religious community. A third meaning of the word is armed warfare. This text takes the second and third meanings as the basic principle. These definitions are used by the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

5 Jihadism is a movement within political Islam that is based on a specific version of Salafist ideology and the ideologies of figures such as Sayyid Qutb. It seeks to establish the global rule of Islam by means of armed warfare (jihad), including the resurrection or maintenance of the Islamic state. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

Islamism is a radical movement within Islam that seeks to establish a society that mirrors the one described in what the movement believes to be the original roots of Islam: the Koran and the Sunnah (the sayings and teachings of the prophet). Islamism has a political agenda and its manifestation can be either violent, non-violent or even democratic in nature. Definition as stated on www.aivd.nl, the website of the General Intelligence and Security Service.

Jihadism is therefore an ideology that rejects the current political systems and their processes and laws, as they conflict with those prescribed by Islam. Jihadism considers all representatives, defenders and adherents of these political systems to be infidels. Jihadism opposes forms of Islamism as practised by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamism is therefore a movement that seeks to implement Islamic governance by participating in the political process. In Syria and other combat zones, it can be difficult to determine whether a group is jihadist or Islamist.

6 'Isis may be on its knees but it will rise again if we don't break the cycle', Hassan Hassan, The Guardian, 15 July 2017.

7 'Aanvullende artikel 100-brief Nederlandse bijdrage aan de strijd tegen ISIS' ('Supplementary Article 100 letter on the Dutch contribution to the fight against ISIS'), p. 2, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 January 2016.

8 'In the Event of the Islamic State's Untimely Demise', Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, Foreign Policy, 11 May 2016.

9 'How ISIS Survives the Fall of Mosul', Charlie Winter, The Atlantic, 3 July 2017.

10 'Islamic State': Raqqa's loss seals rapid rise and fall', Jim Muir, BBC, 17 oktober 2017.

11 'Can ISIS Survive the Caliphate's Collapse?', Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, Bicom, 16 mei 2017.

12 'Defeat as Victory? How the Islamic State Will Rely on Hijrah to Claim a Win', Burak Kadercan, War on the Rocks, 13 October 2017.

13 Guerrilla war: an armed conflict in which unorganised combatants attempt to hinder and exhaust a regular army and in which these unorganised combatants try to avoid direct confrontation with the regular army as much as possible due to their inferior firepower.

14 Terrorism: the execution, for ideological motives, of violence against human beings or material property in an attempt to undermine or destabilise societal structure, strike fear into the hearts of the population or influence political decision-making. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

15 'In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction', Hararo J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, War on the Rocks, 27 September 2017.

recently,¹⁶ and the morale of others appears to be decreasing.¹⁷ However, the remaining combatants see this as a purification process. In their eyes, this just leaves it with the most hard-core members.¹⁸

In recent years, the anti-ISIS coalition may have succeeded in driving ISIS into a corner, but they have failed to defeat it militarily, politically or strategically, or eradicate its ideology. After all, the anti-ISIS coalition is focusing on the physical side of the battle against ISIS. ISIS has likewise been unable to defeat the anti-ISIS coalition, resulting in a stalemate in the Middle East. ISIS seemed to be trying to break the stalemate by orchestrating terrorist attacks against liberal democracies fighting against them, in order to try and antagonise these countries into taking draconian measures to protect Western society. By perpetrating a constant series of attacks, ISIS aims to provoke overreactions against Muslims and exhaust the resolves of Westerners. In this way, ISIS hopes to undermine support for counterterrorist measures and force Western governments to withdraw from the anti-ISIS coalition. For this purpose, ISIS is focusing its propaganda on civilian victims of coalition military action in order to cultivate sympathy for its extremist doctrine and its terrorist movement both in the West and in the local region. According to this interpretation of ISIS's strategic tactics, the draconian nature of the provoked government measures, the constant attacks/threats of attacks, and the propaganda are all intended to erode support among the Western population for their government's policies regarding ISIS. In the same way, they wish to reduce support for other governments in the Middle East and North Africa, giving ISIS the chance to achieve politically desirable results by means of force.¹⁹

ISIS's desire to attack the West is also inspired by the rejection of the West and 'Western' values. In *Dabiq*, ISIS phrased it in the following way:

We hate you, first and foremost, because you are disbelievers; you reject the oneness of Allah – whether you realise it or not – by making partners for Him in worship, you blaspheme against Him, claiming He has a son, and you indulge

*in all manner of devilish practices. It is for this reason that we were commanded to openly declare our hatred for you and our enmity towards you.*²⁰

ISIS will continue to lose territory in Iraq and Syria as a result of the constant offensive against them and cannot survive in its current form. This not only undermines the narrative that the 'caliphate' is an unconquerable gift from Allah, but also stops them from imposing taxes on citizens and conducting other forms of fund-raising. The end of ISIS as a proto-state in Iraq and Syria therefore appears to be in sight, but ISIS has many facets.²¹ It also has manifestations as a Sunni insurgency, a terrorist group, an ideology, and a criminal organisation. Despite the disappearance of the proto-state, the other manifestations – and the threats they pose – will remain intact. Amongst the rubble of Fallujah, it is easy to forget that, since 2004, this city has been liberated from ISIS and its predecessors three times with support from the Americans.²² ISIS has also perpetrated attacks in this devastated region since the last liberation.²³ As long as the civil war in Syria and the oppression of Sunnis in Iraq continue, ISIS will remain active, albeit possibly under a new name.²⁴

In the past two years, the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria has shrivelled from an area the size of the United Kingdom to little more than a couple of enclaves. Conversely, it has simultaneously developed from a local Iraqi group to an international organisation (over a longer period of time).²⁵ It is tempting, but also misleading, to measure the threat posed by ISIS (solely or primarily) in terms of land control and oil possession by the 'caliphate'. For now, its losses do not appear to have diminished its capacity to orchestrate or inspire attacks in the West.²⁶ Some analysts even believe the threat will increase in the short-term, as the end of the 'caliphate' may prompt supporters to commit attacks at home instead. Furthermore, a shrunken 'caliphate' may make ISIS focus more strongly on carrying out attacks in Europe, in order to divert

16 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al Qaida', S/2017/35, par. 20, 13 January 2017. UN, 13 January 2017. The substantial increase in the price of forged passports for ISIS militants to help them escape from Tal Afar to surrounding countries could indicate increasing levels of desertion ('Costs of fake passports for IS militants reach US\$5,000 in Tal Afar', Nehal Mostafa, Iraqi News, 8 August 2017, 'Hundreds of Isis defectors mass on Syrian border hoping to flee', Martin Chulov, The Guardian, 12 September 2017).

17 Rather than fighting to the death, the ISIS combatants in Qalamoun (Lebanon) made a deal to allow them to escape. This is an indication that morale is declining 'Militarily Defeating The Islamic State', The Soufan Center, TSC Intel Brief, 7 September 2017.

18 'Mosul has fallen, but Islamic State is far from defeated', Shiraz Maher, New Statesman, 14 July 2017.

19 'A Military Assessment of the Islamic State's Evolving Theory of Victory', Michael J. Mooney, War on the Rocks, 26 June 2017.

20 'Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You', *Dabiq*, issue No. 15, p. 31, July 2017.

21 'Es gibt verschiedene Gesichter des IS' ('IS has various faces'), Märkische Online Zeitung, 1 July 2017.

22 'Het "kalifaat" is verwoest, maar uit de puinhopen herrijst een nieuwe IS-achtige groep' ('The "caliphate" has been destroyed, but a new IS-like group has risen from the rubble'), Ana van Es, De Volkskrant newspaper, 2 July 2017. 'Victories against IS leave Iraq's Sunni Heartland shattered', Susannah George, AP, 13 August 2016.

23 'ISIS Could Rise Again: What Its Last Resurrection Says About Its Future in Iraq and Syria', Benjamin Bahney and Patrick B. Johnston, Foreign Affairs, 15 December 2017.

24 'After Mosul: What Fate for IS in Iraq?', Andrea Plebani, included in the ISPI report, 'After Mosul: Re-inventing Iraq', p. 136, June 2017.

25 'What ISIL really thinks about the future', Hassan Hassan, The National, 3 July 2017.

26 'Don't Follow the Money: The Problem with the War on Terrorist Financing', Peter R. Neumann, Foreign Affairs, Volume 96, Issue 4, July/August 2017.

attention from the defeats in its heartland²⁷ and to demonstrate its enduring relevance.²⁸ Based on figures from the Institute for the Study of War, the number of attacks connected to ISIS has increased in recent years rather than decreased.²⁹

This is also in line with an appeal from Abu Mohammad al-Adnani made just before his death in May 2016, in which he called on his followers to target civilians in the West.

*The smallest bit of work that you can carry out in their countries is far better and beloved to us than any major [operations] here. [These operations] would be of much success and more harmful to them.*³⁰

Contents and objective of the analysis

The analysis below identifies a broad range of possible development paths that the various manifestations (proto-state, Sunni insurgency, terrorist group, criminal organisation, and jihadist ideology) and threats stemming from these manifestations could take. These manifestations often exist concurrently and are not mutually exclusive. For example, the ideological appeal of ISIS is a vital precondition for the relocation of the 'caliphate' or the continuation of the conflict in the desert. Furthermore, the further development of a virtual 'caliphate'³¹ not only stems from the ideology, but also reinforces it.

This analysis charts a broad range of possible development paths ISIS could take after the fall of the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. Its goal is to gain a clear picture of the threats stemming from these paths in order to encourage debate and deliberation within government circles, in the media and among academics. It can also help to inform the general public on this issue.

Perspectives for action can be developed by the government and its partners based on the insights gained, although these perspectives will not be addressed in the analysis.

Structure

The analysis initially devotes attention to the possible development paths that the fall of the 'caliphate' may instigate, and subsequently examines the threats associated with these paths. The length of a section says more about the complexity of that specific development path or the threats associated with it than it does about the severity of the threats.

Although ISIS founded and shaped the 'caliphate' in both Iraq and Syria, the emphasis in this analysis is on future developments in Iraq. The inner core of ISIS has always been more of an Iraqi organisation than a Syrian one, and it will primarily focus its recovery efforts in Iraq.

ISIS and the Netherlands

In the first two sections, the threats most relevant to the Netherlands are addressed, i.e. the threats posed by returning terrorist combatants and the threat posed by home-grown terrorism. Although both threats have existed for years, the fall of the 'caliphate' will increase their severity and likelihood. For example, it stands to reason that the number of returnees³² will increase. It is also possible that the number of home-grown threats will increase, as ISIS sympathisers will find it almost impossible to travel to the 'caliphate'.

Strategic options for ISIS: adjustment and relocation

The point of departure for Sections 3 – 6 is that the inner core of ISIS will continue to exist and that two manifestations of ISIS will return – the guerrilla organisation and the terrorist organisation. Section 3 analyses the scenario in which the inner core of ISIS and its combatants go underground and continue activities in Iraq and Syria (mainly in Iraq), while Section 4 also touches upon the possible consequences of ISIS combatants spreading to relatively stable Muslim-majority countries. Section 5 explores the consequences of a possible relocation of the core and/or highest members of ISIS, while Section 6 examines how the organisation could build upon existing franchises or affiliated organisations in Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan and the Philippines.

Tactical options for ISIS and its combatants

This is followed by three sections addressing two other manifestations of ISIS, ISIS as a criminal organisation, and the virtual 'caliphate'. These manifestations may continue to develop regardless of whether the inner core of ISIS survives or not. The first part of Section 7 focuses on ISIS as a criminal organisation. The third part of Section 7 considers possible criminal or business activities that ISIS combatants may adopt. The part in between these two suggests that ISIS sympathisers in Europe may make greater use of funds obtained via criminal activities. Section 8

27 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 6, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

28 'As Caliphate Crumbles, Islamic State Turns to Old-Fashioned Crime', Jamie Dettmer, New Delhi Times, 9 August 2017.

29 'ISIS's Expanding Campaign in Europe', Jennifer Cafarella and Jason Zhou, Institute for the Study of War, 18 September 2017.

30 'ISIS Spokesman Al-Adnani Urges "Caliphate Soldiers", ISIS Supporters To Target Civilians In Europe, U.S. During Ramadan', Middle East Media Research Institute, 21 May 2016. Remarks made by Rachid Kassim, a French ISIS operative who threatened attacks in the West, also echo this approach. 'An Interview with Rachid Kassim, Jihadist Orchestrating Attacks in France', Amarnath Amarasinga, Jihadology, 18 November 2016.

31 The virtual 'caliphate' consists primarily of the gigantic jihadist propaganda archive and secondarily of the ICT infrastructure, both of which are used to exert influence on its supporters, enemies, the media and the general public. This influence can have both an open and covert nature.

32 Returnees are travelling jihadists who have stayed with a jihadist group in a jihadist combat zone and then return to the land that they travelled from or to a different country that is not a jihadist conflict zone. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

concentrates on possible ways for the 'caliphate' to live on as a source of inspiration in the virtual world. Section 9 examines a tactical decision that the leaders of ISIS could make involving further escalation as an attempt to turn the unfavourable tide.

Strategic options revisited: ISIS and Al-Qaeda

In Section 10, we look at ISIS's continued existence in relation to its strategic situation. This section considers a number of ways that ISIS could strategically coexist with Al-Qaeda and groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. The final two sections are more summative in nature. Section 11 considers the finiteness and infiniteness of the 'caliphate' as an idea. The concluding section then explains which of the development paths are most likely and considers their mutual compatibility.

Explanation of the working method

This analysis is based on open sources. There are many newspaper articles, scientific studies and publications available on this subject via government bodies, multilateral organisations and knowledge institutes. However, none of the sources consulted offers a systematic analysis of the possible development paths that ISIS could take. Often, the sources consulted touch on just one development path, or a couple at most. During this analysis, our aim was to provide as comprehensive a list as possible. Accordingly, we addressed both the development paths and the associated threats, including those for which only anecdotal evidence exists, such as the use of virtual currency. Furthermore, this means that some of the paths and associated threats described are based on just one or a limited number of sources. The quality of the sources also varies, from opinions published in a newspaper to meticulous scientific research. Therefore, in many cases, the decision was made to make reference to more than one source/type of source.

ISIS AND THE NETHERLANDS

1. Returning terrorist combatants

The return of foreign terrorist combatants³³ from Iraq and Syria has been a concern for some time now. Following the end of the 'caliphate' in these countries, concerns are growing that some of the combatants may try to perpetrate an attack upon their return.³⁴ If the 'caliphate' is militarily defeated or falls apart, then the number of returnees will increase, and Europe in particular will have to deal with a diaspora.³⁵ An increasing number of returnees could reinforce the domestic jihadist movement in the Netherlands and amplify the threat posed by it.³⁶ Returnees may even commit terrorist attacks, although the threat could also come from their new or renewed engagement with jihadist networks in the Netherlands via the influence they have on supporters and sympathisers. A couple of years ago, European security services were predominantly concerned about plots orchestrated by ISIS. Nowadays, ISIS seems to serve more as a source of inspiration, and in some cases it was only later discovered that an attack was

coached by ISIS,³⁷ e.g. by returnees. These 'veterans' strive to radicalise,³⁸ recruit and train combatants as well as plan attacks.³⁹

Extremely few returnees carry out attacks, but the threat is not negligible

Most returnees do not pose an acute risk.⁴⁰ For example, according to the French Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT), only three percent of returnees planned or committed an attack upon their return in the period 2013 – 2016.⁴¹ Research by Lorenzo Vidino also confirms these findings. Only 18% of the 65 people involved in 51 successful attacks since the declaration of the 'caliphate' (June 2014) fought for ISIS in Iraq or Syria.⁴² In other words, the vast majority of attackers have never travelled to fight for ISIS.

33 Foreign terrorist combatants hail from areas outside the jihadist battlegrounds. 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 42' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 42'), Summary, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, July 2016. A returnee is a jihadist holding Dutch citizenship or a Dutch residence permit who has returned to the Netherlands or another Schengen country, or a jihadist with a residence permit and an EU nationality or with a residence permit in another Schengen country who has returned to the Netherlands. 'Actieprogramma Integrale Aanpak Jihadisme. Overzicht maatregelen en acties' ('Programme of Action for a Comprehensive Strategy against Jihadism: Overview of Measures and Activities'), p.34, Ministry of Security and Justice, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 29 August 2014.

34 'Future of ISIS', Ben Smith, House of Commons Library, Number CBP 8029, p. 8, 30 June 2017.

35 'ISIS poses "sustained" threat to US for years to come despite loss of territory', The Guardian, 27 September 2016.

36 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 43' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 43'), Summary, p. 4, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, November 2016.

37 'Facing the Evolving Jihadi Threat in Europe', Thomas Renard, Clingendael Spectator, 19 September 2017. 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 2, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

38 Radicalisation is a process of increasing willingness to accept the most extreme consequences stemming from a particular ideology and to put these extreme consequences into action. This increasing willingness can result in conduct that seriously hurts others or restricts their freedom, can prompt individuals or groups to turn their backs on society and can lead to violence. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

39 'Facing the Evolving Jihadi Threat in Europe', Thomas Renard, Clingendael Spectator, 19 September 2017.

40 'Tackling the Surge of Returning Foreign Fighters', Alastair Reed and Johanna Pohl, ICCT, 14 July 2017.

41 In Belgium and France, these figures were substantially higher: 13.5% and 10.6% respectively. 'Attentats, tentatives et projets d'attentats en relation avec le contexte syro-irakien dans les pays occidentaux (2013 – 2016)' ('Attacks, attempts and planned attacks in the West with an Iraqi-Syrian connection (2013 – 2016)'), p. 2, Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism, March 2017.

42 'Fear Thy Neighbour: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West', p. 16-17, Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, ICCT/ISPI/George Washington University, June 2017. This figure is nearly identical to the results of a French study (17.7%). 'Attentats, tentatives et projets d'attentats en relation avec le contexte syro-irakien dans les pays occidentaux (2013 – 2016)' ('Attacks, attempts and planned attacks in the West with an Iraqi-Syrian connection (2013 – 2016)'), p. 8, Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism, March 2017.

Furthermore, more than a quarter of them had no known connection to ISIS or any other terrorist group whatsoever.⁴³ On the other hand, a substantial percentage of returnees remain active members of extremist networks.⁴⁴ These individuals therefore pose a threat to national security. Moreover, the data concerning the involvement of returnees in domestic attacks does not say anything about the situation in the future. There is always the possibility that returnees may resume terrorist activities at a later date. With regard to combatants returning to Australia (among other countries) after travelling to war zones in the 1990s, experience shows that returnees often wait many years before resuming terrorist activities.⁴⁵ The background and the characteristics of returnees have changed over the years. Nowadays, current and future returnees are much more likely to possess previous military experience, to have spent a more prolonged period in war zones and to have been indoctrinated by ISIS.⁴⁶ The first generation of combatants returned relatively quickly. Jihadists who travelled later are much more likely to have been a front-line soldier and to have committed attacks or atrocities. They will probably have forged international contacts and may well be a role model and a source of inspiration for some of those who stayed behind. Upon their return, many will have difficulty readjusting to everyday life and many will be traumatised, which can be a risk factor in them resorting to violence.

Growing number of returnees and corresponding threats

For the time being, the number of European returnees is relatively limited compared to the number of combatants who have travelled out.⁴⁷ The longer the conflict in Iraq and Syria lasts, the more travelling jihadists will die and hence the fewer returnees there will be. In Iraq and Syria, the warring factions often kill their enemies immediately or shortly after capture.⁴⁸ ISIS counts upon its combatants to fight to the death,⁴⁹ and a violent death on the battlefield is exactly the fate that many ISIS fighters aspire to. Any combatant who stares down the barrel of a gun and sees a pathway to paradise is unlikely to surrender.⁵⁰ Mass surrenders of ISIS

combatants have indeed been reported,⁵¹ though in many cases this involved local combatants who had allied with ISIS for pragmatic reasons rather than ideological ones. Reports of the surrender of foreign ISIS combatants who migrated to the 'caliphate' in order to participate in the jihad are much less frequent.⁵² Naturally, ISIS militants suffer from fear and cowardice as well, although ISIS wants its followers and enemies to believe its combatants fear nothing. The Soufan Center even expects that the battle for the 'caliphate' will result in the deaths of practically all foreign combatants.⁵³ This would be a significant development, as some of these jihadists are the most violent among them.⁵⁴ The limited military training and battle experience possessed by many other Western soldiers may encourage ISIS commanders to see them as expendable, so they may be more likely to use them for riskier missions. Their limited training and battle experience will probably result in a high casualty rate due to them taking misjudged risks or performing ill-advised activities.⁵⁵ Furthermore, ISIS has stated that it will execute anyone who attempts to desert.⁵⁶ It would be particularly difficult for foreign combatants to escape, as they are more closely watched by ISIS, their Arabic is often poor and they have little knowledge of the terrain.⁵⁷ Furthermore, many foreign combatants have surrendered or ritually burnt their passport upon their arrival to the 'caliphate', which can hinder any attempt to return. Moreover, special forces from a number of Western countries – such as France – work very closely with Iraqi units in order to eliminate their compatriots fighting for ISIS.⁵⁸ British special forces (the SAS) allegedly have a list of 200 British ISIS combatants whom they are ordered to kill or capture in order to prevent their unnoticed return to the United Kingdom.⁵⁹ There are also reports that China has sent special units to Syria to fight against Uyghurs (Muslims from western China) who have joined jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁰ All of these developments

43 'Fear Thy Neighbour: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West', p. 16-17, Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, ICCT/ISPI/George Washington University, June 2017.

44 'Manche kommen zurück, "um sich zu erholen"' ('Some come back "to recuperate"'), Politik, 28 November 2016.

45 'ASIO Annual Report to Parliament 2014 – 2015', p. 4, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, 24 September 2015.

46 'The Right Target in Sight? Returnees and the Current Jihadist Threat', p. 37, Hans van Miert, Security and Global Affairs, September 2017.

47 A travelling jihadist is a person who leaves their country of origin to fight for a jihadist group in a jihadist combat zone. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

48 'Are Returning Jihadists a Major Threat?' Thomas R. Cabe, The Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 24, No. 4.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 'ISIS Fighters, Having Pledged to Fight or Die, Surrender en Masse', Rod Nordland, The New York Times, 8 October 2017.

52 'The Bloody End of the Islamic State's Utopian Dream', Graeme Wood, The Atlantic, 20 October 2017. 'ISIS After the Caliphate', Scott Atran, Hoshang Waziri and Richard Davis, The New York Review of Books, 19 October 2017.

53 'The Islamic State of 2018', Intel Brief, The Soufan Center, 13 July 2017.

54 Ibid.

55 'Are Returning Jihadists a Major Threat?' Thomas R. Cabe, The Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 24, No. 4.

56 Ibid.

57 'How To Lose Your Mind To ISIS And Then Fight To Get It Back', Mike Giglio, BuzzFeedNews, 11 September 2017.

58 'France's Special Forces Hunt French Militants Fighting for Islamic State', Tamer El-Ghobashy, Maria Abi-Habib, Benoit Faucon, The Wall Street Journal, 27 May 2017.

59 'SAS in Iraq are given a "kill list" of 200 British jihadis to take out before they return home', Jessica Duncan, Mail Online, 6 November 2016. 'SAS in Iraq gets kill list of British jihadis', Mark Hookham, The Times, 6 November 2016. 'Killing British ISIS fighters the only option "in almost every case", UK minister says', Sam Meredith, CNBC, 23 October 2017. 'Terroristen IS vogelvrij' ('IS Terrorists Outlawed'), Ralph Dekkers, De Telegraaf, 24 October 2017.

60 'Chinese Troops Arrive in Syria to Fight Uyghur Rebels', Jacques Neriah, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 20 December 2017.

can help to reduce the number of returnees. Furthermore, some experts are of the opinion that surviving ISIS combatants will have nothing left to fight for after the loss of the 'caliphate'.⁶¹ However, other authors are convinced that plenty of foreign combatants will survive the war and that a significant proportion of these survivors will continue to fight even after the 'caliphate' falls, either in Iraq/Syria or in a different war zone.⁶²

In 2015, based on German figures, Peter Neumann estimated that between 25% and 40% of combatants who went to fight for ISIS may return to their countries of origin.⁶³ In October 2016, the European coordinator of counterterrorism, Gilles de Kerchove, noticed that EU Member States are having great difficulty dealing with the threats posed by large numbers of returnees. At the time, he spoke of the return of around 1,500 to 2,000 European combatants.⁶⁴ In July 2017, Director of Europol Rob Wainwright gave a similar figure, around 2,500.⁶⁵ It is expected that these combatants will return gradually rather than in groups.⁶⁶ Many European countries are already having difficulty dealing with small numbers of returnees.⁶⁷ According to EU employees, their intelligence and security services lack the resources to monitor them all.⁶⁸ The estimated number of returnees is less than half the number of European jihadists who travelled at one time to fight for ISIS (5,000⁶⁹ to 7,000).⁷⁰ In turn, these European combatants are only a

small minority of the 40,000 jihadists who have travelled to Iraq and Syria from over 100 countries.⁷¹

In just over four years, many more combatants have travelled to Iraq and Syria than those who travelled to Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. In other words, many more combatants have been trained in Iraq and Syria than during the Soviet–Afghan War in the 1980s. With regard to the large numbers of trained combatants and organisational embedding, the current scenario more closely resembles Al-Qaeda's situation prior to the attacks of 11 September 2001.⁷² This does not necessarily mean that the Netherlands or the West is about to suffer a similar attack, but such large numbers of trained combatants certainly pose a potential threat. The increase in scale is a particularly vital element in this regard.

Types of returnees – many still radical

Returnees are not a homogeneous group. Some are disillusioned, such as those who travelled to Iraq and Syria seeking utopia, adventure and a way to express their religious identity and were confronted with an entirely different reality. Upon their return, they could still be an inspiration to young radicals to perpetrate violence, although most disillusioned returnees will pose a negligible threat of violence.

Other returnees are not disillusioned, but decided to leave the war for various possible reasons; They still believe in violent jihad, but may no longer believe in ISIS. They return for a wide range of reasons, such as an upcoming wedding, missing their family or battle-weariness, although they may in principle be prepared to resume violent jihad at a later date. This group has been disengaged from ISIS, but not deradicalised.⁷³ This was the attitude that Revkin encountered when speaking to ISIS deserters in Turkey. They still consider themselves jihadists and would like to see the establishment of a sharia-based society, although they were disillusioned by the way ISIS followed its own strict rules.⁷⁴ This situation was confirmed by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. In a group of 58 ISIS defectors, only a couple had renounced their jihadist ideology.⁷⁵ German research indicated that a large proportion (48%) of these

61 'The Islamic State of 2018', Intel Brief, The Soufan Center, 13 July 2017.

62 'How ISIS Members Fled The Caliphate, Perhaps To Fight Another Day: US officials say most of ISIS fighters have died on the battlefield. Smugglers along the Syria-Turkey border say many have escaped', Mike Giglio and Munzer al-Awad, BuzzFeedNews, 19 December 2017.

63 'Die neue Dschihadisten: IS, Europa und die nächste Welle des Terrorismus' ('The new jihadists: IS, Europe and the next wave of terrorism') p. 131, Peter Neumann, Econ, 2015.

64 'Collapse of IS will lead to attacks, say EU officials', Chris Vallance, BBC News, 18 October 2016.

65 "'No evidence" of foreign fighter flow from Iraq, Syria into Europe, intel officials say', Carlo Muñoz, The Washington Times, 7 September 2017. It is striking that these numbers match the order and scale of Neumann's estimates.

66 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 6, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

67 'Europe's new challenge: Defectors from ISIS', Joby Warrick, The Washington Post, 10 May 2017.

68 'Islamic State fighters returning to UK "pose huge challenge"', Patrick Wintour, The Guardian, 9 March 2017.

69 'Europe Braces for Return of ISIS Fighters From Syria and Iraq', Rob Wainwright (Director of Europol), interviewed by Guy Taylor, The Washington Times, 13 July 2017. See also 'EU anti-terror chief: IS still has 2,500 European fighters', AP, 12 September 2017. In this article, it is pointed out that De Kerchove estimates that 1,500 combatants have already returned home and 1,000 have died.

70 John Gatt-Rutter, Director of Counterterrorism at the European External Action Service, quoted by Martin Banks in 'Returning Foreign Fighters Are Biggest Threat to EU', The Parliament, 12 October 2016. See also 'Europe's new challenge: Defectors from ISIS', Joby Warrick, The Washington Post, 10 May 2017.

71 James R. Clapper, 'Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community', 'Senate Armed Services Committee, p. 4-6, 9 February 2016.

72 'The Evolving Terrorist Threat and CT Options for the Trump Administration', Bruce Hoffman, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, p. 11, June 2017.

73 'Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements (Political Violence)', John Horgan. For more examples, see sources such as 'How To Lose Your Mind To ISIS And Then Fight To Get It Back', Mike Giglio, BuzzFeedNews, 11 September 2017.

74 'A State-Less Caliphate is Less Inspiring to Prospective Recruits and Financiers', Martha Revkin, 26 March 2017.

75 'Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors', p. 10, Peter R. Neumann, ICSR, 2015.

'defectors' retain their belief in jihadist ideology.⁷⁶ The younger generation is particularly at risk. Minors are comprehensively indoctrinated with the ISIS mentality. This ideological indoctrination is conducted via education and military training camps (for youths aged nine and above) as well as in their everyday life.⁷⁷ Minors have a special role to play within ISIS, as they are the new generation of combatants and represent the future of the 'caliphate'.⁷⁸ Some of them have already died in suicide attacks, while others may well perpetrate such attacks in the West.⁷⁹ Although it is too early to predict the exact consequences for minors in the region or returnees, the negative effects are expected to persist for many years to come.⁸⁰ These minors will return to society and the school system, where they may well have a negative effect on their peers, for example.

The third subgroup of returnees consists of active operatives who have been sent back to their home country to find new recruits, commit attacks or incite others to commit attacks. The Paris attacks in 2015 are probably the most prominent example of the activities of such operatives. According to American security services, ISIS supposedly sent hundreds of combatants to Europe in 2015 and 2016.⁸¹ ISIS combatants in the Middle East are said to supervise and facilitate their activities. Furthermore, ISIS is still believed to have several dozen operatives at its disposal.⁸² This group poses the largest threat, as it means that, regardless of the outcome in Iraq and Syria, ISIS will continue to be able to perpetrate attacks in the years to come.⁸³ Some experts believe that attacks by remotely supervised returnees are becoming less likely, as the crumbling 'caliphate' would mean there is less symbolic reward for would-be martyrs.⁸⁴ However, a failed plot in Australia in 2017 showed that, even in hard times, ISIS is still able to remotely orchestrate attacks. No returnees were involved in this plot,

although one jihadist who had travelled to Syria and was family of the terrorists did play a vital role in planning the failed attack.⁸⁵

End of the caliphate – limited impact on the threat of attacks

So far, however, only eight percent of attacks conducted in the West have been perpetrated by individuals operating under the direct order of the leadership of ISIS.⁸⁶ In 26% of cases, the attacks are committed by people with no connection to ISIS or other groups, and in 66% of the cases, they are committed by people with some contact, although the attack was carried out independently of this contact.⁸⁷ In other words, if the 'caliphate' is destroyed, only the smallest of these groups will be directly affected. Yet, despite being the smallest group, it is also the most potentially dangerous. The end of the 'caliphate' will have little to no effect on the second category (26%), and it may well have no effect on the largest category (66%) either, due to the rise of the 'virtual entrepreneurs' phenomenon.⁸⁸ These 'entrepreneurs' are individuals who use social media and encryption to coach aspiring terrorists and provide them with logistical support.⁸⁹ In the literature, this is also referred to as *cybercoaching* (*remote virtual coaching*) of terrorists.⁹⁰ They may well be part of the 'caliphate', but they could just as easily be outside it, which would make it easier for them to continue their activities once the 'caliphate' falls.⁹¹

The number of suicide attacks seems to stabilise at a substantial level. In 2016, ISIS claimed 1,112 'martyrdom operations' in Iraq and Syria. In the first six months of 2017, ISIS claimed 527 such operations in these two countries.⁹² These are large numbers, although some of these operations failed. To put this into perspective, Al-Qaeda carried out 54 suicide attacks during the entirety of 2001.⁹³ It is very possible that some of those who survive the war in Iraq and Syria will travel to other countries to conduct suicide missions there.⁹⁴ The same risk applies to the children of

76 'Jeder vierte Syrien-Rückkehrer kooperiert mit Behörden' (One in four Syrian returnees cooperate with authorities'), Manuel Bewarder and Florian Flade, *Die Welt*, 28 November 2016.

77 'Minderjarigen bij ISIS' ('Minors within ISIS'), a publication by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism and the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service, p. 3, April 2017.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

80 'After Mosul: What Fate for IS in Iraq?', Andrea Plebani, included in the ISPI report, 'After Mosul: Re-inventing Iraq', p. 153.

81 'How a Sensitive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers', Rukmini Callimachi, *The New York Times*, 3 August 2016.

82 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 4, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

83 'The Evolving Terrorist Threat and CT Options for the Trump Administration', Bruce Hoffman, *The Washington Institute of Near East Policy*, Policy Focus 153, p. 11, June 2017.

84 'ISIS Will Fail, but What About the Idea of ISIS?' Simon Cotte, *The Atlantic*, 23 March 2017.

85 'New Developments in the Islamic State's External Operations: The 2017 Sydney Plane Plot', Andrew Zammit, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 9, pp. 13-18, October 2017.

86 'Fear Thy Neighbour: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West', p. 63, Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone and Eva Entenmann, *ICCT/ISPI/George Washington University*, June 2017.

87 *Ibid.*

88 'Trump's thinking on the caliphate is simplistic and dangerous', *The Washington Post*, 9 June 2017.

89 'The surprising reality of the ISIS threat', Michael Weiss, *CNN*, 1 September 2017.

90 'The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?', John Mueller, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 9, October 2017, p. 29.

91 'The threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Planners', Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 3, March 2017.

92 'The terrorist diaspora: After the fall of the caliphate', Thomas Joscelyn, *The Long War Journal*, 14 July 2017.

93 'Suicide Attacks Increase and Spread', *The Washington Post*, 18 April 2008.

94 'The terrorist diaspora: After the fall of the caliphate', Thomas Joscelyn, *The Long War Journal*, 14 July 2017.

the 'caliphate'. Some of them have already died in suicide attacks, while others may well perpetrate such attacks in the West.⁹⁵ In the near future, large numbers of refugees are expected to come to Europe from the Middle East and Africa, and ISIS could once again use these channels to smuggle individuals into Europe (including returnee European citizens and children), as the organisation has done before.⁹⁶

Sub-conclusions

Estimates vary greatly regarding the number of travelling jihadists who will return, although they may be somewhat generous. However, the numbers of combatants travelling to the war zone are unprecedented. Studies show that only a very small proportion of the jihadists that have returned so far have committed attacks, while other studies show that only a relatively small minority of the 'successful' attackers fought for ISIS. Nevertheless, recent history suggests that the potential and actual threat posed by current and future returnees is substantial. The vast majority of attacks are not carried out by returnees, although those carried out by returnees claim more victims than average.⁹⁷

Most returnees have not been deradicalised, and the end of the 'caliphate' will only have a limited effect on the threat of terror attacks. It only directly affects individuals acting on the instructions of the leadership of ISIS and does not affect those with no link to the inner core of ISIS or those operating alone.

95 Ibid.

96 'Top secret British police operation to stop refugee boat jihadis is scuppered by Libya after militia storm base', Barbara Jones, *The Mail Online*, 10 September 2017. 'In Libya, Islamic State Seeks Revival in Gateway to Europe', Hassan Morajea, *The Wall Street Journal Online*, 18 September 2017. 'The Islamic State's Libyan External Operations Hub: The Picture So Far', Johannes Saal, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 11, p. 22, December 2017.

97 'Taking on "foreign fighters": How the West tracks – and targets – jihadis fleeing the collapse of ISIS', James Kitfield, *Yahoo News*, 2 December 2017.

2. Home-grown terrorists

The main threat appears to be from home-grown supporters, violent lone actors, and sleeper cells⁹⁸ who have been inspired by the ideology of ISIS, but have never travelled to the ‘caliphate’⁹⁹ (or did try to travel but were stopped). Rather than coordinated and coached attacks, inspired attacks seem to be the preferred option for ISIS.

According to French research, only 17.7% of the perpetrators of successful or failed attacks spent time in Iraq or Syria.¹⁰⁰ This means that the vast majority of attackers have never travelled to participate in the jihad and that attacks involving returnees are a minority. At the same time, some of the attacks that were perpetrated by returnees resulted in high numbers of fatalities, such as the attacks in Paris (13 November 2015) and Brussels (22 March 2016).¹⁰¹

As established above, the fall of the ‘caliphate’ will have little effect on the risk posed by this group. The only factor that will be eliminated is the inspirational effect that the existence of the ‘caliphate’ possesses. Children who have never travelled to or spent time in ISIS-held territory could also pose a potential risk to Dutch

society.¹⁰² In 2016 and 2017, minors either carried out or attempted attacks in many different European locations.¹⁰³

However, the fall of the ‘caliphate’ will affect the home-grown threat in another way. Financial and communication networks used to support the attackers are coming under increasing pressure. As a result, ISIS and its leadership are becoming increasingly dependent on Western volunteers with little to no training and who must now act with little to no support, coordination or supervision.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, it will become more difficult for Western supporters of ISIS to conduct large-scale and complex attacks,¹⁰⁵ and attacks will be more likely to fail either partly or completely.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, individuals who travelled to the ‘caliphate’ at an earlier stage may decide to return in order to carry out attacks ‘at home’. The implosion of the ‘caliphate’ could result in more frequent, yet less deadly terrorist attacks.¹⁰⁷ Partly in response to the increasing pressure on the ‘caliphate’, ISIS is encouraging these supporters to commit attacks on ‘soft targets’.¹⁰⁸ ISIS is calling on these supporters to hit the West in any possible way, even by kidnapping children to raise funds for the terrorist group.¹⁰⁹ Due to these developments, the home-grown threat will

98 ‘Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State Revisited’, Europol, November. ‘Homegrown extremists “more threat” to UK than returning Islamic State jihadists’, Mark White, SkyNews, 1 September 2017.

99 ‘A battered ISIS grows ever more dependent on “lone wolves”’, Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, National Security, 20 July 2017.

100 ‘Attentats, tentatives et projets d’attentats en relation avec le contexte syro-irakien dans les pays occidentaux (2013 – 2016)’ (‘Attacks, attempts and planned attacks in the West with an Iraqi-Syrian connection (2013 – 2016)’), p. 8, Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism, March 2017.

101 ‘The Right Target in Sight? Returnees and the Current Jihadist Threat’, p. 34, Hans van Miert, Security and Global Affairs, September 2017.

102 ‘Minderjarigen bij ISIS’ (‘Minors within ISIS’), a publication by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism and the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service, p. 17, April 2017.

103 In Paris, Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Mannheim, Hannover and Barcelona. ‘Minderjarigen bij ISIS’ (‘Minors within ISIS’), a publication by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism and the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service, p. 17, April 2017. ‘12-jarige jongen wilde aanslag plegen op Duitse kerstmarkt’ (‘12-year-old attempted an attack on a German Christmas market’), De Volkskrant newspaper, 16 December 2016. ‘Moussa Oukabir, 17, confirmed as one of five attackers killed in Cambrils – as it happened’, The Guardian, 18 August 2017.

104 ‘A battered ISIS grows ever more dependent on “lone wolves”’, Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, National Security, 20 July 2017.

105 ‘Anticipating the Post-Daesh Landscape’, Rik Coolsaet, Egmont Paper 97, October 2017.

106 ‘The Collapse of the Islamic State and the Rise of the “Fail-Bomber”’, Murtaza Hussain, The Intercept, 11 December 2017.

107 Ibid.

108 ‘Islamic State calls for attacks on the West during Ramadan in audio message’, Reuters, 22 May 2016.

109 ‘Rumiyah 11’, p. 39, July 2017.

persist in the coming period, and the collapse of the 'caliphate' is more likely to increase this threat than to reduce it.

Sub-conclusions

The main threat is from individuals who did not travel to Iraq or Syria. Individuals sympathetic to the ideology of ISIS and who are now less able or no longer able to travel to the 'caliphate' may decide to carry out an attack in their own country. As the fall of the 'caliphate' will make it harder for the leaders of ISIS to support attackers in the West, their propaganda may become even more inspirational to 'stay-at-home' jihadists, who could then independently decide to carry out attacks in their own country.

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10111923As a result of these developments, the home-grown threat will persist and is more likely to increase than to decrease.

Yet, it is important to realise that the threat posed by returnees and combatants who are still abroad and the threat posed by individuals who have never travelled to jihadist combat zones may be linked. These two groups are by no means isolated from one another. Terrorist combatants can both radicalise and recruit new adherents from the Middle East or upon their return from a jihadist combat zone, e.g. while on remand or after a jail sentence has been imposed.¹¹⁰ Another option is that these returnees collaborate, such as the perpetrators of the Paris (November 2015) and Brussels (March 2016) attacks.¹¹¹ These threats can also manifest themselves in the medium-term, such as after returnees have served their jail sentence and are released. If this is indeed the case, then the home-grown threat may well be more short-term in nature, while the returnees may pose a greater threat in the medium term.¹¹²

110 For example, radicalisation is a serious problem in Belgium. 'Brussels Attacks One Year On: More Still Needs to Be Done', Thomas Renard, RUSI, 13 March 2017.

111 'Europe's "new" jihad: Homegrown, leaderless, virtual', Thomas Renard, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, Security Policy Brief, July 2017.

112 Taken from an e-mail sent by Thomas Renard to the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism on 19 November 2017.

ADJUSTMENT AND RELOCATION: STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR ISIS:

3. Continuation as a guerrilla organisation – return to the desert

Comparison of ISI in 2007 with ISIS in 2017

ISIS's first retreat to 'the desert' took place ten years ago after tribal Sunni forces, in collaboration with the US army, inflicted extremely heavy losses on the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), the forerunner of ISIS.¹¹³ Later, these tribal Sunni forces were pushed aside by the Shia government led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, when he believed he had no further use for them. The desert became the base from which ISI operated (particularly the foreign ISI combatants), generating income from motorway robberies and extortion. The Iraqi combatants, for whom keeping a low profile was much easier, remained particularly active in urban areas, spreading death and destruction among their tribal enemies and Iraqi forces. The predominantly Sunni population no longer trusted the government or the military forces affiliated with the government,¹¹⁴ which created the conditions for ISI's overt return in 2013. Under the command of former officers in the Iraqi army and Saddam Hussein's former security services,¹¹⁵ ISIS was able to bring large areas under its control within a short time. In the run-up to the summer of 2014, ISIS murdered many of the former Sahwa elements, which eliminated any possible moderate Sunni alternative to ISIS.

Compared to 2007, the conditions for ISIS's recovery are more favourable.¹¹⁶ Since 2007, political and religious divides have widened further in Iraq and Syria. The Sunnis in Iraq and Syria are

extremely uncertain about their future in their own country and feel extremely unsafe and vulnerable. In times of crisis and war, people often cling to their particular ethnic and religious groups, and this is also the case for Iraqi Sunnis who either have or see no other way out. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, they have been politically and socio-economically marginalised by the majority Shiites and feel threatened by the Shia militias. Many Sunnis also fear that ISIS will return in some guise or another.¹¹⁷ In a nutshell, they fear for both their physical safety and their religious identity. If this does not change, part of this group will probably continue to violently resist.

ISIS will continue to ramp up fear among the Sunni population in Iraq by using violence to further undermine the stability of society. In this way, ISIS is deliberately attempting to amplify the sectarian divide¹¹⁸ and, just like its predecessor ISI, it seeks to be the only remaining alternative that can offer the Sunni population security, stability and preservation of their own identity. This recurring cycle of marginalisation and violent radicalisation¹¹⁹ will continue to intensify as long as sectarian politics and violence remain the norm

113 The extra deployment of American forces was known as the 'surge', in cooperation with tribal forces such as the Sahwa, the 'Awakening' and the 'Anbar Awakening Councils'.

114 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. Get ready for ISIS 2.0', Seth J. Frantzman, BICOM, 16 May 2017.

115 'The Dawa'ish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders', Romen Zeidel, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 11, Issue 4, pp. 20-21, August 2017.

116 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. The Western odyssey in defeating ISIS', Kyle Orton, BICOM, 16 May 2017.

117 'A striking positive shift in Sunni opinion in Iraq is underway. Here's what it means', Munqith al Dagher and Karl Kaltenthaler, The Washington Post, 14 September 2017.

118 'Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors', p. 216, Assaf Moghadam, Columbia University Press, 2017.

119 'ISIS: A Catastrophe for Sunnis', Liz Sly, The Washington Post, 23 November 2016. The origin of ISIS commanders strongly reflects this cycle. The vast majority of these commanders come from western (Anbar) and northern Iraq (Mosul, Kirkuk and Tal Afar). These regions suffered greatly from marginalisation and discrimination in relation to the allocation of funds by the central Iraqi government. 'The Dawa'ish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders', Romen Zeidel, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 11, Issue 4, p. 24, August 2017.

in Iraq.¹²⁰ Sectarian violence by Iraqi (mainly Shia) militias during and after the conquest of Mosul, such as torture and summary execution, appears to be ushering in the next phase in this process.¹²¹ This sectarian violence is counterproductive, especially in the long-term.¹²² ISIS's propaganda is currently focusing on fear of cruelty at the hands of Shia militias,¹²³ but ISIS has been capitalising on the feeling of marginalisation and powerlessness among Iraqi Sunnis for over a decade.¹²⁴ To this day, tactical military victories achieved by the Iraqi army and Shia militias against ISIS are alienating the Sunni hearts and minds due to mindless violence perpetrated by the army and militias during the liberation of cities such as Mosul and Raqqa.¹²⁵ As a result, Sunni grievances are further reinforced.

This sectarian behaviour of the already mistrusted regime made it easier for jihadist groups to return to the stage.¹²⁶ The growing regional role of Iran will also continue to increase the appeal of ISIS.¹²⁷ Withdrawal of US troops from Iraq could strengthen Iran's already dominant position to such an extent that it would encourage a negative reaction, such as allowing ISIS to return. It would therefore appear that American presence in the region is vital to serve as a moderating factor in the internal political struggles in Iraq, which would otherwise be even more sectarian in nature.¹²⁸ Furthermore, withdrawal of US forces would probably result in reduced pressure on ISIS in the desert. A US withdrawal

would also have negative consequences on the professionalisation of the Iraqi army.¹²⁹

However, this kind of moderating influence does depend on how the United States conducts itself, as its behaviour directly affects the degree to which the Iraqi population sees the US as a force for stability. President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is unlikely to have had a positive impact on this perception.

Return to the desert and going underground in the city

Since the summer of 2016, ISIS has repeatedly announced what it would do in the event that Mosul, Raqqa and other cities were lost: *inhiyaz*, a return to the desert. In the long-term, the desert is at least as important to ISIS's survival as the city.¹³⁰ The prospects of successfully and permanently driving ISIS from this enormous desert landscape are extremely remote.¹³¹ ISIS has been preparing for a long period of desert habitation for some time.¹³² The leader of ISIS and his closest confidants, his most important commanders, and the hard-core combatants will probably remain underground¹³³ in Iraq and Syria to continue their activities as 'ISIS 2.0'.¹³⁴

The foreign combatants, especially those from the West, will have a very difficult time surviving underground. Even Moroccans or Algerians will stand out among the local population, which will probably force them and their Western comrades to return to their home countries or travel to other jihadist war zones.¹³⁵ If they do stay, any foreign combatants will be subject to intense monitoring by the

120 'Isis may be on its knees but it will rise again if we don't break the cycle', Hassan Hassan, The Guardian, 15 July 2017. 'Syria's Festering Wounds Will Spark a Jihadist Renaissance', Amr al-Azm, Foreign Policy, 10 July 2017. An opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute in 2017 showed that Iraqi respondents believed corruption to be the most important underlying factor for the rise of ISIS; see 'Iraq After the Fall of IS: The Struggle for the State', Renad Mansour, Chatham House, The Royal Institute for International Affairs, p. 12, July 2017.

121 'Stream of floating bodies near Mosul raises fears of reprisals by Iraqi militias', Fazel Hawramy, The Guardian, 15 July 2017. See also 'The Comeback Caliphate: How ISIS Could Regain Control of Iraq', Daniel R. DePetris, The National Interest, 19 July 2017.

122 'How ISIS Is Transforming: Why Predictions of Its Demise Are Premature', Colin P. Clarke, Foreign Affairs, 25 September 2017.

123 'The state of ISIS: shrinking territory, expanding reach', Scott Peterson, The Christian Science Monitor, 12 June 2017. See also 'The Day After: What to Expect in post-Islamic State Mosul', Tallha Abdulrazaq and Gareth Stansfield, Conflict in the Middle East, 25 May 2016.

124 'The day after ISIS: The Middle East after the Islamic State. Tending Flowers in the Desert', Craig Whiteside, BICOM, 18 July 2017.

125 'Mosul Turning Ugly, Raqqa Front Slows', Charles Lister, Middle East Institute, 17 July 2017.

126 'The Battle for Raqqa and the Challenges After Liberation', Hassan Hassan, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 6, 27 June 2017.

127 'Iran in the Islamic State's Crosshairs', Hassan Hassan, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 14 June 2017.

128 'After the liberation of Mosul, what now for Iraq's Sunnis?', Struan Stevenson, Al Arabiya, 18 July 2017. 'Trump Turns Away From Iraq's Coming Storm', Paul D. Shinkman, U.S. News, 29 March 2017.

129 'Why A Dying Islamic State Could Be An Even Bigger Threat To America', James Dobbins and Seth G. Jones, Fortune, 9 March 2017.

130 'The Islamic State After Mosul', Hassan Hassan, New York Times, 24 October 2016. 'Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond', Hassan Hassan, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 11, p. 5, December 2017.

131 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. The Islamic State: Baqiya?', Aymenn al-Tamimi, bicom.org.uk/blogpost, 16 May 2017. 'Political Primacy, Strategic Risks, and ISIL after the Caliphate', Craig Whiteside, ICCT, 9 October 2017. 'The Islamic State Group Lives on – In Iraq's Deserts', Kamal al-Ayash, Niqash, 13 December 2017.

132 'Mosul has fallen, but Islamic State is far from defeated', Shiraz Maher, New Statesman, 14 July 2017.

133 'After the Battle for Mosul, Get Ready for the Islamic State to Go Underground', Patric Ryan and Patrick B. Johnson, War on the Rocks, 18 October 2016. This does assume that al-Baghdadi is still alive. 'Leeft al-Baghdadi nog? IS geeft toespraak van leider vrij', ('Is al-Baghdadi still alive? IS releases leader's speech'), Het Laatste Nieuws, 28 September 2017. 'Ex CIA-Station Chief: ISIS Leader Likely Still Alive', Sandy Fitzgerald, Newsmax, 29 September 2017.

134 'Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? They have options', Colin P. Clarke and Armanath Amarasinga, The Atlantic, 6 March 2017.

135 'In the Event of the Islamic State's Untimely Demise', Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, Foreign Policy, 11 May 2016.

security services due to their non-Iraqi accents, and especially the Western combatants, as they do not look like Arabs.¹³⁶

The remainder of the 'caliphate' will probably develop into an insurgent movement resembling a combination of a guerrilla organisation and a traditional terrorist organisation. ISIS will probably focus on robberies, extortion, smuggling, and taxation of the local population in order to raise funds.¹³⁷ The organisation will additionally commit terrorist attacks, but ISIS will initially focus on recovery, reorganisation, and rearmament¹³⁸ – a process that appears to have already started in some Iraqi provinces.

ISIS currently carries out four to five major attacks per month in Baghdad, which is comparable to 2011, when ISIS's predecessor (the Islamic State in Iraq) was at its lowest point. According to the anti-ISIS coalition, ISIS still had six to ten thousand combatants in mid-October. This is eight to fourteen times the number that ISIS had in 2011.¹³⁹ It is conceivable that ISIS will be able to increase the number of attacks per month in 2018, as the organisation will then most likely be less distracted by the defence of its current territory.¹⁴⁰ It is expected that ISIS in 2018 will be three times as deadly in Iraq as its predecessor ISI was between 2009 and 2012.¹⁴¹

In Diyala Province in eastern Iraq, ISIS has not had control of a city for over two years, although they have started a new wave of violence.¹⁴² Terrorist cells regularly use improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and car bombs to attack positions held by local militias. There is little doubt that ISIS is trying to widen sectarian divides and undermine the security and order provided by the Iran-backed Badr militia.¹⁴³ From Diyala, ISIS also attacks Tamim and Baghdad. Even the very heart of the Shia provinces in southern

Iraq could be targeted from Diyala.¹⁴⁴ Diyala has not suffered such a strong insurgency since the crux of the insurgency conducted by ISIS's predecessor in 2007 and 2008.¹⁴⁵ ISIS's activities in Diyala Province are very similar to those conducted by ISI in the previous decade; old ties might have been rekindled.¹⁴⁶ There are signs that ISIS is also recovering in other areas of Iraq where it had previously lost its foothold,¹⁴⁷ as well as in areas over which it lost control more recently, such as Tikrit and Ramadi.¹⁴⁸ ISIS attackers have succeeded in slipping past checkpoints due to lax security and widespread corruption,¹⁴⁹ and ISIS is said to be setting up sleeper cells in cities like Kirkuk.¹⁵⁰ All of this has not only transformed ISIS into a more classic terrorist organisation, but has returned it to its roots as Sunni guerrillas.¹⁵¹

According to its own – probably biased – reports, ISIS conducted over 1,400 attacks in 16 cities in Iraq and Syria during the first few months after these cities were declared free of ISIS's rule.¹⁵² Simply driving out ISIS as the formal controlling party of a certain territory is therefore not enough to completely negate its ability to perpetrate violence.¹⁵³ Military victories are meaningless if they are

136 'The Islamic State After the Caliphate – Can IS Go Underground?', Thomas R. McGabe, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, p. 97, August 2017.

137 'Charting the Future of The Modern Caliphate', Colin P. Clarke, *War on the Rocks*, 3 May 2017.

138 'Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? They have options', Colin P. Clarke and Armanath Amarasinga, *The Atlantic*, 6 March 2017. 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. Get ready for ISIS 2.0', Seth J. Frantzman, *BICOM*, 16 May 2017.

139 'With Loss of Its Caliphate, ISIS May Return to Guerrilla Roots', Margaret Coker, Eric Schmitt and Rukmini Callimachi, 18 October 2017.

140 'Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies', Michael Knights, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 7, p. 15, August 2017.

141 'Interpreting the Fall of Islamic State Governance', Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 October 2017.

142 'ISIS: A Catastrophe for Sunnis', Liz Sly, *The Washington Post*, 23 November 2016. 'Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox', Michael Knights and Alex Mello, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 10, pp. 1-7, October 2016. 'Terror and Murder – Islamic State Switches to an Insurgency in Iraq: It's delusional to call this war over', Paul Iddon, 7 December 2017.

143 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. The Islamic State: Baqiya?', Aymenn al-Tamimi, *BICOM*, 16 May 2017. See also 'Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox', Michael Knights and Alex Mello, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 10, p. 5, October 2016.

144 'After Mosul: What Fate for IS in Iraq?', Andrea Plebani, included in the ISPI report, 'After Mosul. Re-inventing Iraq', pp. 134-135, June 2017. See also 'Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox', Michael Knights and Alex Mello, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 10, p. 5, October 2016.

145 'Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies', Michael Knights, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 7, p. 19, August 2017.

146 'New Frenemies: Extremists Return to Diyala, To Reunite with Old Allies, Al Qaeda', Mustafa Habib, *Niqash*, 27 April 2017.

147 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. The Western odyssey in defeating ISIS', Kyle Orton, *BICOM*, 16 May 2017.

148 'Away from Iraq's front lines, the Islamic State is creeping back in', Loveday Morris, *The Washington Post*, 22 February 2017. 'IS claims attacks on several areas in western Iraq', *BBC Monitoring*, 27 September 2017. 'Islamic State Fighters Attack Iraqi Forces in Ramadi: Insurgents infiltrated the city by pretending to be tribal fighters, security officials say', Ghassan Adnan and Isabel Coles, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2017.

149 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. The Islamic State: Baqiya?', Aymenn al-Tamimi, *BICOM*, 16 May 2017.

150 'More Dangerous Every Day: Meeting a Member of an Extremist Sleeper Cell in Kirkuk', *Niqash*, Shalaw Mohammed, 23 August 2017.

151 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 6, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

152 'The Fight Goes on: The Islamic State's Continuing Military Efforts in Liberated Cities', p. 1, Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, *Combating Terrorism Center*, West Point, United States Military Academy, 28 June 2017.

153 'IS kan weg zijn, IS-terreur blijft' ('IS may be gone, but IS terror remains'), Gert van Langendonck, *NRCNext*, 3 July 2017.

not accompanied by extra efforts to provide security, governance, and economic development.¹⁵⁴

Particular attention must be paid to the prison system. There is a great deal of evidence indicating that, to a large extent, the return of ISI after its almost complete eradication in 2007 – 2008 was significantly facilitated by activities that took place in prisons. ISI used the prisons for reorganisation, recruitment, training, and recovery. Prison guards were bribed, prisoners broke out either with or without external assistance,¹⁵⁵ or prisoners were wrongfully granted amnesty – such as ‘Caliph’ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2004, spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani in 2009 and religious leader Abu Ali al-Anbari in 2012.¹⁵⁶ This demonstrates the flawed judgement of both the Iraqi and American authorities in separating the wheat from the chaff.

If regular ISIS combatants and innocent Sunnis are once again imprisoned together with hard-core ISIS jihadists, then the latter group is likely to ideologically indoctrinate the former two groups and help create the next generation of ISIS.¹⁵⁷

Bleak prospects

Even though ISIS has lost control of all its cities, it will still take an enormous effort to defeat them in the desert. Even if ISIS is entirely defeated militarily, similar groups will continue to spring up as long as the factors causing the radicalisation of Sunnis (political exclusion, sectarian policy, socio-economic marginalisation, and extreme physical danger) – i.e. the factors contributing to the success of ISIS – are not removed.¹⁵⁸ It is clear that ISIS will fall back on the tactics it used a decade ago. ISIS will probably try to violently eliminate potential Sunni rivals and nip any Sunni competition – be it jihadist or political – in the bud.¹⁵⁹

It seems that the White House is willing to provide humanitarian and infrastructural support in Iraq (and Syria) following the military campaign, but it no longer wishes to play a leading role in state-building and reconstruction efforts thereafter.¹⁶⁰ This kind of attitude will probably hinder the rebuilding of the region and hence the construction of a federal and democratic Iraq.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, due to the low oil price, the Iraqi government does not have the money to fund this reconstruction.¹⁶² The faltering attempts at state-building and reconstruction may then result in ISIS returning.¹⁶³

Tensions between the government in Baghdad and the Kurds may also facilitate the return of ISIS (either with the same name or otherwise) or the rise of other jihadist groups.¹⁶⁴ Thorny issues, such as follow-up action to the Kurdish independence referendum, distribution of power regarding oil fields and disputed territories may result in a new downward spiral of violence.¹⁶⁵

If ISIS develops into a guerrilla organisation with more or less fixed influence on a certain amount of territory, then the organisation may also develop a shadow government, like the one the Taliban has in Afghanistan. This shadow government consists of local leaders who act and dispense justice in line with Sharia law. Afghans often respect these local leaders (or are forced to respect them) more than the limited authority held by the Afghan state.¹⁶⁶ Over the course of the 1990s, a slightly different variety of this situation developed in parts of northern Sinai. Due to corrupt judges and a dysfunctional justice system (it often took years before verdicts were issued), local clerics took it upon themselves to dispense justice. The local population often recognised this clerical justice above and beyond the official justice system.

154 ‘ISIS Reverts to Insurgent Roots to Pose Long-Term Threat, Study Says’, Eric Schmitt, *The New York Times*, 29 June 2017. ‘Aanvullende artikel 100-brief Nederlandse bijdrage aan de strijd tegen ISIS’ (‘Supplementary Article 100 letter on the Dutch contribution to the fight against ISIS’), p. 2, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 January 2016.

155 ‘Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent, The Breaking The Walls Campaign, Part I’, p. 7, Jessica Lewis, *Middle East Security Report 14*, Institute for the Study of War, September 2013.

156 In 2011, the Syrian government took the cynical step of granting amnesty to many hardened jihadists, who were said to have subsequently joined up with Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Following this amnesty, the Syrian government was able to claim with greater justification that it was fighting terrorism. ‘How Syria’s Uprising Spawned a Jihad: Five years ago the opposition to Bashar al-Assad was mostly peaceful and secular. What Happened?’, Kathy Gilsinan, *The Atlantic*, 16 March 2016.

157 ‘The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State, Tending flowers in the desert’, Craig Whiteside, 18 July 2017.

158 ‘The Islamic State After Mosul’, Hassan Hassan, *New York Times*, 24 October 2016.

159 ‘Charting the Future of The Modern Caliphate’, Colin P. Clarke, *War on the Rocks*, 3 May 2017. ‘Insurgents Again: The Islamic State’s Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond’, Hassan Hassan, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 11, p. 5, December 2017. ‘ISIS Could Rise Again: What Its Last Resurrection Says About Its Future in Iraq and Syria’, Benjamin Bahney and Patrick B. Johnston, *Foreign Affairs*, 15 December 2017. ‘What Happens When ISIS Goes Underground?’, Daniel Byman, *The National Interest*, January – February 2018. See also ‘The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory’, Brian H. Fishman, pp. 142–143, 2016.

160 ‘Trump Turns Away From Iraq’s Coming Storm’, Paul D. Shinkman, *U.S. News*, 29 March 2017. ‘As a coalition, we are not in the business of nation-building or reconstruction’, according to American Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. ‘We must ensure that our respective nations’ precious and limited resources are devoted to preventing the resurgence of ISIS and equipping war-torn communities to take the lead in rebuilding their institutions and returning to stability.’ ‘Iraq is free as ISIS loses steam, but hold off on the victory dance’, Thomas Sanderson, *The Hill*, 21 October 2017.

161 ‘Trump Turns Away From Iraq’s Coming Storm’, Paul D. Shinkman, *U.S. News*, 29 March 2017.

162 ‘Victories against IS leave Iraq’s Sunni Heartland shattered’, Susannah George, *AP*, 13 August 2016.

163 ‘With Loss of Its Caliphate, ISIS May Return to Guerrilla Roots’, Margaret Coker, Eric Schmitt and Rukmini Callimachi, 18 October 2017. ‘Areas Newly Seized From ISIS Seen at Risk of Backsliding: U.N. calls for fresh aid to stabilize areas battered by lengthy fight against militants’, Michael R. Gordon, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2017.

164 ‘Mysterious militants raise new fears of insurgency: a new armed group has appeared in northern Iraq, causing locals to fear that IS is regrouping and rebranding for guerrilla warfare.’, Araz Mohammed, Rawaz Tahir, Mohammed Hussein, Samya Kullab and Ben Van Heuvelen, *Iraq Oil Report*, 14 December 2017.

165 ‘Prospect of Kurdish independence raises talk of war’, Hamdi Malik, *Al-Monitor*, 14 September 2017.

166 ‘In the Event of the Islamic State’s Untimely Demise’, Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2016.

Following the rise of ISIS in Sinai, some of these judges joined the ISIS *wilayat* (province)¹⁶⁷ of Sinai.¹⁶⁸

There are 25 million Sunnis living between Baghdad and Damascus who are wary of the government in these cities and are becoming increasingly isolated from the ruling authorities.¹⁶⁹ As long as these Sunnis are unconvinced that the Iraqi or Syrian state, respectively, will protect them rather than prosecute them, ISIS will continue to be able to find sympathisers and new recruits among them in order to set up 'ISIS 2.0'.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the international anti-ISIS coalition will disintegrate once its main needs are met¹⁷¹ and the international focus shifts to other jihadist organisations, such as the Al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS).¹⁷²

A return to the desert will probably make it more difficult for ISIS to carry out attacks on Western targets.¹⁷³ At the same time, the desire for attacks will increase in order to continually reinforce ISIS's relevance to the international jihadist movement.¹⁷⁴

Sub-conclusions

For a substantial period, ISIS has been preparing for a return to the desert in order to continue the conflict there. In comparison to 2007, when ISIS first retreated to the desert, the current conditions for the organisation's recovery are more favourable. Targeted violence by ISIS and drastic measures by Shia militias and other parties are highly likely to further inflame sectarian tensions. For many years, a huge number of Sunnis have felt that they have been politically and socially marginalised and that their physical safety and religious identity are under threat. If this does not change, part of this group will probably continue to violently resist. Any withdrawal by the United States could result in the revival of ISIS or the rise of other jihadist groups. The faltering efforts at state-building and reconstruction may also contribute to this. The organisation has already taken the first steps towards continuing the conflict underground as a guerrilla organisation that also carries out terrorist attacks. A return to the desert will

almost definitely make it more difficult for ISIS to carry out attacks on Western targets.

167 *Wilayat* is the Arabic name that ISIS uses to refer to its provinces. ISIS has also declared control of provinces outside Iraq and Syria, such as in Libya and Yemen. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

168 'Crossing the Canal: Why Egypt Faces Creeping Insurgency', Michael Horton, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 6, p. 24, June/July 2017.

169 'Victories against IS leave Iraq's Sunni Heartland shattered', Susannah George, AP, 13 August 2016.

170 'The Islamic State is Not Dead Yet', Anthony J. Blinken, 9 July 2017; also see 'ISIS was a symptom. State collapse is the disease', Thanassis Cambanis, The Boston Globe, 15 July 2017.

171 'ISIS was a symptom. State collapse is the disease', Thanassis Cambanis, The Boston Globe, 15 July 2017.

172 'Preventing a Jihadist Factory in Idlib', Fabrice Balanche, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 31 August 2017.

173 'ISIS Will Fail, but What About the Idea of ISIS?', The Atlantic, Simon Cottee, 23 March 2017.

174 *Ibid.*

4. Undermining relatively stable countries with Muslim majorities

In accordance with this development path, ISIS operatives will set up and further develop clandestine networks in the more politically stable countries in the region with the primary aim of destabilising them.¹⁷⁵ Whatever happens with ISIS in Iraq and Syria, few doubt that the unifying ideal of the ‘caliphate’ will live on even after its demise, continuing to serve an important motivational, psychological and ideological purpose. Furthermore, its combatants will spread out, as was the case with Al-Qaeda after the fall of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. This atomisation reduced the effectiveness of the inner core of Al-Qaeda, but at the same time breathed new life into affiliated local organisations and supported the rise of new franchises. It seems likely that a similar development path will materialise after the fall of the ‘caliphate’. This would put Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi¹⁷⁶ in the same position as Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, a ‘theoretical’ remote leader who remains hidden. Despite al-Baghdadi refusing and later even resisting against such a role,¹⁷⁷ it is one that the future may still have in store for him.

According to this development path, it is just a matter of time before ISIS (or other Sunni terrorist networks) will start expending greater efforts to carry out attacks in more stable countries in the region, such as Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and the Gulf States.¹⁷⁸ In jihadist eyes, the legitimacy of the governments in these countries is limited at best. The chaos in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya provides the

essential oxygen to incite Sunni and Shia extremism in the entire region.¹⁷⁹

Countries like Tunisia, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia are particularly vulnerable to scenarios in which returnees carry out attacks, given the large numbers of their citizens who have travelled to Iraq and Syria. Areas in Russia and the Caucasus and countries in Central Asia may have to deal with a similar scenario.¹⁸⁰ In Tunisia, ISIS-affiliated groups have already attempted to destabilise the transition of the political system by capitalising on dissatisfaction with the speed and direction of the transition¹⁸¹ in order to undermine consensus-driven politics in that country.¹⁸²

Sub-conclusions

As was the case with Al-Qaeda, some of the ISIS combatants will spread out, with many returning to their country of origin. Within this development path, this means that they will travel or return to relatively stable countries with a Muslim majority, such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia or Tunisia. It is expected that some of these combatants will reinforce local ISIS-affiliated organisations or set up their own franchises. It is possible that al-Baghdadi will then play a similar role to the one al-Zawahiri plays for Al-Qaeda, that of a theoretical and remote leader.

175 ‘Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS’ Global Reach’, Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017.

176 Pseudonym of Ibrahim bin Awad bin Ibrahim al Badri al Radawi al Hussein al Samarra.

177 ‘In the Event of the Islamic State’s Untimely Demise’, Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, Foreign Policy, 11 May 2017.

178 including Saudi Arabia.

179 ‘The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. Get ready for ISIS 2.0’, Seth J. Frantzman, bicom.org.uk/blogpost, 16 May 2017.

180 ‘Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS’ Global Reach’, Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017.

181 ‘How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb’, International Crisis Group, Report Number 178, p. 11, 24 July 2017.

182 Ibid., p. 19.

5. Relocation of the inner core of ISIS

a. Escape to countries where ISIS franchises control territory

A change of location could boost strategic opportunities for the group's continued existence.¹⁸³ Currently, ISIS is under such heavy fire in Iraq and Syria that it is not inconceivable that a small number of targeted or fortunate attacks could take out practically the entire top and upper middle levels of the organisation. To limit this risk, the group may consider relocating some of its leaders. However, relocation of the ideological and strategic leadership is not without risk – since a 'retreat' such as this would be hard to swallow for some ISIS supporters. It would also mean giving up Syria (temporarily at least), a region that plays an important role in the organisation's apocalyptic prophecies.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, moving out of Iraq and Syria would be a short-term blow to the organisation's credibility because, in its propaganda, ISIS continually emphasises that it will stay and expand in Iraq and Syria.

In theory, it is possible that the ideological and strategic leaders would move and that the operational leaders would remain in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, due to the increasing pressure, ISIS may choose to retreat to other areas controlled by ISIS, such as parts of Yemen, Libya or Afghanistan. The inner core of ISIS has already sent a number of combatants to these areas from Iraq and Syria. For example, al-Baghdadi has instructed supporters and sympathisers to travel to Libya.¹⁸⁵ However, just as is the case for Western combatants, it is difficult for ISIS leaders to blend in with the local community in Yemen, Libya or Afghanistan, such as the Tuareg or Toubou in southern Libya and the surrounding area.¹⁸⁶

However, from ISIS's perspective, it is problematic that none of these franchises are functioning effectively due to internal conflicts and a lack of local support (as is the case in Yemen),¹⁸⁷ violent opposition by other armed groups (jihadist or otherwise), effective government action or international pressure, such as in Libya, Afghanistan¹⁸⁸ or Algeria.¹⁸⁹ On the other hand, some franchises have managed to maintain themselves for a reasonably long time and are therefore viable for the time being. In the event of a relocation of the leadership or the fall of the 'caliphate', they may well receive a boost in terms of manpower, resources, and expertise. At the same time, in contrast to Al-Qaeda,¹⁹⁰ ISIS franchises have little to no success in forming alliances with groups that have a similar or complementary ideology.¹⁹¹ Instead of building alliances, ISIS insists on strict loyalty to the 'caliphate' and organisational uniformity, a stance that turns potential allies into opponents.¹⁹² The alliances that ISIS has managed to forge appear to be the result of intimidation or opportunism.¹⁹³ Tribes in Iraq and Syria have allegedly been paid to offer their support.¹⁹⁴

183 'In the Event of the Islamic State's Untimely Demise', Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2017.

184 *Ibid.*

185 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 20, UN, 31 May 2017.

186 'Matriarchal and Tribal Identity, Community, Resilience, and Vulnerability in South Libya', Manal Taha, *United States Institute of Peace*, November 2017, pp. 1-18.

187 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 27, UN, 31 May 2017.

188 *Ibid.*, par. 28.

189 *Ibid.*, par. 21.

190 'Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Financial Assessment', p. 4, Yaya J. Fanusie and Alex Entz, Center on Sanctions & Illicit Finance, July 2017. 'Nexus of Global Jihad, Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors', pp. 9-10 and p. 129, Assaf Moghadam, Columbia University Press, 2017.

191 One exception to this is South-East Asia. Here, ISIS has had greater success in forming alliances, as the network there is much more fluid in nature. 'Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity Outside the Group's Defined Wilayat', p. 4, Marielle Ness, CTC, 2 June 2017.

192 'What Will Happen to ISIS When Its Territory is Recaptured?', James L. Gelvin, *Stringer/Reuters*, 30 October 2016.

193 'Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors', p. 168, Assaf Moghadam, Columbia University Press, 2017.

194 *Ibid.*

b. Escape to more stable countries in the region

ISIS leaders and other high-ranking individuals may also escape to neighbouring countries and go into hiding there. Jordan and Lebanon have large communities of Syrian refugees (mainly Sunnis)¹⁹⁵ and a large Salafist¹⁹⁶ movement. ISIS's presence could further upset the often-precarious sectarian balance in these countries. The situation in Turkey is even more concerning, as ISIS and other jihadist groups have built up extensive networks in this country and the government does not appear to be taking action to combat this.¹⁹⁷ Despite increased Turkish border checks, foreign combatants may have moved to cities such as Sanliurfa and Gaziantep.¹⁹⁸ Furthermore, the heavy-handed measures taken by the Turkish government in response to the military coup in 2016 have led to purges of the Turkish army, police, intelligence services, and justice system, which has weakened and undermined Turkey's capacity for counterterrorism.¹⁹⁹ However, relocating to a country with a recovering or reasonably functional state apparatus will not be an attractive prospect to the top and middle levels of ISIS.

areas, there is powerful competition from other groups (jihadist or otherwise) or the government is taking major counterterrorist action.²⁰¹ Going into hiding within the enormous refugee populations in neighbouring countries would be a more feasible course of action, although this would appear similarly unattractive to ISIS due to the reasonably well-functioning or recovering state and security system in Jordan and Lebanon.

Sub-conclusions

Relocation of the leadership appears unlikely, as ISIS's 'caliphate' is based in the Levant, just like the historic 'caliphate'. Iraq and Syria have a unique historic and religious significance that other regions simply do not have,²⁰⁰ and any 'retreat' would be hard to swallow for a large proportion of the supporters of ISIS. It is therefore unlikely that ISIS will move the 'caliphate' and its leadership outside Iraq and Syria to a country in which an affiliated organisation wields a degree of power. Furthermore, in all of these

195 'Hezbollah Steers Lebanon Closer to Syria, Straining Efforts to Stay Neutral', Reuters, 11 August 2017.

196 Salafism is a collective term for a spectrum of fundamentalist movements within Sunni Islam that call for a return to pure Islam as it was practised in the time of the prophet Muhammed and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs in the centuries thereafter. Adherents of Salafism consider themselves 'pious and righteous spiritual leaders' and practise a literal interpretation of the 'traditional' Koran. As defined by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism.

197 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017. 'Erdogan radicaliseert Turkije: Treedt Turkije in de voetsporen van Pakistan en Iran?' ('Erdogan radicalises Turkey: Will Turkey follow in the footsteps of Pakistan and Iran?'), Hakan Büyüç, De Kanttekening, 20 October 2017. 'What Happens When ISIS Goes Underground?', Daniel Byman, The National Interest, January – February 2018. 'Turkey is becoming new hub for Salafist-jihadi exodus from Syria', Metin Gurcan, Al-Monitor, 8 January 2018. 'Islamic State Networks in Turkey', Merve Tahiroglu and Jonathan Schanzer, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, p. 8 and pp. 17-19, March 2017.

198 'ISIS Fighters Are Not Flooding Back Home to Wreak Havoc as Feared', Eric Schmitt, The New York Times, 22 October 2017. 'How ISIS Members Flew The Caliphate, Perhaps To Fight Another Day', Mike Giglio, BuzzFeedNews, 19 December 2017.

199 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017. 'Islamic State Networks in Turkey', Merve Tahiroglu and Jonathan Schanzer, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, p. 20 and pp. 24-25, March 2017.

200 'Rise and fall of ISIS: its dream of a caliphate is over, so what now?', Jason Burke, The Guardian, 21 October 2017.

201 'When the Caliphate Crumbles: The Future of Islamic State's Affiliates', Clint Watts, War on the Rocks, 13 June 2016.

6. Building upon existing franchises – global network

Section 3 has already established that the current situation in Iraq (and Syria) is much worse than in 2007. This is also the case in the sense that one of the most striking differences between ISIS now and its predecessor in 2007 is its distribution across a number of official and unofficial *wilayats* in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. While the inner core of ISIS is weakening, the periphery may well take on greater importance, as was the case for the inner core of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This opens up the possibility of demonstrating to people outside Iraq and Syria that the dream of the 'caliphate' is still alive, which to many sympathisers will be far more influential than the development and expansion of the virtual 'caliphate' (see Section 8).

To prove that the dream of the 'caliphate' lives on, it is vital to demonstrate that the ISIS methodology (*manhaj*) is successful in practice. ISIS can do this by conquering cities (such as in Marawi) and conducting guerrilla wars against stronger enemies (such as in Afghanistan). The loss of the 'caliphate' means that ISIS will return to a previous phase of its military strategy, characterised by insurgency, banditry and terrorism. ISIS's phased political and military strategy – from terrorism to insurgency to conventional war and back again – serves as a bridge between two of its pillars, the violent brand and the military campaign. The brand is based on a belief system that orders an eternal struggle against heretics, infidels, and apostates. ISIS will survive by conducting a military campaign based on insurgency and terrorism, which will simultaneously allow it to continue the fighting permanently.²⁰²

In reaction to the fall of the 'caliphate', the leadership could decide to go into hiding in Iraq and Syria and simultaneously build upon

existing franchises in other countries. ISIS has eight franchises, governing 36 *wilayats*, from Algeria to the Caucasus and from Afghanistan to Yemen.²⁰³ In many of the areas in which ISIS operates franchises, there is no effective state authority and there are currently violent uprisings (or the conditions are ripe for violent uprisings). ISIS could choose to shift the focus from the Middle East to other areas and capitalise upon existing conflicts. This will enable it to set up and expand positions and use these as a basis for carrying out attacks.²⁰⁴

Some of the ISIS franchises are little more than tiny terrorist organisations, while others grew into uprisings that temporarily or permanently controlled territory, such as ISIS in Libya (ISIS-L) or ISIS in the Khorasan *wilayat* in Afghanistan.²⁰⁵ Some ISIS franchises and the associated *wilayats* may disappear,²⁰⁶ but others will survive the collapse of the 'caliphate' in ISIS, especially if experienced combatants relocate to these regions.²⁰⁷

Since the increasing military pressure on the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria has made it more difficult to travel there, ISIS has called on potential combatants to travel to other regions, such as Libya,

202 'In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction', Hararo J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, *War on the Rocks*, 27 September 2017.

203 'Status report: IS Provinces as of July 2017', SITE Intelligence Group, June 2017.

204 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017.

205 'When the Caliphate Crumbles: The Future of Islamic State's Affiliates', Clint Watts, *War on the Rocks*, 13 June 2016.

206 'The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya', p. 44, Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith and Karim Mezran, *Atlantic Council*, June 2017.

207 'Future of ISIS', Ben Smith, House of Commons Library, Number CBP 8029, p. 8, 30 June 2017.

Yemen, Afghanistan, and the Philippines.²⁰⁸ The relative size and strength of the affiliated groups operating in these areas has increased since ISIS reached its peak in 2015.²⁰⁹ The analysis below pays specific attention to these countries, as the likelihood of ISIS successfully continuing the conflict is highest there. ISIS and organisations affiliated with ISIS are active in many countries. However, in the short to medium term, the organisation seems most likely to capture more territory in these specific countries, with an eye to setting up a system of sharia-based governance and continuing the armed conflict against people of other faiths, apostates and heretics.

South-East Asia and the Philippines in particular are given more attention in this analysis because this region is culturally very different from the *wilayats* in the Islamic heartland in the Middle East (Yemen), South Asia (Afghanistan) and North Africa (Libya). In addition, ISIS appears to be trying to expand in this region and is therefore paying more attention to this goal in its propaganda. Furthermore, ISIS's attitude to other groups in the Philippines seems somewhat different compared to its attitude in other regions. The Philippines is also the only country in which ISIS is active that does not have a Muslim majority. Yet, the deep internal divisions in the Philippines and the government's chronic failure to resolve these differences by fulfilling the economic, social, and security needs of a large proportion of its population also provide a major driving force for the current insurgency in the country.

People and groups affiliated with ISIS also operate in Algeria, the Russian Federation, the Caucasus, Central Asia, China, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Thailand, although in these countries, support for ISIS is relatively limited. Furthermore, the mainly heavy-handed yet effective and repressive government activities in these countries prevent ISIS and other jihadist groups from developing and maturing. So far, very few ISIS combatants have travelled from the 'caliphate' to Somalia, Nigeria and Egypt (Sinai). Given the different ethnic make-up of the populations in these countries (Somalia and Nigeria), this is unlikely to change any time soon. Inaccessibility can also play a role, such as in the Sinai. However, there are now reports of Russian-speaking combatants with combat experience in Iraq and Syria travelling on to Sinai.²¹⁰

Another course of action for fleeing ISIS combatants is to go to a 'new' war zone. One such region could be Rakhine State in Myanmar. The plight of the Rohingya Muslims could attract foreign

combatants, particularly from ISIS,²¹¹ and the extremely brutal measures employed by the Burmese government could well drive Rohingyas into the arms of international jihadist groups such as ISIS.²¹²

a. Libya

In the Maghreb, ISIS achieved its greatest success in Libya, as this is the only country whose state collapsed following the Arab Spring. However, just like everywhere else, the jihadist expansion in Libya was (i) a consequence of the instability rather than its main cause, (ii) a type of radicalisation that follows a crisis rather than a crisis caused by radicalisation, and (iii) a consequence of a conflict between other parties rather than a consequence of targeted action by ISIS itself. ISIS, Al-Qaeda and other jihadist organisations rarely have the power to conquer territories outside an existing war zone or imploded state.²¹³ In Sirte, ISIS-L capitalised on the absence of the state and the rivalry between three Libyan governments and other groups²¹⁴ who were more preoccupied with fighting each other than tackling ISIS-L.²¹⁵ Some analysts believe that the main warring parties in Libya (the Libyan National Army and the *Bunyan al-Marsous* forces) turned a blind eye to ISIS-L's activities in the hope that ISIS-L would attack the other faction.²¹⁶

In the past two years, a large number of foreign combatants have travelled to Libya, including combatants from Iraq and Syria.²¹⁷ The inner core of ISIS sent combatants from Iraq and Syria to Libya

208 'This is What Allah and His Messenger Had Promised Us', Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, 2 November 2016. This appeal was repeated in an article in an Al-Naba publication at the end of November 2016. 'ECTC Situation Report. Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in Libya: Exploiting disorder', Europol, 7 September 2017, p. 18.

209 '18th report of the ISIS and Al Qaida Monitoring Team', S/2016/629, par. 58, 19 July 2016.

210 'Is Sinai the new Syria? Evidence that Russian-speaking fighters left Raqqa & went to Egypt', Janna Paraszczyk, Chechens in Syria, 14 December 2017.

211 'Myanmar and its Rohingya Muslim Insurgency', Thomas M. Sanderson and Maxwell B. Markusen, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 7 September 2017. 'Myanmar faces growing danger from ISIS supporters as persecution of Rohingya Muslims continues', Business Insider, Reuters, 4 January 2017. Al-Qaeda has also called upon Muslims to support the Rohingyas. 'Al-Qaeda Central urges Muslims to Financially, Militarily, and Physically Support Their Brethren in Myanmar', SITE Intelligence Group, 12 September 2017.

212 'Could Myanmar's Rakhine State become the next ISIS recruiting ground?', Euan Black, Southeast Asia Globe, 15 December 2016. 'Rohingya plight making Myanmar a target for Isis, Malaysia warns', The Guardian, 5 January 2017.

213 'Exploiting Disorder: Al Qaeda and the Islamic State', International Crisis Group Special Report, p. ii, 14 March 2016.

214 'How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb', International Crisis Group, Report Number 178, p. 14, 24 July 2017.

215 'How Realistic is Libya as an Islamic State "Fallback"?', Geoff D. Porter, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 3, p. 2, March 2016.

216 "'Daesh are back and want revenge": The fall and rise of IS in Libya', Tom Wescott, Middle East Eye, 5 September 2017.

217 'Report on the threat posed to Libya and neighbouring countries, including off the coast of Libya, by foreign terrorist fighters recruited by or joining Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities', UN, S/2016/27, p. 6, 18 July 2016. 'In Libya, Islamic State Seeks Revival in Gateway to Europe', Hassan Morajea, The Wall Street Journal Online, 18 September 2017. 'Long shadow of the Islamic State's crumbling caliphate falls upon Egypt', Simon Speakman Cordall, The Arab Weekly, Issue 133, p. 3, 26 November 2017. 'Algerian Foreign Minister: IS Foreign Fighters Moving Toward Libya', Libyan Express, 11 December 2017.

in 2015 to set up ISIS-L.²¹⁸ ISIS-L could survive in the north of Libya as a collection of sleeper cells in Tripoli and other cities.²¹⁹

The desert and the rural areas in the south offer strategic depth and a safe haven in which ISIS can recover, recruit and train.²²⁰

The endemic smuggling activities in the region (especially oil smuggling) offer opportunities to fund this recovery.²²¹ There are unconfirmed reports that some ISIS combatants who planned attacks in the West no longer use Iraq and Syria as the base of their operations, instead using Libya.²²² In any case, it is conceivable that ISIS-L will be able to use this influx of combatants from the Middle East to develop external attack forces that are independent of the forces in Iraq and Syria.²²³ There are also indications that ISIS is trying to smuggle combatants into Europe via Libya.²²⁴

Some high-ranking individuals within the inner core of ISIS may see Libya as an emergency exit²²⁵ in case the situation for the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria becomes untenable.²²⁶ However, ISIS-L has not received any significant funding from the 'caliphate' since 2016 due to stricter financial checks and the growing financial

difficulties of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.²²⁷ The loss of territory in Libya will have worsened this already problematic financial situation. As a result, it is less likely that the top level of ISIS will retreat to Libya.

Many jihadists in North Africa and elsewhere are involved in an essentially nationalistic conflict, although the conflict in Libya also involves strongly tribal aspects. As long as ISIS continues to ignore this nationalistic focus and pay less attention to building national alliances and local support compared to other organisations, such as Al-Qaeda and groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda,²²⁸ ISIS will continue to find it difficult to grow and establish a dominant position. ISIS has traditionally focused on complete domination of partner groups, which local groups generally will not tolerate.²²⁹ This process was demonstrated in Derna, and to a lesser extent in Sirte.

ISIS-L likewise had little success, as the organisation never took root in Libya: they were artificial, an imported foreign ideology.²³⁰ Compared to the franchises affiliated with Al-Qaeda, ISIS-L is much less embedded in the country. For example, at least 70% of ISIS-L consists of non-Libyans²³¹ and the leaders are predominantly Saudi Arabian.²³² Reports that ISIS-L combatants were recruited from poor neighbouring countries (Chad, Mali, and Sudan) in exchange for payment also suggests that ISIS-L has a lack of pulling power in general and among the Libyan population in particular.²³³ In Libya, local jihadist groups are at best ambivalent to ISIS-L and at worst outright hostile. A typical reaction was displayed by the jihadist-Salafist group Benghazi Revolutionary Shura, which

218 S/2015/891, par. 21, UN, 19 November 2015. The number of combatants is reported to be around 800, including a number of high-ranking Iraqi commanders. Many of the ISIS-L combatants previously fought for the Libyan al-Battar unit and set up ISIS-L together with non-Libyan ISIS combatants. 'A Quick Guide to Libya's Main Players', p. 6, Mattia Toaldo and Mary Fitzgerald for the European Council in Foreign Relations, Center for Security Studies, 15 June 2016. 'The Dawah: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders', Romen Zeidel, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 11, Issue 4, p. 18, August 2017. 'The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory', Brian H. Fishman, pp. 232-233, 2016.

219 'When the Caliphate Crumbles: The Future of Islamic State's Affiliates', Clint Watts, War on the Rocks, 13 June 2016. 'In Libya, Islamic State Seeks Revival in Gateway to Europe', Hassan Morajea, The Wall Street Journal Online, 18 September 2017. 'CrisesAlert2: European security interests at stake in Libya?', Kars de Bruijne, Floor El Kamouni-Janssen and Fransje Molenaar, Clingendael report, p. 7, October 2017.

220 'Analysis: 'Signs of Recovery for the Islamic State'', Kyle Orton, The Henry Jackson Society, 22 April 2017. 'CrisesAlert2: European security interests at stake in Libya?', Kars de Bruijne, Floor El Kamouni-Janssen and Fransje Molenaar, Clingendael report, p. 7, October 2017.

221 '20th Report of the IS and AQ Monitoring Team', S/2017/573, par. 34, UN, 30 June 2017. 'This is the terrorist likely to succeed Baghdadi as ISIS's new leader', Al Arabiya English, 15 July 2017. 'In Libya, Islamic State Seeks Revival in Gateway to Europe', Hassan Morajea, The Wall Street Journal Online, 18 September 2017.

222 'The terrorist diaspora: After the fall of the caliphate', Thomas Joscelyn, The Long War Journal, 14 July 2017.

223 'The Evolving Terrorist Threat and CT Options for the Trump Administration', Bruce Hoffman, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, p. 11, June 2017.

224 'Top secret British police operation to stop refugee boat jihadis is scuppered by Libya after militia storm base', Barbara Jones, The Mail Online, 10 September 2017. 'In Libya, Islamic State Seeks Revival in Gateway to Europe', Hassan Morajea, The Wall Street Journal Online, 18 September 2017.

225 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL', S/2016/501, par. 26, UN, 31 May 2016.

226 'How Realistic is Libya as an Islamic State "Fallback"?', Geoff D. Porter, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 3, p. 1, March 2016.

227 'Who pays for IS in Libya?', James Roslington and Jason Pack, Hate Speech International, 24 August 2016.

228 For example, see the explanation by Qasim al-Raymi – leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – regarding his strategy to gain broad and unqualified support (April 2017), 'And by the grace of Allah, we fight [alongside] all Muslims in Yemen, together with different Islamic groups. We fought with the Salafs without exception. We fought with the Muslim Brotherhood and also our brothers from the sons of tribes. We fought together with the public in Aden and elsewhere. We participate with the Muslims in every battle.' Quoted by Thomas Joscelyn in 'AQAP leader discusses complex war in Yemen', The Long War Journal, 2 May 2017. See also 'The general's trap in Libya', Emily Estelle, Critical Threats, 1 August 2017.

229 'What is the future of ISIS and what is its status on the security agenda?', Alex P. Schmid, Security and Global Affairs, p. 51, 1 December 2016.

230 'How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb', International Crisis Group, Report Number 178, p. 31, 24 July 2017.

231 'Isil recruiting migrant "army of the poor" with \$1,000 sign-up bonuses', Colin Freeman, The Telegraph, 1 February 2016. Other estimates give an even lower percentage of Libyans in ISIL-L. 'How Realistic is Libya as an Islamic State "Fallback"?', Geoff D. Porter, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 3, p. 1, March 2016.

232 'In retreat, IS takes advantage of Libya's political divide: Rival forces in Libya are fighting an Islamic State insurgency after the group suffered major blows across the country', Mat Nashed, Al-Monitor, 21 December 2017.

233 'Isil recruiting migrant "army of the poor" with \$1,000 sign-up bonuses', Colin Freeman, The Telegraph, 1 February 2016.

violently drove ISIS-L out of Derna following ISIS-L's cruel treatment of the local population.²³⁴

The lack of non-Sunni minorities in Libya, and especially the lack of Shiites, poses a tricky strategic problem for ISIS-L. In Libya, the organisation cannot exploit sectarian divides within the Muslim world as it has so successfully done in Iraq and Syria. In Libya, there are no Shiites for ISIS-L to use as a bogeyman,²³⁵ and no other sectarian divide that ISIS-L can use to capitalise upon fears among the Sunni population of Shia dominance, as is the case in Iraq and Syria.

The loss of Sirte presents a second strategic problem for ISIS-L. The success in Iraq and Syria, and later Libya, was partly based on the message that ISIS-L would stay and expand in Libya. However, the loss of the stronghold in Sirte means ISIS-L can no longer assert this.²³⁶

b. Yemen

In addition to Libya, ISIS combatants from Iraq and Syria could also retreat to Yemen. Yemen appears to be an ideal place of refuge due to (i) the arid climate, (ii) the scarcely penetrable mountains, (iii) the security vacuum caused by state absence combined with a worsening civil war, (iv) a growing internal refugee problem offering recruitment opportunities, (v) omnipresent smuggling networks with which the armed conflict can be funded, and (vi) porous²³⁷ borders for smuggling goods and combatants.²³⁸

Given these beneficial conditions, it is unsurprising that ISIS in Yemen (ISIS-Y) has been set up by the inner core of ISIS and provided with leadership, guidance, and funding.²³⁹ Furthermore, in recent times, an increasing number of foreign ISIS combatants from Iraq and Syria have sought refuge in the Al Bayda Governorate²⁴⁰ and the east of the Al Mahrah Governorate.²⁴¹ It is conceivable that the inner

core of ISIS may wish to send some of its combatants to continue the battle in Yemen after the fall of the 'caliphate'.

Firstly, these combatants could be aiming to rebuild ISIS-Y. Secondly, such an influx may provoke a direct confrontation between ISIS-Y and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).²⁴² However, there are signs that ISIS-Y would now rather complement than compete with AQAP. A collaboration between ISIS-Y and AQAP at the tactical level is possible.²⁴³ At the very least, the fact that these groups have not been battling each other recently is a sign that, for the time being, they are accepting each other's presence in the region. Both groups have made enemies of the Saudi coalition and the Houthis, and it is possible they are focusing their energy on them.²⁴⁴ A third scenario is that returning foreign ISIS combatants might have decided to affiliate themselves with the AQAP, which is the dominant force in Yemen.²⁴⁵ Not only is ISIS-Y under fire from both the Saudi coalition and drone attacks by the Americans, but it also lacks tribal support and therefore has no safe haven in Yemen.²⁴⁶ This can also result in ISIS-Y combatants defecting to AQAP. This influx of ISIS combatants could result in further radicalisation of AQAP, especially now the Saudi coalition and the American drones continue to take out leading figures within AQAP. As a result, the rank-and-file of AQAP could be driven into the ideological arms of ISIS.²⁴⁷ Studies indicate that these drone campaigns in Yemen or Pakistan are more likely to benefit jihadists than damage them, as they promote anti-Americanism.²⁴⁸

c. Afghanistan and Pakistan

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the market for extremist groups continues to thrive, although it is also saturated. Many armed factions are fighting for attention. Even so, ISIS succeeded in gaining a foothold.²⁴⁹ Throughout 2016, ISIS attempted to put itself on the map in certain regions of Afghanistan. However, following both Afghan and international military ground operations

234 'Islamic State in North Africa: Still There, Struggling to Expand', Lisa Watanabe, Middle East Policy, 19 June 2017.

235 'How Realistic is Libya as an Islamic State "Fallback"?', Geoff D. Porter, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 3, p. 1, March 2016.

236 Ibid.

237 'There is a constant threat of infiltration via the long coastline.' 20th Report of the IS and AQ Monitoring Team', S/2017/573, par. 27, UN, 30 June 2017.

238 'War-torn Yemen may attract jihadi fighters from Syria and Iraq', Elisabeth Kendall, The Financial Times, 27 February 2017.

239 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al-Qaida', S/2017/35, par. 32, 13 January 2017. 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 28, UN, 31 May 2017. '18th report of the ISIS and Al Qaida Monitoring Team', S/2016/629, par. 26, 19 July 2016. 'Third report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2016/830, par. 23, UN, 30 September 2016.

240 Tweet by Adam Baron, @adambaron, 17 July 2017, 06.08 p.m.

241 '20th Report of the IS and AQ Monitoring Team', S/2017/573, par. 27, UN, 30 June 2017. Mainly from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Tunisia. 'Third report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2016/830, par. 23, UN, 30 September 2016.

242 'War-torn Yemen may attract jihadi fighters from Syria and Iraq', Elisabeth Kendall, The Financial Times, 27 February 2017.

243 '18th report of the ISIS and Al Qaida Monitoring Team', S/2016/629, par. 27, 19 July 2016. 'Third report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2016/830, par. 24, UN, 30 September 2016.

244 'Al-Qaida and IS – friends or foe in Yemen?', The Region, 13 August 2017.

245 'War-torn Yemen may attract jihadi fighters from Syria and Iraq', Elisabeth Kendall, The Financial Times, 27 February 2017. 'Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: Financial Assessment', p. 2, Yaya J. Fanusie and Alex Entz, Center on Sanctions & Illicit Finance, July 2017.

246 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 27, UN, 31 May 2017.

247 'War-torn Yemen may attract jihadi fighters from Syria and Iraq', Elisabeth Kendall, The Financial Times, 27 February 2017.

248 'The Wider Jihadi Movement Will Take Over Where the Islamic State Left Off', Tore Hamming, World Politics Review, 29 November 2017.

249 'Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State', Ali Soufan, p. 272, 2017.

combined with international air support, ISIS in Afghanistan (ISIS-K)²⁵⁰ was soon significantly weakened.²⁵¹

The inner core of ISIS continues to partly fund ISIS-K,²⁵² although ISIS-K has been asked to seek funding itself as a result of increasing losses.²⁵³ ISIS-K is currently active in nine Afghan provinces,²⁵⁴ although it only has a serious military presence in three districts of the Nangarhar Province.²⁵⁵ In April, the American commander in Afghanistan, General Johnson, declared that the inner core of ISIS had plans to import combatants to Afghanistan from Syria, although the army said at the time that they had seen no sign of this.²⁵⁶ However, there are more and more signs that ISIS-K is being reinforced by foreign ISIS combatants who have gained experience in Iraq and Syria.²⁵⁷ Now, French and Algerian ISIS combatants are reported to have relocated from Iraq and Syria to the north of Afghanistan in order to join forces with ISIS-K.²⁵⁸ In addition, ISIS combatants returning from Iraq and Syria are allegedly joining up with groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda.²⁵⁹ After the fall of the 'caliphate', ISIS combatants from the Caucasus and Central/South-East Asia may also come to reinforce Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁶⁰ As this region is a frequent host to fluctuating terrorist alliances, ISIS-K will probably also have access to a larger reservoir of combatants.

d. South-East Asia²⁶¹

The situation in South-East Asia is of significant importance to ISIS. While the 'caliphate' seems to be crumbling in Iraq and Syria, the group appears to be aiming to expand in South-East Asia.²⁶²

The organisation considers the region, especially the south of the Philippines, to be an area in which it could possibly achieve visible success. It portrays the fierce defence of Iraq and Syria as a form of 'remaining' and the activities of militants elsewhere, such as on Mindanao, as a form of 'expanding'. This 'remaining and expanding' strategy is an important reason why the organisation has focused and intensified its propaganda on this region.²⁶³

In recent years, ISIS has surpassed Al-Qaeda with regard to its threat level in South-East Asia. ISIS has inspired new combatants and breathed new life into existing terrorist networks.²⁶⁴ The declining influence of Al-Qaeda in this region means that individuals and groups affiliated with ISIS are considered a greater threat. So far, over 60 groups have declared their support for ISIS or sworn their allegiance to 'Caliph' al-Baghdadi.²⁶⁵ In South-East Asia, the greatest threat posed by ISIS may well be the allure of its extremist ideology.²⁶⁶ This ideology emphasises the need for unity, which has led to more operational collaboration between the many different groups in South-East Asia.²⁶⁷

An IPAC²⁶⁸ report identifies many links between the inner core of ISIS and ISIS supporters in South-East Asia,²⁶⁹ although, according to IPAC, the level of direct funding from Syria is limited.²⁷⁰ However, the Filipino Minister of Defence claims that the (now dead) 'emir' of ISIS, Isnilon Hapilon, received millions from the inner core of ISIS.²⁷¹ Intercepted telegrams suggest that ISIS has a refined command structure in South-East Asia that enables the organisation to coordinate the activities of its regional supporters.²⁷² The majority (60%) of attacks carried out in South-East Asia between June 2014 and April 2017 can be attributed to ISIS operatives, who either supervised or funded the attacks. Nearly

250 Known as ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K). ISIS-K is the ISIS franchise in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

251 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 28, UN, 31 May 2017.

252 Ibid.

253 '20th Report of the IS and AQ Monitoring Team', S/2017/573, par. 57, UN, 30 June 2017.

254 According to Afghan intelligence documents seen by Reuters. 'Embassy, mosque attacks fuel fears ISIS bringing Iraq war to Afghanistan' Hamid Shalizi, Reuters, 2 August 2017.

255 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 28, UN, 31 May 2017.

256 'Embassy, mosque attacks fuel fears ISIS bringing Iraq war to Afghanistan' Hamid Shalizi, Reuters, 2 August 2017.

257 'Embassy, mosque attacks fuel fears ISIS bringing Iraq war to Afghanistan' Hamid Shalizi, Reuters, 2 August 2017. 'French fighters appear with Islamic State in Afghanistan', Wakil Kohsar, AFP, 10 December 2017.

258 'French fighters appear with Islamic State in Afghanistan', AFP, 10 December 2017.

259 'The Return of al Qaeda to Pakistan', Farhan Zahid, Middle East Institute, 24 August 2017.

260 'Central Asian Jihadists in the Front Line', Ely Karom, Perspective on Terrorism, p. 83, August 2016.

261 In this analysis, the term 'South-East Asia' refers to the following countries: Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, East Timor, Singapore and Thailand.

262 'Islamic State Becoming a Growing Presence in South East Asia', Noor Zahid, Voice of America News, 25 August 2017.

263 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al'Qaida', S/2017/35, par. 59, 13 January 2017. No such thing as defeat for Islamic State's propaganda machine, Haroro J. Ingram, The Australian, 15 September 2017.

264 'Third report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2016/830, par. 18, UN, 30 September 2016.

265 'The Caliphate's Influence in Southeast Asia', Rohan Gunaratna, IAPS Dialogue, 14 February 2017.

266 'Marawi: A Safe Haven for ISIS in the Philippines?', Hamza Iftikhar, Raddington report, 17 July 2017.

267 'Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia', IPAC report No. 33, p. 23, 26 October 2017.

268 The Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict.

269 Also see 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al'Qaida', S/2017/35, par. 60, 13 January 2017.

270 'Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia', IPAC, IPAC report No. 38, p. 19 and p. 23, 21 July 2017.

271 '8 Killed foreign fighters likely from ISIS', Pia Ranada, Rappler, 1 June 2017.

272 'ISIS' Core Helps Fund Militants in Philippines, Report Says', Jon Emont and Felipe Villamor, The New York Times, 20 July 2017.

half of the attacks were allegedly facilitated by ISIS in Syria and carried out by ISIS combatants originating from South-East Asia.²⁷³

ISIS is attempting to capitalise on long-term trends in South-East Asia, i.e. increasing religious conservatism and growing intolerance. These are trends that may stem from the increasing influence of Salafist and Wahhabist ideology.²⁷⁴ In recent decades, the Saudis have exported their ideology on a massive scale by training imams and publishing literature.²⁷⁵ The poverty in huge parts of South-East Asia serves as a fertile breeding ground for ISIS. For example, certain regions of Mindanao, which has endured decades of violence and war, have major problems with poverty and low development levels. Of the 20 poorest provinces on the Philippines, 11 are located on Mindanao.²⁷⁶ However, ISIS's message is also appealing to the upper middle class, which has experienced the racism from the Christian section of Filipino society first-hand.²⁷⁷

Different destination for foreign combatants

For some time, ISIS has been focusing on propaganda for the jihadist cause in the Philippines in particular.²⁷⁸ Since the military successes of ISIS supporters in the Philippines, this focus has intensified further. In the ISIS magazine *Rumiyah*, Isnilon Hapilon – ‘Emir’ of the East Asian soldiers of the ‘caliphate’ – urges combatants to immigrate to the war zones in East Asia. He also claims many have already heeded his call.²⁷⁹ Individual ISIS supporters also encourage others to join the battle in the Philippines.²⁸⁰ These mobilisation attempts appear to be having an

effect. According to the Filipino Minister of Defence, eight ISIS combatants from Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Russia (Chechnya) have been killed so far.²⁸¹ There had already been signs that Uyghurs and a Moroccan explosives expert had travelled to the archipelago.²⁸² The culture in South-East Asia differs greatly from the culture in the Middle East and North Africa, which makes this destination less appealing to most ISIS combatants than countries such as Yemen or Libya, as these combatants have a different ethnic background to the Filipino people.²⁸³

Mindanao will continue to attract foreign combatants for the simple reason that ISIS-affiliated groups control territory there. No other ISIS or Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in South-East Asia control territory. Controlled territory helps terrorist organizations to regroup, train or plan attacks in peace. This territory could enable significant growth and may be important to any group wishing to be recognised by the inner core of ISIS as a province of the ‘caliphate’. In the short-term, this only appears to be feasible in the Philippines.²⁸⁴

Return of regional combatants from the Middle East

Statistics on the number of jihadists who travelled to the Middle East from South-East Asia vary, although various government and non-governmental sources estimate the figure to be between 600 and 1,000,²⁸⁵ the majority of whom are still in the Middle East.²⁸⁶ However, concerns are growing that some of these combatants will return to South-East Asia after the fall of the ‘caliphate’, possibly

273 ‘Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity Outside the Group’s Defined Wilayat’, p. 1, Marielle Ness, CTC, 2 June 2017. For more information, see sources such as ‘Third report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL’, S/2016/830, par. 18–21, UN, 30 September 2016.

274 ‘The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia’, Shashi Jayakumar, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 2, p. 31, February 2017. Wahhabism, which seeks a return to ‘pure Islam’, is the state religion of Saudi Arabia. The central focus of Wahhabism is *tawhid* (‘oneness of God’). It preaches that the Koran must be read literally and any innovation (*bid’ah*) must be rejected. Wahhabism strives for full implementation of *sharia* and an extremely accurate recreation of the life of the prophet Muhammed. ‘Salafisme in Nederland: Een blijvende factor van belang of een voorbijgaand fenomeen?’ (Salafism in the Netherlands: an enduringly significant factor or a passing phenomenon?), National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, p. 14, March 2008.

275 ‘Saudi’s Purist Salafi Drive into Southeast Asia’, H.A. Hellyer, Atlantic Council, 10 March 2017.

276 ‘How Two Brothers Took Over a Filipino City for ISIS’, Ana P. Santos, The Atlantic, 12 August 2017.

277 Ibid.

278 ‘Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al’ Qaida’, S/2017/35, par. 60, 13 January 2017.

279 ‘Interview with the Amir of the Soldiers of the Khilafah in East Asia’, *Rumiyah* 10, p. 37, 7 June 2017.

280 Examples of this include ‘Australian IS Fighter Calls in Video for Countrymen to Fight in Marawi or Stay and Kill “Disbelievers”’, Jihadist Threat Alert, SITE Intelligence Group, 7 August 2017, and ‘IS Supporter on Telegram Calls for Migration to the Philippines’, SITE Intelligence Group, 8 May 2017.

281 ‘8 Killed foreign fighters likely from ISIS’, Pia Ranada, Rappler, 1 June 2017. Thomas Sanderson, CSIS Director, also mentions Morocco. ‘Black Flags over Mindanao: ISIS in the Philippines’, Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, testimony by CSIS Director Thomas M. Sanderson, 12 July 2017. See also the article by Catherine S. Valente about foreign combatants: ‘89 foreign terrorists in PH – intel report’, The Manila Times, 25 June 2017. According to the police’s special anti-terrorism unit (Densus 88), there are currently 38 Indonesian terrorists active in the Philippines (‘Polri: Dozens of Indonesians Involved in Marawi Terrorism Act’, Rezki Alvionitasari, Tempo.Co, 3 June 2017) and 20 in Malaysia. ‘Why Another Philippines Terrorist Attack is Coming: Another Marawi-like siege is likely to occur’, Zachary Abuza, The Diplomat, 6 July 2017. For more information about relations with the Middle East, see ‘Pro-ISIS Groups in Mindanao and Their Links to Indonesia and Malaysia’, IPAC report No. 33, p. 23, 26 October 2017. ‘As foreigners fight in the Philippines, a new hub for Islamic State’, Reuters, 30 May 2017.

282 ‘The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia’, Shashi Jayakumar, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 2, p. 30, February 2017.

283 ‘When the Caliphate Crumbles: The Future of Islamic State’s Affiliates’, Clint Watts, War on the Rocks, 13 June 2016.

284 ‘Why Another Philippines Terrorist Attack is Coming: Another Marawi-like siege is likely to occur’, Zachary Abuza, The Diplomat, 6 July 2017.

285 ‘Black Flags over Mindanao: ISIS in the Philippines’, Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, testimony by CSIS Director Thomas M. Sanderson, 12 July 2017. See also ‘Marawi: A Safe Haven for ISIS in the Philippines?’, Hamza Iftikhar, Raddington report, 17 July 2017, and ‘The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia’, Shashi Jayakumar, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 2, February 2017.

286 ‘The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia’, Shashi Jayakumar, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 2, p. 27, February 2017.

accompanied by jihadists from the rest of the world.²⁸⁷ According to the Director of the National Counter Terrorism Center, American intelligence services have not yet detected a significant number of combatants returning from the 'caliphate'.²⁸⁸ The geography of the Malaysian, Indonesian, and Filipino archipelagos makes it difficult for the army, border police and security services to intercept these combatants.²⁸⁹ Indonesia, the country with the biggest Muslim population in the world, is particularly concerned that ISIS may use the south of the Philippines as a springboard for colonising the rest of South-East Asia, especially because, until recently, coastguards only monitored the waters separating the two countries to a limited degree, according to the Chief of Staff of the Indonesian Army.²⁹⁰

New stronghold in the Philippines

The conflict in Marawi is important, not only due to the number of lives at stake or the stability of the region, but also because it may be an indicator of what ISIS will look like in the future. Will the loss of an existing stronghold in one part of the world affect the establishment of a new stronghold in another part of the world?²⁹¹ ISIS claims it will not.²⁹² ISIS may set up a regional training centre for extremists from Indonesia and Malaysia (among other countries) on the predominantly Muslim Filipino island of Mindanao.²⁹³

The major setbacks suffered by the 'caliphate' necessitated a change of strategy. ISIS appealed for more attacks in the *wilayats*, including those in South-East Asia. Such appeals resonate with potentially violent extremists in South-East Asia,²⁹⁴ and together with the flagging 'caliphate' also encourage these regional extremists to focus on enemies that are nearby rather than those

that are far away.²⁹⁵ The attack in Jakarta in January 2016 may have been an example of this. It was poorly executed,²⁹⁶ and failed largely due to insufficient training,²⁹⁷ although the aforementioned training centre on Mindanao may be able to remedy such situations in future.

The current Filipino president's chosen tactic is to use force to fight the militants in the south of the Philippines. The miserable socio-economic position of the Muslims in the Philippines, the unacceptable and undisciplined actions of the Filipino army and the general lawlessness in the southern islands will only perpetuate the violent resistance, which has already raged for decades. Dozens of years of separatist violence against the central government in Manila mean there is an abundance of weapons and munitions, which can be supplemented with arms supplies stolen or 'purchased' from the Filipino government.²⁹⁸ As long as this situation remains unchanged and the tediously slow peace process remains fruitless, the conflict will simply continue. The return of home-grown combatants after the fall of the 'caliphate', the influx of foreign combatants and ISIS's new attack strategy will further deteriorate the security situation in the entire region, particularly on Mindanao and neighbouring islands. Furthermore, Marawi has increased fears of copycat battles in other areas of the Philippines or South-East Asia. South-East Asians who have fought in urban areas in Iraq and Syria will now have a template for applying the lessons learned in Iraq and Syria in tropical cities in their countries of origin.²⁹⁹

Moreover, ISIS appears to want to boost its involvement in the conflict in South-East Asia by making use of regional groups and networks and by appointing an emir. Another interesting development is that, in South-East Asia, ISIS appears willing to work together with other groups without completely dominating them and forcing them into the ISIS 'mould', as the organisation insists on doing elsewhere. At the same time, the organisation is currently unwilling to declare a *wilayat*. The reason for this is unclear, although it may be that local groups are not willing to closely affiliate themselves with ISIS, an unwillingness that will only increase upon the fall of the 'caliphate'. The future of ISIS in the region depends largely on how well they are able to form

287 'Worst-case scenario for Australia is "ISIS-vortex" developing in Philippines', Mark Saunokonoko, 15 August 2017.

288 'ISIS Recruits Fighters for the Philippines Instead of Syria', Robert Windrem, NBC News, 12 September 2017.

289 'Marawi: A Safe Haven for ISIS in the Philippines?', Hamza Iftikhar, Raddington report, 17 July 2017.

290 'A Deadly New Front for ISIS', Joseph Hincks, Time, 26 June 2017. 'Isnilon Hapilon may have fled Marawi City', Agence France-Presse, 24 June 2017.

291 'Marawi: A Safe Haven for ISIS in the Philippines?', Hamza Iftikhar, Raddington report, 17 July 2017.

292 'But Allah Came Upon Them, from Where They Had Not Expected', Rumiayah 10, p. 5, 7 June 2017.

293 'Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia', IPAC, IPAC report No. 38, p. 23, 21 July 2017. In the 1990s, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) set up training camps on Mindanao with funding from Al-Qaeda. 'Assessing the Feasibility of a "Wilayah Mindanao"', Joseph Franco, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 11, Issue, pp. 30-31, August 2017. In the decades that followed, Jemaah Islamiyah made use of these MILF centres (and also trained the MILF), as it was safer to train on Mindanao than in Indonesia. 'Sharing the Dragon's Teeth: terrorist groups and the exchange of new technologies', p. xiv, Kim Craiging, Peter Chalk, Sara A. Daly and Brian A. Jackson, Rand Corporation, 2017.

294 'The Caliphate's Influence in Southeast Asia', Rohan Gunaratna, IAPS Dialogue, 14 February 2017.

295 'Why Another Philippines Terrorist Attack is Coming: Another Marawi-like siege is likely to occur', Zachary Abuza, The Diplomat, 6 July 2017.

296 'The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia', Shashi Jayakumar, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 2, p. 28, February 2017.

297 'Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia', IPAC, IPAC report No. 38, p. 17, 21 July 2017.

298 'Marawi: Winning the War After the Battle', Joseph Franco, ICCT, 29 November 2017.

299 'Assessing the Feasibility of a "Wilayah Mindanao"', Joseph Franco, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 11, Issue, p. 34, August 2017.

alliances with existing jihadist parties, such as Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah.³⁰⁰

Sub-conclusions

It is clear that, after the fall of the ‘caliphate’, ISIS will transform into a decentralised and amorphous organisation that operates in a more asymmetrical manner.³⁰¹ These changes could manifest in myriad ways. The inner core of ISIS has evolved into a group with a global network of franchises, just as Al-Qaeda did³⁰² after the attacks on September 11, 2001. In Al-Qaeda’s case, it had sufficient structure at that point to ensure continuity of and guidance to the network of Al-Qaeda franchises. In ISIS’s case, it remains to be seen whether enough of the top and middle levels of ISIS will remain to provide coordination, strategic continuity and operational management of the ISIS network, given the speed at which this structure is being destroyed in Iraq and Syria.³⁰³ Furthermore, the network of ISIS franchises has always been loosely organised, and it also remains to be seen whether this network will remain intact after the fall of the ‘caliphate’.³⁰⁴ It is clear that the inner core of ISIS will return to the desert near the border between Iraq and Syria and continue the conflict from there, and that from that point onwards, the franchises will continue either largely or entirely as independent organisations. They will continue to use ISIS’s logo, reputation, and propaganda, as it will remain a strong brand.

While ISIS is bracing itself in Iraq and Syria, the inner core of the organisation may try to subtly use its influence elsewhere. It is possible that ISIS will switch from its traditional centralised *wilayah* system to a more decentralised command and control system consisting of a network of more loosely affiliated units. This kind of network would be more resilient to counterterrorist activities than a centrally controlled system.³⁰⁵

In recent years, Al-Qaeda franchises in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and the Sahel have distanced themselves from their Al-Qaeda brand to a greater or lesser extent in order to bridge gaps between them and local groups, enable better collaboration with these groups or even merge.³⁰⁶ HTS has gone as far as to renounce the brand, although this does not mean that they have renounced their jihadist ideology. This phenomenon may well repeat itself among ISIS franchises. This may create a complex situation in which two decentralised networks are operating in parallel alongside other local groups that may or may not subscribe to the legacies of one of these two brands. These situations may well differ in each separate country or region.

Libya shows that, even within a single country, ISIS can head down many different development paths, successively if necessary. The rise of ISIS in Derna, a fundamentalist stronghold in eastern Libya, was mainly driven by the return of returnee combatants from Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, in Sirte, the birthplace of Colonel Gaddafi, the rise of ISIS was mainly stimulated by marginalisation of groups previously allied to the fallen dictator’s regime. This development path also occurred in both Iraq and Syria. The large number of Tunisian combatants in Sabratha, a city in the west of the country, represents a third development path that ISIS could also nurture in other countries.³⁰⁷

300 ‘Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity Outside the Group’s Defined *Wilayah*’, CTC, p. 7, Marielle Ness, 30 May.

301 ‘Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS’ Global Reach’, Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017.

302 ‘Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State’, Ali Soufan, pp. 182-183, 2017.

303 In the last three years, 80% to 90% of the upper echelons of ISIS have been killed, mainly by American drones and rockets. ‘Islamic State’s Demise: A Terror Group in its Death Throes?’, Christoph Reuter, *Der Spiegel*, 30 August 2017.

304 ‘Can You Kill the Islamic State?’, Ali H. Soufan, *The New York Times*, 20 June 2017.

305 ‘Assessing the Feasibility of a “*Wilayah Mindanao*”’, Joseph Franco, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 11, Issue, p. 36, August 2017.

306 ‘Between the Arab Revolutions and the Islamic State’s Caliphate: al-Qaeda Leaders’ Online Propaganda 2012-2014’, Gunnar J. Weimann, in: ‘Terrorists’ Use of the Internet’, M. Conway et al., IOS Press 2017, p. 130.

307 ‘Islamic State’s re-organization in Libya and potential connections with illegal trafficking’, pp. 3-4, Arturo Varvelli, George Washington University, November 2017.

TACTICAL OPTIONS FOR ISIS AND ITS COMBATANTS

7. New revenue models and payment methods for ISIS

It is unlikely that the territorial 'caliphate' will survive its fourth year, not only due to the loss of territory, but also because the existing revenue model is no longer sustainable and the organisation is at risk of going bankrupt in the short to medium term.³⁰⁸ By now, ISIS is thought to have lost 80% of its turnover.³⁰⁹ This will not necessarily cause problems in the short-term, as the 'caliphate' has also lost a considerable amount of territory and therefore has substantially lower costs.³¹⁰

a. Criminal empire – nexus of ISIS and organised crime

In Iraq and Syria, as well as in peripheral regions such as Yemen and Libya, ISIS's business model seems to be based more on robbery than productivity. The model is fuelled by theft, taxation, smuggling, corruption, and forced donations.³¹¹ Such models are only sustainable for growing conquests, as was demonstrated by the Mongolian empire at the time of Timur, which existed for several dozen years and conquered huge tracts of land.³¹² Now that the 'caliphate' is shrinking and the pseudostate appears doomed, this funding model is no longer sufficient.

Loss of territory results in a change of funding model

ISIS cannot survive as a proto-state based solely on the idea of a 'caliphate', its political objectives or its religious convictions. Its ability to earn money is also a crucial factor in its survival, in the form of robbery, smuggling, regular taxation and financial

rewards for protecting smuggling routes and the business interests of tribal elites in northern Iraq.

After the fall of the 'caliphate', ISIS will earn less money for protecting these smuggling networks and tribal business interests and will have little to no success in its taxation efforts.³¹³ However, it is important to remember that the ISIS organisation will require considerably less money; in contrast to the proto-state, it will not have to provide basic civil infrastructure, such as refuse collection or electricity.³¹⁴

Leaked documents show that ISIS has already been forced to halve its combatants' wages due to the financial strain of war.³¹⁵ This may well affect the morale of some combatants, although it appears that the loss of territory and sources of income did not immediately result in significant damage to ISIS's organisational structure.³¹⁶ However, the fall of the 'caliphate' will change things. Developments that are already in progress, such as ISIS's activities in the Diyala Governorate, are causing ISIS to transform from a proto-state to an underground movement, which may disintegrate into a variety of cells without an overarching command structure.³¹⁷

These changes will affect its organisational structure, its military strategy, and its funding model. In Diyala, ISIS militants are allegedly already funding most or all of their cells by ransoming hostages, because they no longer have access to any other sources

³⁰⁸ 'End of ISIS Approaching as Caliphate Loses Money and Land', Jack Moore, Newsweek, 30 June 2017.

³⁰⁹ 'Islamic State Territory Down 60 Percent and Revenue Down 80 Percent on Caliphate's Third Anniversary', IHS Markit online report, 29 June 2017.

³¹⁰ 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 8, UN, 31 May 2017. 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al'Qaida', S/2017/35, par. 25, UN, 13 January 2017.

³¹¹ For more information on the unsustainability of the political economy of the 'caliphate', see sources such as 'A Predictable Failure: The Political Economy of The Decline of the Islamic State', Jacob Shapiro, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 9, pp. 28-34, September 2016.

³¹² 'Who pays for ISIS in Libya?', James Roslington and Jason Pack, Hate Speech International, 24 August 2017, and 'Het Rijk van Timoer de Lammer' ('The Empire of Timur the Lame'), NRC, 30 June 1990.

³¹³ 'ISIS and the New War Economy', Renad Mansour, Chatham House, 8 June 2017.

³¹⁴ 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al'Qaida', S/2017/35, par. 25, 13 January 2017.

³¹⁵ 'ISIS cuts its fighters salaries by 50%', Jose Pagliery, CNN, 19 January 2016. 'A Caliphate under Strain: The Documentary Evidence', pp. 1-8, Aymenn Jawad al Tamimi, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 4, April 2016.

³¹⁶ 'Military setbacks don't ensure Islamic State's demise', Metin Gurcan, Al-Monitor, 20 July 2017.

³¹⁷ '20th Report of the IS and AQ Monitoring Team', S/2017/573, par. 16, UN, 30 June 2017.

of funding.³¹⁸ This decentralised type of funding is a more traditional way for terrorist organisations to raise funds,³¹⁹ and it boosts their resilience.³²⁰ Kidnappings are attractive, because they generally involve large sums of money and payment is made in cash. The return of international journalists and humanitarian workers to the regions liberated from ISIS may well result in a higher number of kidnappings for ransom.³²¹ Such kidnappings may be an indication that funds are drying up, as in the past, ISIS usually used individuals with Western ethnic backgrounds to make gruesome execution videos.³²²

Investment in the underworld and the legitimate business world – criminal traits

A shrinking ‘caliphate’ may lead to the reinforcement of the nexus between ISIS and organised crime. This shrinkage will lead to decreased revenue from the legitimate and illegitimate sale of oil, gas and phosphates, regular taxation, extortion of the local population, and the illegal sale of antiquities. This may result in ISIS no longer being capable of funding the Sunni insurgency and being forced to collaborate more with the world of organised crime or ‘collect taxes’ on the activities of criminal networks that wish to traffic people, goods or drugs in areas under the control of ISIS or in which many ISIS combatants are present.³²³

The demise of the ‘caliphate’ appears to be pushing ISIS in the direction of organised crime,³²⁴ as was the case with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Somalia, and Mali. As well as behaving more like an organised criminal enterprise itself, ISIS is also collaborating more with established organised crime networks. This is not a new phenomenon.³²⁵ After the fall of the Taliban in 2002, its soldiers fled into the mountains and funded their insurgency partly with income from the production and sale of heroin.³²⁶ After the fall of the government of the Islamic Courts Union in 2007, Al-Shabaab funded its battle against forces fighting under the flag of the African Union by taxing the illegal export of charcoal via ports

controlled by Al-Shabaab.³²⁷ Furthermore, in the Sahel, after France’s intervention in Mali, the violent jihadist offensive was financed through kidnappings, the smuggling of cigarettes, and the jihadist groups’ ties with cocaine-smuggling networks, among other sources of income.³²⁸

The leadership of ISIS has been preparing itself for the loss of the ‘caliphate’ and has invested in the region.³²⁹ While its combatants are going underground, the ISIS organisation is now focusing more on legitimate and semi-legitimate business via third parties in order to launder its presumably substantial reserves³³⁰ and maintain its wealth.³³¹ ISIS invests in businesses and property in Baghdad and other regions via front men. The profits from these investments are then returned partially or fully to ISIS.³³² ISIS has also proven capable of exchanging Iraqi dinars into dollars on a massive scale via currency-exchange offices that it owns via third parties. In addition to cash couriers,³³³ ISIS also makes use of money-transfer and currency-exchange offices in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere in order to pass on funds to other countries.³³⁴ It is likewise plausible that ISIS is exchanging dinars for gold or other precious minerals that can be easily transported and traded internationally.³³⁵ At auctions conducted by the Iraqi Central Bank in an attempt to stabilise the dinar, ISIS also buys dollars in exchange for dinars.³³⁶

ISIS also extorts local businesses or waits for an opportune moment to violently seize economic power over specific businesses.³³⁷ Whether ISIS is successful in doing so depends on the long-established criminal networks in Iraq that may have the power to curb ISIS’s hunger for economic power.³³⁸ In Mosul, ISIS

318 ‘Islamic State in Diyala finance cells with ransoms: MP’, Mohamed Mostafa, Iraqi News, 14 August 2017.

319 ‘Islamic State: Financial Assessment’, Yaya J. Fanusie and Alex Entz, Center on Sanctions & Illicit Finance, p. 2, March 2017.

320 ‘The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory’, Brian H. Fishman, p. 221, 2016.

321 ‘Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al’Qaida’, S/2017/35, par. 24, 13 January 2017. ‘Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL’, S/2017/467, par. 13, 31 May 2017. ‘Islamic State: Financial Assessment’, Yaya J. Fanusie and Alex Entz, Center on Sanctions & Illicit Finance, p. 10, March 2017.

322 ‘Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL’, S/2016/501, par. 12, UN, 31 May 2016.

323 ‘As Caliphate Crumbles, Islamic State Turns to Old-Fashioned Crime’, Jamie Dettmer, New Delhi Times, 9 August 2017.

324 ‘Islamic State’s next move could be underground criminal networks’, Aisha Ahmad, The Washington Post, 8 August 2017.

325 ‘Making Jihad Pay: Why Islamists and Business Elites Work Together’, Aisha Ahmed, Foreign Affairs, 5 October 2017.

326 ‘Penetrating Every Stage of Afghan Opium Chain, Taliban Become a Cartel’, Azam Ahmed, The New York Times, 16 February 2016.

327 ‘How the Charcoal Trade Fuels Terrorism’, UN Dispatch, 22 February 2012.

328 ‘Drugs and Money in the Sahara: How the Global Cocaine Trade is Funding North African Jihad’, Kathleen Caulderwood, International Business Times, 6 May 2015. ‘Al Qaeda’s arm in North Africa has made around \$100 million through ransom and drug trading, study says’, Javier E. David, CNBC News, 7 December 2017.

329 ‘Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL’, S/2017/467, par. 13, 31 May 2017.

330 ‘Islamic State’s next move could be underground criminal networks’, Aisha Ahmad, The Washington Post, 8 August 2017.

331 ‘Oil, Extortion Still Paying off for ISIS’, Patrick B. Johnston, The Cipher Brief, 27 October.

332 ‘ISIS and the New War Economy’, Renad Mansour, Chatham House, 8 June 2017.

333 ‘Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL’, S/2016/501, par. 58, UN, 31 May 2016.

334 ‘Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL’, S/2017/467, par. 14, 31 May 2017.

335 ‘Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL’, S/2016/501, par. 14, UN, 31 May 2016.

336 ‘ISIS and the New War Economy’, Renad Mansour, Chatham House, 8 June 2017.

337 ‘Islamic State’s next move could be underground criminal networks’, Aisha Ahmad, The Washington Post, 8 August 2017.

338 ‘Islamic State’s next move could be underground criminal networks’, Aisha Ahmad, The Washington Post, 8 August 2017.

has previously formed alliances with key players in the criminal underworld, although these soured when ISIS saddled its business partners with exponential tax increases after the 'caliphate' was declared.³³⁹

By focusing more on the interface between the legal and illegal economies, the organisation of ISIS is transitioning into more of a criminal organisation with a profit motive (at least in Iraq) and is collaborating more intensively with other criminal organisations. This new strategic focus is inspired by efforts to ensure other manifestations of ISIS (Sunni guerrilla and terrorist organisation) remain financially healthy.

Use of new payment methods – Jihad Inc.

ISIS's dwindling flow of income will be a major obstacle to its ambition to be a financier of international terrorism. However, the organisation probably has substantial cash reserves.³⁴⁰ These reserves were probably put aside partly for future activities or to support ISIS departments elsewhere,³⁴¹ such as in the Philippines.³⁴²

ISIS has an external attack unit that will probably live on after the loss of territory in Iraq and Syria.³⁴³ It is conceivable that part of ISIS will continue as a type of Jihadi investment fund that mainly focuses on jihadist investment opportunities and uses new technology to fund international jihadist terrorism. ISIS may well make increasing use of new payment methods, such as prepaid cards³⁴⁴ and crypto currency.³⁴⁵

In the past, ISIS has made innovative use of cyberspace and cyber technology, and many followers of ISIS have already used crypto currency to fund terrorism.³⁴⁶ For this reason, among others, it is conceivable that the organisation may use crypto currency to prepare attacks. This crypto currency could be used to

mask illegal activity required for the preparation of attacks, such as purchasing weapons or bomb-making materials.³⁴⁷

However, crypto currency is currently not an appealing prospect to financiers of terrorism. Only a small number of terrorists make use of crypto currencies, such as Bitcoin, Monero or Litecoin.³⁴⁸ Most of these crypto currencies only offer partial anonymity; it is difficult to transfer large sums, confidence in these currencies is negligible and the use of crypto currency is scarcely accepted in the Middle East and North Africa.³⁴⁹ Even if technological advancements make the use of crypto currency more attractive to financiers of terrorism, the lack of confidence in them and other obstacles will remain.³⁵⁰

At the moment, attacks are mainly being carried out in the West by lone actors or small groups, who often operate independently of ISIS and most frequently fund their relatively austere financial needs either largely or entirely by themselves. However, until now, larger groups have also made little to no use of crypto currency for the simple reason that there are plenty of other methods of transferring money easily and securely, such as cash couriers, prepaid cards or via *hawala* banking.³⁵¹ All in all, it is unlikely that ISIS will be an early adaptor of crypto currency in order to fund its activities.³⁵²

b. Crime as a source of funding for the jihad in Europe

In addition to benefiting from the skills that criminals bring to the jihad, ISIS also explicitly calls upon its followers to commit crime in order to fund the jihad.³⁵³ In issue 11 of *Rumiyah*, ISIS encourages followers to seize the wealth of the infidels (*kuffar*) by using violent means (*ghanimah*), non-violent means (*fay*) or fraud and deception (*ihtitab*).³⁵⁴

339 'Desperate ISIS is taxing nearly everything, including open front doors and messy beards', Market Watch, 27 May 2016, and 'Islamic State's next move could be underground criminal networks', Aisha Ahmad, The Washington Post, 8 August 2017.

340 'The IS Economy: Will Losing Territory Cripple Islamic State', Ludovico Carlino, Terrorism Monitor Volume, 9 December 2017.

341 Ibid.

342 'ISIS central provided Marawi militants with funding, says report', Audrey Moralla, Philippine Star 21 July 2017. 'Año: ISIS sent at least \$1.5 million to fund Marawi siege', Jim Gomez, AP, 24 October 2017.

343 'The Evolving Terrorist Threat and CT Options for the Trump Administration', Bruce Hoffman, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, p. 10, June 2017.

344 'Terrorist Use of Virtual Currencies: Containing the Potential Threat', p. 19, Zachary K. Goldman, Ellie Maruyama, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Edoardo Saravalle and Julia Solom-Strauss, CNAS, May 2017.

345 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL', S/2016/501, par. 14, UN, 31 May 2016.

346 'US woman used bitcoin to move cash to Islamic State, police say', BBC, 15 December 2017. 'Terrorist Use of Virtual Currencies: Containing the Potential Threat', p. 2 and pp. 12-13, Zachary K. Goldman, Ellie Maruyama, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Edoardo Saravalle and Julia Solom-Strauss, CNAS, May 2017.

347 'What Happens After ISIS Goes Underground', Colin P. Clarke and Chad C. Serena, 29 May 2017.

348 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 15, 31 May 2017. See also 'Terrorist Use of Virtual Currencies: Containing the Potential Threat', Zachary K. Goldman, Ellie Maruyama, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Edoardo Saravalle and Julia Solomon-Strauss, Center for a New American Security, 3 May 2017.

349 'Terrorist Use of Virtual Currencies: Containing the Potential Threat', pp. 26-18, Zachary K. Goldman, Ellie Maruyama, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Edoardo Saravalle and Julia Solom-Strauss, CNAS, May 2017.

350 'Are Terrorists Using Cryptocurrencies?', David Mannheim, Patrick B. Johnston, Joshua Baron, Cynthia Dion-Schwarz, Foreign Affairs, 21 April 2017.

351 'Terrorist Use of Virtual Currencies: Containing the Potential Threat', p. 6 and p. 28, Zachary K. Goldman, Ellie Maruyama, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Edoardo Saravalle and Julia Solom-Strauss, CNAS, May 2017.

352 'Are Terrorists Using Cryptocurrencies?', David Mannheim, Patrick B. Johnston, Joshua Baron, Cynthia Dion-Schwarz, Foreign Affairs, 21 April 2017.

353 'The Kafir's Wealth is Halal for You, so Take It', Rumiyah 8, Al Hayat Media Center, 2017, pp. 12-15.

354 'The Wealth of the Kuffar Is Either Ghanimah, Fay or Ihtitab', Rumiyah 11, Al Hayat Media Center 2017, p. 31.

This economic war is a goal in itself, although it is also being used in Europe to fund violent jihad, despite this usually not being necessary³⁵⁵ given the low cost of most terrorist attacks.³⁵⁶ These criminal activities may even increase the risk of the terrorists being discovered.³⁵⁷ Despite this, between 2014 and 2016, at least 23% of ISIS plots in Europe made use of funds gained from criminal activities.³⁵⁸

Research by Basra and Neumann suggests that radical individuals with a criminal past continue to use these methods in order to fund terrorism. This observation, combined with ISIS's appeals to use criminal activities to finance terrorism, could result in greater prevalence of crimes committed in order to fund attacks.³⁵⁹ Between 1994 and 2013, at least 38% of terrorist plots were partially funded by criminal activities. An obvious explanation for the lower percentage (23%) between 2014 and 2016 is that ISIS partly funded the plots and therefore fewer criminally obtained funds were required.³⁶⁰ If you subscribe to this school of thought, it is logical that the use of criminal proceeds is on the increase again, as the 'caliphate' has fallen and therefore 'central' funding from ISIS has partly or fully dried up.

c. Mercenaries, mujahideen and jihadist consultants

Many ISIS combatants have died in the war in Iraq and Syria, and this war is still ongoing. However, some of them will survive and escape. Most of them will not be willing or able to return to their country of origin, as described above. These combatants may well join other organisations and will tend to favour those with the most promising prospects and those with a similar ethnic and linguistic background.³⁶¹ Based on their overwhelmingly North African or Turkish ethnic backgrounds, European combatants will be more likely to select an organisation with combatants originating from North Africa and the Middle East, Russians will prefer to join an organisation with links to the Caucasus or Central Asia and Asian combatants will be more likely to opt for Central or South-East Asia.

Furthermore, after the fall of the 'caliphate', ISIS combatants may set up a nomadic group – a jihadist vanguard – that is constantly seeking the next jihadist battleground, be it in Yemen, Libya, Mali, Afghanistan or the Philippines. ISIS franchises and local jihadist groups in these countries will welcome the arrival of battle-hardened comrades.³⁶² In this way, they serve as the militant offspring of the mujahideen – the international jihadists for Al-Qaeda – who first fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and later fought in Algeria, Chechnya, and the Balkans.

Since mid-2016, a jihadist consultancy organisation – Malhama Tactical – has been providing military training and advice, elite soldiers for front-line combat, and assistance with the procurement of arms. In Syria, this organisation has apparently established a good name for itself, and the demand for its services is substantial.³⁶³ In 2016, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS)³⁶⁴ were among those who enlisted their services. Malhama Tactical is prepared to work anywhere Sunni Muslims are being oppressed or attacked, such as is currently the case in Myanmar. The organisation prefers to train jihadist groups rather than fight alongside them. The scale of the organisation is allegedly tiny, although it has recruited military instructors with combat experience via online advertisements. The organisation bills clients for the services provided, but says it does not wish to operate as a provider of mercenaries.³⁶⁵ As the leadership of Malhama Tactical is Russian-speaking, it tends to offer services to groups in Russian-speaking regions, such as Ajnad al-Kavkaz and Junud al-Sham. Although Malhama Tactical claims its goal is to support Sunnis in need, its support is much more likely to be given to Russian-speaking Sunni groups than to others. Regardless, the fall of the 'caliphate' would mean a substantial group of battle-hardened soldiers would become available who may wish to continue to prove themselves in Sunni war zones around the world in the capacity of private military consultants.³⁶⁶

Sub-conclusions

ISIS's connection with the criminal world has always existed and it is logical that it would continue to exist if the organisation moves underground. Upon the fall of the 'caliphate', ISIS's funding

355 In Europe, personal funds, such as salaries or savings, are the most common means of funding terrorism. According to Oftedal's figures, this is the case 58% of the time. 'The Financing of Jihadi Terrorist Cells in Europe', Emilie Oftedal, Forsfarets Forskningsinstitut, p. 16.

356 'Crime as Jihad: Developments in the Crime-Terror Nexus in Europe', Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 9, p. 3, October 2017.

357 Ibid.

358 'Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect', Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 10, No. 6, p. 16.

359 'Crime as Jihad: Developments in the Crime-Terror Nexus in Europe', Rajan Basra and Peter R. Neumann, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 9, p. 3, October 2017.

360 'Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect', Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 10, No. 6, p. 16.

361 'When the Caliphate Crumbles: The Future of Islamic State's Affiliates', Clint Watts, War on the Rocks, 13 June 2016.

362 'Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? They have options', Colin P. Clarke and Armanath Amarasinga, The Atlantic, 6 March 2017.

363 'Malhama Tactical Evolves', Infantry Marine Miles, The Fire Arm Blog, 3 July 2017. 'The Blackwater of Jihad', Neil Hauer, Foreign Policy, 10 February 2017.

364 The Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant, now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

365 'The Blackwater of Jihad', Rao Komer, Christian Boys and Eric Woods, Foreign Policy, 10 February 2017. 'Uighur Foreign Fighters: An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge', Colin P. Clarke and Paul Rexton Kan, ICCT Policy Brief, p. 12, November 2017.

366 'The Global Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration', Bruce Hoffman, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 11, p. 4, November/December 2016. 'Turkey is becoming new hub for Salafist-jihadi exodus from Syria', Metin Gurcan, Al-Monitor, 8 January 2018.

sources in Iraq and Syria will dry up partially or entirely. This means that not only the organisational model and the military strategy will change, but also the funding model. Furthermore, this could reinforce ISIS's connection with the criminal world, and the organisation will continue to conduct criminal practices in order to increase its revenue streams. In order to get around international efforts to fight terrorism, ISIS will continue to use methods that are in vogue with cross-border organised crime.³⁶⁷

ISIS will continue to invest cash in formal and informal economies. Despite territorial and other losses, ISIS probably remains one of the richest terrorist organisations³⁶⁸ in history due to the reserves the organisation was able to build up between 2014 and 2016, when its estimated earnings were between two and three million dollars a day.³⁶⁹ Tribal elites with extensive regional smuggling networks are not interested in jihadist ideology, and the same goes for organised criminals in the cities. If the 'caliphate' falls, both groups will be looking for new business partners who can protect and facilitate their interests. If the Iraqi government is unable to combat the corruption and extortion among its own ranks, then these groups may elect to continue their secret alliance with ISIS or re-establish their links with ISIS in order to fund a guerrilla war that could drag on for dozens of years.³⁷⁰

The more the 'caliphate' shrinks, the more active the reconstruction efforts will be, which are partly financed from a reconstruction fund. It can be assumed that ISIS and other jihadist organisation will try to abuse these funds.³⁷¹

This transition of the international jihad may go hand in hand with the rise of other types of entrepreneurs in jihadist-inspired violence, such as mercenaries, consultants and nomadic mujahideen. It is likely that jihadist mercenaries and consultants will be a marginal phenomenon, at least in the short-term. However, the phenomenon of nomadic mujahideen may well grow exponentially, if the experiences in Afghanistan are anything to go by.

367 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL', S/2016/501, par. 59, UN, 31 May 2016.

368 'Report of the Secretary-General of the Security Council on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2016/92, par. 16, UN, 29 January 2016.

369 'ISIS and the New War Economy', Renad Mansour, Chatham House, 8 June 2017.

370 'Islamic State's next move could be underground criminal networks', Aisha Ahmad, The Washington Post, 8 August 2017.

371 'Fifth report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL', S/2017/467, par. 16, UN, 31 May 2017.

8. Virtual 'caliphate'

The term 'virtual caliphate' briefly describes two ways in which ISIS uses the internet: (1) to spread its propaganda and build and maintain its networks, and (2) as a temporary or permanent alternative to the physical 'caliphate'. Both strategies are examined below.

The virtual 'caliphate' as a propaganda vehicle and the glue that holds the network together

The European CT coordinator and other leading officials have warned that the virtual 'caliphate' could outlive the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria.³⁷² The end of the 'caliphate' certainly does not mean the end of the 'caliphate' as a concept.³⁷³ The idea and the dream continue to live on, not only in the spirits of the deceased ISIS combatants, but also in the global jihadist culture, which has created a gigantic digital propaganda archive.³⁷⁴ Over a considerable stretch of time, efforts to silence the ISIS propaganda machine have been mainly fruitless.³⁷⁵ This has resulted in a gigantic archive that will preserve the cultural and strategic depth of the 'caliphate' even after it falls, which sympathisers can fall back on and gain inspiration from for many years to come.³⁷⁶

However, since 2016 – and especially in the past six months – the disruptive measures taken by some social media companies are

starting to have more and more effect on ISIS's propaganda.³⁷⁷ ISIS propaganda material is now more difficult to find than before. However, social media platforms such as YouTube – and especially Facebook and Twitter – remain widely used media for the purposes of reaching large groups (outreach).³⁷⁸ Additional efforts to further develop a virtual 'caliphate' are a logical and natural response to territorial losses, and propaganda will therefore be more important to ISIS than ever before.³⁷⁹ In this way, ISIS can continue to inspire its supporters and remain influential and relevant,³⁸⁰ sometimes even managing to inspire others to commit attacks.³⁸¹ The decrease in 'official' ISIS propaganda on the internet has partly been compensated by content posted by pro-ISIS sympathisers. This indicates that ISIS has a solid base of supporters on the internet.³⁸²

ISIS will continue to use propaganda to portray apparent defeats as victories. The largely failed attack on the London Underground in September 2017 – in which only the detonation mechanism was ignited – is an example of this. ISIS presented this as an attack, and the media and politicians had a field day. No attention was paid to its failure, just the fact that ISIS had been capable of attacking the United Kingdom.³⁸³ Another example can be found in a statement by al-Baghdadi during the same period, in which he claimed that

372 'Gilles de Kerchove sur la lutte contre le terrorisme: "Il faut former les citoyens contre la radicalisation"' (Gilles de Kerchove on the battle against terrorism: "We must turn citizens against radicalisation"), *Le Soir*, 4 July 2017.

373 'Mosul liberation will not be end of IS', Ali Hasem, *Al-Monitor*, 8 July 2017.

374 'Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare', p. 19, Charlie Winter, ICSR, 2017.

375 'ISIS's propaganda machine is thriving as the physical caliphate fades', Joby Warrick, *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2017. 'Disruptive Efforts by Industry and Law Enforcement Force Jihadist to Seek New Platforms to Disseminate Terrorist Propaganda', *Europol Press Release*, 15 September 2017. 'The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online', p. 12, Martyn Frampton, Ali Fischer and Nico Prucha, *Policy Exchange*, 2017.

376 'Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare', Charlie Winter, p. 19, *International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 2017. 'In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction', Hararo J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, *War on the Rocks*, 27 September 2017.

377 'TE-SAT: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2017', *Europol*, p. 29. 'Disruptive Efforts by Industry and Law Enforcement Force Jihadist Sympathisers to Seek New Platforms to Disseminate Terrorist Propaganda', *Europol Press Release*, 15 September 2017.

378 'Technology & Terrorism: Trends and tactics in terrorists' use of ICT', *SITE*, September 2017, p. 3 and p. 5.

379 'The Islamic State May be failing but Its Strategic Communications Legacy is Here to Stay', Colin Clarke and Charlie Winter, *War on the Rocks*, 17 August 2017.

380 'Future of ISIS', Ben Smith, *House of Commons Library*, Number CBP 8029, p. 8, 30 June 2017.

381 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, *Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 8 June 2017.

382 'Disruptive Efforts by Industry and Law Enforcement Force Jihadist Sympathisers to Seek New Platforms to Disseminate Terrorist Propaganda', *Europol Press Release*, 15 September 2017.

383 'Why ISIS Is So Good at Branding Its Failures as Successes: The Parsons Green Attack shows that governments and media outlets keep falling into the propaganda traps being set for them', Charlie Winter and Haroro J. Ingram, 19 September 2017.

ISIS's attrition strategy was working. According to him, the United States had become battle-weary and would send no more soldiers to Syria.³⁸⁴ In reality, the United States sent several hundred ground troops to Syria. The more territory ISIS loses, the more important propaganda becomes, but ISIS is becoming increasingly less able to spread its propaganda.³⁸⁵ However, two decades of experience have taught the leaders of ISIS that such propaganda is especially important in times of crisis, in order to overcome setbacks and keep morale high.³⁸⁶

In the virtual world, ISIS will survive and maybe even flourish, although the loss of territory will bring major disadvantages. It weakens their brand's global power of expression and undermines the utopian promises. The loss of territory also limits the capacities of ISIS's media officers, due to the diminished available budgets and less freedom of movement. Furthermore, the coalition is successfully taking out more and more media centres and media operatives (including a number of the most skilled propagandists),³⁸⁷ and internet service providers and social-media companies are also more active and effective in combating jihadist content than they have been in the past.³⁸⁸

Creating propaganda will never be as easy as it once was, but ISIS's archives are filled to the brim with material that can be and is already being used to evoke 'caliphate' nostalgia.³⁸⁹ Images of the 'caliphate' era will be used to establish a powerful and enduring narrative. A new myth will be created, and returnees could play a substantial role in spreading this narrative.³⁹⁰ However, the flip-side of this myth creation is that it simultaneously highlights the failure of the 'caliphate'.

The sharp decline in production of official ISIS propaganda is being partially compensated by supporters spreading online content.³⁹¹

This activism can facilitate cohesion within physical and virtual ISIS networks in Europe. These supporters not only spread official ISIS material, but also their own productions. As a result, the lines between official and unofficial media messages and activities are blurring.³⁹²

ISIS will also focus on the internet for another reason: under pressure from the military operations, ISIS will increasingly send its internal communications on the dark web via secure methods such as encryption.³⁹³ This development means that the intelligence, security, and police services must put in extra effort in order to access these communications. On the other hand, this development will probably mean that ISIS will only communicate within a smaller circle to reduce the likelihood of them getting caught, which also reduces the risk of large-scale radicalisation. ISIS and other terrorist organisations are making greater use of encrypted social media platforms, such as Telegram, in order to maintain contact with their supporters and share information with them.³⁹⁴ They use Telegram for collaboration, discussion and preparation, and even for virtual training camps.³⁹⁵

However, we must keep in mind that terrorist interaction still takes place between open social media and encrypted message services. ISIS recruiters first notice people on Facebook or Twitter and then invite them to continue the conversation on Telegram. In other words, they use a continuum of electronic services.

Rise of cybercoaches/virtual entrepreneurs?

The end of the 'caliphate' may result in a greater number of attacks being planned or encouraged remotely by *cybercoaches* (virtual entrepreneurs), as is happening in Libya.³⁹⁶ However, the threat posed by cybercoaching should not be overestimated.

Cybercoaching involves many disadvantages for the terrorists, the most significant of which is that cybercoaches have little to no control over their would-be jihadists. Until now, these remote combatants have often been naïve, little security aware, incompetent, unstable or even psychologically disturbed.³⁹⁷

The impossibility of training them face-to-face is also a substantial disadvantage.³⁹⁸ Furthermore, cybercoaching has frequently been

384 'ISIS-leader seemingly breaks 11-month silence in audio recording', Tim Lister, Jim Sciutto, Ghazi Balkiz and Michael Callahan, CNN, 29 September 2017.

385 'Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State's Evolving Online Strategy', Charlie Winter and Jade Parker, Lawfare blog, 7 January 2018.

386 'Why ISIS Is So Good at Branding Its Failures as Successes: The Parsons Green Attack shows that governments and media outlets keep falling into the propaganda traps being set for them', Charlie Winter and Haroro J. Ingram, 19 September 2017.

387 'Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine', Charlie Winter, WIRED UK, 20 December 2017.

388 'Is Islamic State losing control of its 'virtual caliphate'?', Charlie Winter, BBC News, 9 November 2017. 'Analysis: Islamic State media output goes into sharp decline', BBC monitoring, 23 November 2017.

389 'The Islamic State May be failing but Its Strategic Communications Legacy is Here to Stay', Colin P. Clarke and Charlie Winter, 17 August 2017. 'Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare', Charlie Winter, p. 19, International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2017.

390 'Brussels Attacks One Year On: More Still Needs to Be Done', Thomas Renard, RUSI, 13 March 2017.

391 'Disruptive Efforts by Industry and Law Enforcement Force Jihadist Sympathisers to Seek New Platforms to Disseminate Terrorist Propaganda', Europol Press Release, 15 September 2017.

392 'Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State's Evolving Online Strategy', Charlie Winter and Jade Parker, Lawfare blog, 7 January 2018.

393 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al Qaeda', S/2017/35, par. 17, 13 January 2017. 'Fourth report of the Secretary-General of the Security Council on the threat posed by ISIL', UN, S/2017/97, par. 3, 2 February 2017. 'Disruptive Efforts by Industry and Law Enforcement Force Jihadist Sympathisers to Seek New Platforms to Disseminate Terrorist Propaganda', Europol Press Release, 15 September 2017.

394 'TE-SAT: Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2017', Europol, p. 29.

395 Ibid.

396 'The Islamic State's Libyan External Operations Hub: The Picture So Far', Johannes Saal, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 11, p. 22, December 2017.

397 'The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?', John Mueller, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 9, p. 29, October 2017.

398 'ISIL's Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation' Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, War on the Rocks, 4 January 2017.

the key to discovering jihadists, as has been shown by analysis of a number of failed plots in the United States. In five out of seven cases, the would-be jihadists not only attracted the attention of remote cybercoaches, but also the FBI.³⁹⁹ Moreover, the analysis by Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens states that cybercoaching is a dangerous 'profession': four of the most influential cybercoaches were killed in 2015 and 2016, and a fifth was arrested.⁴⁰⁰ In view of all this, you could argue that cybercoaching has helped the intelligence and security services more than it has helped the terrorists.⁴⁰¹

In Europe too, there have been few to no indications that cybercoaching played a role in the major attacks that took place in the UK and Spain in 2017.⁴⁰² Cybercoaching did play a substantial role in an Australian plot targeting the civil-aviation sector, although this operation also failed, despite the operatives being acquaintances of the cybercoach. The operatives in Australia followed the coach's instructions and used the material provided, but the bomb they built was too heavy to be taken on board the plane. Furthermore, according to the Australian police, the bomb would certainly have been discovered by the security check.⁴⁰³ It is possible that the cybercoach underestimated Sydney Airport's security measures or was unfamiliar with them.⁴⁰⁴

The virtual 'caliphate' as an alternative to the physical 'caliphate'

- Intention to commit cyberattacks exists

As a reaction to the loss of the 'caliphate', ISIS may continue the battle by concentrating on cyberattacks. For some time, there have been expectations that the United Cyber Caliphate (UCC)⁴⁰⁵ or sympathisers can and will carry out digital attacks, e.g. on critical infrastructure.⁴⁰⁶ However, while the intention to do so certainly

exists among ISIS, this situation has not yet materialised.⁴⁰⁷ So far, the activities remain limited to more simplistic activities, such as defacement of websites or DDoS attacks,⁴⁰⁸ which were primarily conducted for the purposes of propaganda.⁴⁰⁹

- ISIS's digital capabilities remain limited for the time being
ISIS's digital capabilities are still limited. The extreme military pressure ISIS is under in Iraq and Syria is draining its financial⁴¹⁰ and human resources, and may also be causing organisational problems. Consequently, ISIS does not appear capable of investing in complex cyberweapons or hiring experts.⁴¹¹

The cyberattacks that terrorists have managed to carry out so far have largely been on random targets that displayed particular vulnerabilities. Articles in many publications warn about the dangers of jihadists conducting cyberattacks on critical infrastructure,⁴¹² mainly due to the potential large-scale disruption and publicity value that would result from such attacks. However, in order to carry out advanced attacks on specific targets, ISIS will need more ICT expertise than is demonstrated by the cyberattacks they have carried out so far. As a result, the likelihood of ISIS carrying out advanced attacks on specific targets is low.⁴¹³

Sub-conclusions

Although ISIS as a traditional war machine appears to be on the brink of collapse, it remains a formidable opponent as a propaganda machine.⁴¹⁴ In any event, ISIS and ISIS supporters have their work cut out for them in the medium term. After the fall of the physical 'caliphate', the virtual 'caliphate' will live on and remain a powerful source of inspiration, although its influence will diminish. After all, ISIS no longer has a success story to tell. It no longer has access to new or appealing images of military victories

399 'The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs', Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 3, pp. 1-8, 9 March 2017.

400 Ibid., p. 7.

401 'The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?', John Mueller, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 9, pp. 29-33, October 2017.

402 Ibid., p. 33.

403 Ibid.

404 'New Developments in the Islamic State's External Operations: The 2017 Sydney Plane Plot', Andrew Zammit, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 9, p. 16, October 2017.

405 The UCC is a unified collective of ISIS's hackers and hacker groups. 'ISIS hacking groups merge as United Cyber Caliphate, but don't worry too much', Justin Pot, Digital News, 28 April 2016.

406 'Could "cyber caliphate" unleash a deadly attack on key targets?', Emma Graham-Harrison, The Guardian, 12 April 2015. 'ISIS Cyber Capabilities Weak, Poorly Organized: Report', Mike Lennon, SecurityWeek.com, 28 April 2016. 'Hacking for IS: The Emergent Cyber Threat Landscape', Laith Axhour, Alex Kassirer and B. Allison Nixon, Flashpoint, April 2016, pp. 24-25.

407 'Cyber Security Beeld Nederland: CSBN 2017' ('Cyber Security Assessment Netherlands: CSAN 2017'), p. 19, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 21 June 2017.

408 'Hacking for IS: The Emergent Cyber Threat Landscape', Laith Axhour, Alex Kassirer and B. Allison Nixon, Flashpoint, April 2016, pp. 24-25.

409 'Cyber Security Beeld Nederland: CSBN 2017' ('Cyber Security Assessment Netherlands: CSAN 2017'), p. 19, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 21 June 2017.

410 'Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes', Stephen Heißner, Peter R. Neumann, John Holland-McGowan and Rajan Basra, ICSR and EY, 2017.

411 'Terrorism, the Internet, and the Islamic State's Defeat: It's Over. But It's Not Over: The roll-back of the self-declared Islamic State group's territory does not mean that it's online presence has shrunk', David P. Fidler, Council on Foreign Relations, 28 November 2017.

412 'Hacking for IS: The Emergent Cyber Threat Landscape', Laith Axhour, Alex Kassirer and B. Allison Nixon, Flashpoint, April 2016. 'Inside the hacker underworld of ISIS', Paul Szoldra, Business Insider, 18 June 2016.

413 'Don't panic over cyber-terrorism: Daesh-bags still at script kiddie level', Iain Thomsen, The Register, 16 February 2017.

414 'Cyber Security Beeld Nederland: CSBN 2017' ('Cyber Security Assessment Netherlands: CSAN 2017'), p. 19, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, 21 June 2017.

415 'Military setbacks don't ensure Islamic State's demise', Metin Gurcan, Al-Monitor, 20 July 2017.

or the 'good life' in the 'caliphate', but they will continue to film and spread videos of terrorist attacks via the internet. Furthermore, for propaganda purposes, ISIS is likely to continue claiming attacks for which little to no evidence of their involvement exists, as was the case after the attack in Las Vegas. In this way, ISIS probably wishes to convince its combatants that it can attack the United States,⁴¹⁵ as this will further encourage and inspire them.⁴¹⁶ Whatever happens, the organisation will probably continue to claim it is capable of inspiring its sympathisers to carry out attacks anywhere in the world.⁴¹⁷

It is currently unlikely that ISIS will devote attention to the purchasing, development or use of complex cyberweapons in order to continue the jihad. It is equally unlikely that ISIS will carry out any advanced digital attacks on specific targets in the short term.⁴¹⁸

There is speculation about the threat posed by remote coaching by virtual entrepreneurs, although so far, cybercoaching has delivered only limited results.

415 'IS claiming behaviour for attacks in the West: Patterns and hypotheses for 2016 and 2017', ECTC Situation Report, p. 25, Europol, 7 November 2017.

416 Ibid., p. 29.

417 'Huge Decline in ISIS Propaganda Mirrors Losses on Battlefield', Henry Ridgwell, VOANews, 1 December 2017.

418 'Inside the hacker underworld of ISIS', Paul Szoldra, Business Insider, 18 June 2016.

9. Escalation as a tactic

The ‘caliphate’ is losing more and more cities and territory, and nothing indicates that the tables will turn. As a result, ISIS may choose to go on a huge offensive to try and repel this momentum, just like the Vietcong did during the Vietnamese New Year (Tet) in 1968. Although this final offensive destroyed the Vietcong as a fighting force, it shattered America’s will to fight on.⁴¹⁹ ISIS could combine shock and awe attacks in the West with targeted guerrilla operations in North Africa and the Levant⁴²⁰ in an attempt to reverse the momentum against the ‘caliphate’. For example, the European CT coordinator warned of military attacks and cyberattacks on nuclear power stations or air-traffic control systems within five years by hired private Russian hackers.⁴²¹

Whatever happens, ISIS will continue its campaign of excessive violence against Shiites in an attempt to maintain its status as the protector of Sunnis and the standard bearer for militant Sunnism.⁴²² The growing focus of attacks on Copts is part of the same strategy. The attacks on Shia and Christian citizens, just like the enslavement of the Yazidis in 2014, is unique to ISIS. Even Al-Qaeda distances itself from these actions.⁴²³ ISIS knows that Al-Qaeda cannot match them when it comes to excessive violence. Furthermore, ISIS uses this to portray countries like Saudi Arabia negatively. Excessive violence helps ISIS’s efforts to position itself favourably compared to Al-Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni countries, which, according to ISIS’s message, offer too little resistance against what ISIS describes as the enemies of

Sunnis.⁴²⁴ The recent ISIS attacks in Iran can be viewed in this light as well. In this way, ISIS is trying to present itself as the only rightful protector of the Sunnis and the only group willing and able to take on the powerful Shia enemy.

Escalation would not only change the momentum and the dynamics of the conflict, but also the dynamics of the region as a whole. ISIS may choose to carry out an attack on the Syrian President Assad in order to change the course of the war in Syria. Attacks on the great mosques in Mecca and Medina would shock the entire region to its core,⁴²⁵ and spectacular attacks on Israel could likewise fundamentally change the regional dynamics.⁴²⁶

Sub-conclusions

All of these options will probably entail major sacrifices for ISIS, but the possibility of turning the tide with regard to the regional dynamics may be more attractive to ISIS than slowly but surely being pushed back. These options require complex – and in some cases, multiple – attacks. The more the ‘caliphate’ crumbles, the more ISIS’s ability to carry out such mass or complex operations decreases. The major sacrifices that ISIS would have to make combined with its likely decreasing capacity to carry out complex attacks mean that the strategic decision to carry out massive attacks such as the Tet offensive or attacks on nuclear power stations is improbable.

419 ‘In the Event of the Islamic State’s Untimely Demise’, Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2017.

420 ‘The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya’, Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith and Karim Mezran, *The Atlantic Council*, June 2017, p. 42. See also ‘What Happens After ISIS Goes Underground’, Colin P. Clarke and Chad C. Serena, 29 May 2017.

421 ‘Britain is “home to 35,000 Islamist fanatics”, more than any other country in Europe, top official warns’, *The Telegraph*, 31 August 2017.

422 ‘What ISIL really thinks about the future’, Hassan Hassan, *The National*, 3 July 2017.

423 ‘Iran in the Islamic State’s Crosshairs’, *The Tahir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 14 June 2017. For example, see ‘Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors’, pp. 181-182, Assaf Moghadam, *Columbia University Press*, 2017.

424 ‘What ISIL really thinks about the future’, Hassan Hassan, *The National*, 3 July 2017. ‘Terror in Tehran: The Islamic State Goes to War with Islamic Republic’, Chris Zambelis, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 6, p. 19, June/July 2017.

425 In June 2017, the Saudi security services foiled a plot to blow up the Grand Mosque in Mecca. ‘Saudis foil attack on Grand Mosque in Mecca’, Salma Abdelaziz and Laura Smith-Spark, 24 June 2017.

426 ‘In the Event of the Islamic State’s Untimely Demise’, Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2017.

STRATEGIC OPTIONS REVISITED: ISIS AND AL-QAEDA

10. Competition, collaboration or mergers with Al-Qaeda

Since ISIS was expelled by Al-Qaeda, calls have been issued and attempts made to reunite the two organisations.⁴²⁷ This has certainly not happened yet, although various options are conceivable.

a. Switching to and merging with Al-Qaeda

After the fall of the 'caliphate', it is likely that some of the combatants will switch allegiance from ISIS to other groups, such as HTS or Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant).⁴²⁸ Although tactical and doctrinal differences of opinion⁴²⁹ and radically different loyalties will keep ISIS and Al-Qaeda (and groups affiliated with the two organisations) separate, a degree of overlap does exist between the two groups. Individuals and affiliated groups move back and forth between the two organisations all the time.⁴³⁰ This is also in line with a comment made by Lorenzo Vidino, in which he states that European jihadists simply want to fight, and whether they fight for Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Al-Shabaab or another jihadist movement is of little importance to them.⁴³¹ Furthermore, Al-Qaeda is likely to be more attractive to ISIS now it is gaining power in Syria, Yemen, and the Sahel, and the rising star of Hamza bin Laden appears to symbolise

that Al-Qaeda has regained its former glory.⁴³² According to two Iraqi intelligence officers, al-Zawahiri has already tried to take advantage of the developments in Iraq and Syria by sending a representative to Syria with orders to encourage ISIS combatants to desert and join up with Al-Qaeda. According to the same officers, the audio message issued by al-Baghdadi on 28 September – in which he ordered his fighters to never retreat, run away, negotiate or surrender – was inspired by this development.⁴³³

So far, the leading combatants appear to have mostly remained loyal to ISIS, although some of the rank-and-file appear to have switched to more moderate or extreme Salafist organisations.⁴³⁴ It remains to be seen what effect the arrival of these ex-ISIS members has. Will the ISIS combatants adjust to their new organisations and become more moderate, or will they radicalise the combatants in their new organisation?

Conceptually, four different Salafist-jihadist networks can be distinguished in Iraq and Syria: (i) ISIS, (ii) Al-Qaeda and current/former Al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, (iii) less extreme jihadist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham that serve as a bridge between hardliners and less extreme jihadists and (iv) relatively moderate groups. As more and more ISIS combatants

427 For example, see 'Zawahiri Calls Fighters to Unite, Attacks IS for Creating and Maintaining Division', SITE Intelligence Group, 29 August 2016.

428 'Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? They have options', Colin P. Clarke and Armanath Amarasinga, *The Atlantic*, 6 March 2017. 'Waar zijn al die IS-strijders gebleven?' (Where have all the IS combatants gone?), Ana van Es, *De Volkskrant*, 15 November.

429 For a good analysis of these, see 'The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory', Brian H. Fishman, p. 60 et seq, 2016.

430 'Terrorism in North Africa: An Examination of the Threat' Geoff D. Porter, Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security on Counterterrorism & Intelligence, p. 4, 29 March 2017. 'Down but not out: How Islamic State clings on in Libya', *The Economist*, 27 May 2017.

431 'Wrong assumptions: integration, responsibility, and counterterrorism in France', Lorenzo Vidino, *War on the Rocks*, 22 January 2015.

432 'Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al Qa'ida's Leader in Waiting', Ali Soufan, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 8, p. 7, September 2017.

433 'Al Qa'ida set to gain as Islamic State disintegrates: Under pressure from US-led coalition and Russian-backed Syrian troops, fleeing battle-hardened jihadists may return to bin Laden strategy of attacking West', Bassem Mroue and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, *The Times of Israel*, 19 October 2017.

434 'Military setbacks don't ensure Islamic State's demise', Metin Gurcan, *Al-Monitor*, 20 July 2017.

switch to other groups, the ideological and organisational lines between these groups will become increasingly blurred.⁴³⁵

The constant military pressure on ISIS may result in the organisation fragmenting, after which the various factions will merge with HTS or be taken over by force.⁴³⁶ It is also possible that HTS will not unify with the remains of ISIS after ISIS has been militarily defeated, but that an appeal will be made to individual ISIS combatants to come and join the group.⁴³⁷ Jihadist organisations, particularly HTS, remain the strongest opposing entities that could entice both local and foreign combatants to defect. Many combatants want to fight for the strongest group and be able to provide for their families for as long as possible. Yet, in the past, HTS and its predecessors have attracted fewer foreign combatants than groups like ISIS, as they focus more on local aspects.

HTS will probably welcome the additional combatants, although it is possible that they will have a specific interest in the Western combatants. Previously, their predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra (meaning 'the Support Front') was very welcoming of Western combatants, not for battle in Syria, but because the group wanted to train them to continue the battle back in their country of origin in the West.⁴³⁸

b. Collaboration or mergers

It is also possible that remaining sections of ISIS will seek rapprochement with Al-Qaeda,⁴³⁹ as some may see this as the only way to continue the battle. The constant attacks create an environment that may encourage this kind of reconciliation.⁴⁴⁰ After all, neither Al-Qaeda nor ISIS is a monolithic organisation. ISIS is an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, and many ISIS combatants still support Al-Qaeda's approach and ideology.⁴⁴¹ Nevertheless, a reconciliation remains unlikely.

The disputes between ISIS and Al-Qaeda stem from different tactical and strategic approaches and ambitions for power.⁴⁴² Al-Zawahiri follows Osama bin Laden's philosophy and advises Sunni jihadists not to attack Shiites.⁴⁴³ According to al-Zawahiri, the jihad must be primarily focused on the United States and the 'Crusader Alliance'. Deviant Islamic sects should only be attacked for self-defence purposes. Furthermore, al-Zawahiri forbids his supporters from attacking houses of prayer, religious festivals and social meetings of other Islamic faiths. An alternative explanation of the *takfir* doctrine, based on which Muslims can be declared apostates, is the source of this dispute. ISIS is convinced that 'deviant sects' are heretics and that it is not only permitted, but also obligatory, to destroy them completely. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, believes that this doctrine can only be applied to individuals.⁴⁴⁴ ISIS and Al-Qaeda have a similar difference of opinion regarding how non-Muslims living in Muslim countries should be treated. There are indications that religious and military leaders within ISIS are becoming even more radical and no longer have any hesitation about declaring Al-Qaeda leaders to be infidels.⁴⁴⁵

Interviews with Western ISIS combatants likewise suggest that the differences between Al-Qaeda and ISIS remain significant.⁴⁴⁶ ISIS supporters claim Al-Qaeda supporters are the 'Jews of the Jihad',⁴⁴⁷ while al-Zawahiri and his followers call ISIS supporters *Kharijites*⁴⁴⁸ and *takfiris*.⁴⁴⁹ Just like al-Zawahiri, other prominent jihadist ideologues such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi have drawn attention to ISIS's ideological errors. Nevertheless, they are careful not to condemn all members of ISIS for infidel behaviour.

435 'Military setbacks don't ensure Islamic State's demise', Metin Gurcan, Al-Monitor, 20 July 2017.

436 'The Global Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration', Bruce Hoffman, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 11, p. 4, November/December 2016.

437 'The Demise of the Caliphate: Quo Vadis ISIS', Ely Karmon, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 19 December 2016.

438 This is according to Theo Padnos (Peter Theo Curtis), who was kidnapped by Jabhat al-Nusra for two years. 'My Captivity', Theo Padnos, New York Times Magazine, 29 October 2014.

439 'How Al-Qaeda survived drones, uprisings and the Islamic State: The nature of the current threat', Aaron Y. Zelin, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, p. 5, June 2017.

440 'The Evolving Terrorist Threat and CT Options for the Trump Administration', Bruce Hoffman, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Policy Focus 153, p. 13, June 2017. 'Al-Qaeda versus ISIS: Competing Jihadist Brands in the Middle East', Charles Lister, p. 22, Middle East Institute, November 2017.

441 'Al Qaeda Quietly and Patiently Rebuilding: Expert Commentary', Bruce Hoffman, The Cypher, 30 December 2016.

442 'The Extremist Wing of the Islamic State', Tore Hamming, Jihadica, 9 June 2016. 'Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors', p. 126, Assaf Moghadam, Columbia University Press, 2017. 'Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State', Ali Soufan, pp. 259-260, 2017.

443 'General Guidelines for Jihad', Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Sahab Media, 14 September 2013.

444 'Dispute over Takfir Rocks Islamic State', R. Green, Middle East Research Institute, 4 August 2017.

445 Ibid.

446 'Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq', Amranath Amarasinga, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 23 January 2017.

447 'What Comes After ISIS?', Foreign Policy, 10 July 2017.

448 The Kharijites, which translates as 'those who seceded', were members of the earliest sect of Islam. The Kharijites' theology was radically fundamental, involving complete adherence to the Koran and an uncompromising defiance of corrupt authorities. Kharijites believe moderate Muslims to be hypocrites and infidels who can be murdered with impunity. The Kharijites adopted *takfir* (excommunication and denunciation) as their central tenet. Nowadays, the term Kharijite is mainly used pejoratively to describe groups or individuals who wish to create *fitna* (chaos and discord) with their extreme views.

449 'Can the Islamic State and Al Qaeda Find Common Ground?', Scott Stewart, Stratfor Worldview, 9 March 2017.

The apparent objective here is to ensure that reunification of the jihadist movement remains an option.⁴⁵⁰

The supposed animosity between al-Baghdadi and al-Zawahiri is another obstacle to reconciliation.⁴⁵¹ ISIS's English-language propaganda magazines, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, have described al-Zawahiri as manipulative and dishonest on numerous occasions.⁴⁵² ISIS goes as far as to call him a traitor.⁴⁵³ This extreme polarisation can only change⁴⁵⁴ over time if a significant change is made to how both organisations talk about each other's leaders.⁴⁵⁵

After the fall of the 'caliphate', it is also possible that al-Baghdadi will be killed, which could have massive consequences for the relationship between ISIS and Al-Qaeda. According to Hoffman, the intense animosity between al-Baghdadi and al-Zawahiri is the main obstacle to conciliation between the groups. If he is right, then al-Baghdadi's death could make rapprochement possible.⁴⁵⁶ His death could also have significant effects on the development of ISIS in other ways. First, his death might result in an internal battle for succession, resulting in temporary or permanent fragmentation and weakening of the organisation.⁴⁵⁷ Second, his death could result in a complete restructuring of the network of ISIS-affiliated groups in the various *wilayats* and beyond. After all, the leaders of these groups pledged allegiance (*bay'ah*) to al-Baghdadi personally. If he is killed, these leaders may reconsider their and their group's position, in which case they have three options: (i) swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi's successor, (ii) continue independently or (iii) pledge allegiance to another leader, such as al-Zawahiri. As a result, al-Baghdadi's death could unintentionally enable the unification of parts of ISIS and Al-Qaeda.⁴⁵⁸ It is possible that every *wilayat* will make its own decision.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS are not only separated by their struggle for power within the world of Salafi jihadism; their organisations also have different opinions regarding strategy. Al-Qaeda supports a patient approach, in accordance with a three-step strategy based on the

Maoist long-term war strategy, among others.⁴⁵⁹ In the first stage, the goal is to create chaos and capitalise on the subsequent power vacuums. The second step is to then gain support for a jihadist regime. Only once these first two stages are complete should you go about establishing a 'caliphate'.⁴⁶⁰

ISIS is much more sectarian than Al-Qaeda, although the differences appear to be decreasing now that al-Zawahiri has made unusually sectarian comments and called upon Iraqi Sunnis to fight a guerrilla war modelled on the one fought by Al-Qaeda in Iraq⁴⁶¹ under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.⁴⁶² ISIS claims that, after it conquers territory, it has the right to force any Muslims in this territory to support ISIS or face execution. ISIS is much more ambitious than Al-Qaeda and prematurely declared the 'caliphate' in order to use it as a base for global conquest.⁴⁶³ Upon the fall of the 'caliphate', both ISIS and Al-Qaeda must make a number of existential decisions, the most important of which will have to do with resolving these disputes.

Hamza bin Laden's growing stardom within Al-Qaeda may assist this process.⁴⁶⁴ A considerable number of ISIS combatants despise the current leader of Al-Qaeda due to his support for Jabhat al-Nusra.⁴⁶⁵ In contrast to al-Zawahiri, Hamza bin Laden has so far avoided any open criticism of ISIS.⁴⁶⁶ This may well be a strategic decision to reach out to ISIS combatants who are considering a switch to Al-Qaeda, and Al-Qaeda may well be positioning him as a figure who could unite the two groups.⁴⁶⁷ Hamza bin Laden did not simply appear out of nowhere. He is a born-and-bred jihadist and the favourite son of the most famous jihadist in history. His background compensates for his lack of battle experience.⁴⁶⁸ Although it is unclear whether Hamza bin-Laden possesses sufficient charisma, his possible leadership could help to increase

450 'The race to save Peter Kassig', Shiv Malik, Mustafa Khalili, Ali Younes and Spencer Ackerman, *The Guardian*, 18 December 2014.

451 'Can the Islamic State and Al Qa'eda Find Common Ground?', Scott Stewart, *Stratfor Worldview*, 9 March 2017.

452 *Ibid.*

453 'Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al Qa'ida's Leader in Waiting', Ali Soufan, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 8, p. 5, September 2017.

454 'Where Do ISIS Fighters Go When the Caliphate Falls? They have options', Colin P. Clarke and Armanath Amarasinga, *The Atlantic*, 6 March 2017.

455 'Can the Islamic State and Al Qa'eda Find Common Ground?', Scott Stewart, *Stratfor Worldview*, 9 March 2017.

456 'The Global Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration', Bruce Hoffman, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 9, Issue 11, p. 4, November/December 2016.

457 'Don't Kill the Caliph! The Islamic State and the Pitfalls of Leadership Decapitation', Craig Whiteside, *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2016.

458 *Ibid.*

459 'Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage Through Which the Islamic Nation Will Pass', Abu Bakr Naji, 2004.

460 'Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State', Ali Soufan, pp. 184-186 and p.287, 2017.

461 Al-Qaeda in Iraq eventually evolved into ISIS.

462 'Latest al-Qaeda Message Marks Renewed Confidence Against Islamic State', Hassan Hassan, *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 21 September 2017.

463 'Can the Islamic State and Al Qa'eda Find Common Ground?', Scott Stewart, *Stratfor Worldview*, 9 March 2017.

464 'Mosul Falls: What is Next for Us?', Robin Wright, *The New Yorker*, 13 July 2017. 'Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al Qa'ida's Leader in Waiting', Ali Soufan, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 8, p. 1, September 2017.

465 'Can You Kill the Islamic State?', Ali H. Soufan, *The New York Times*, 20 June 2017.

466 'Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al Qa'ida's Leader in Waiting', Ali Soufan, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 8, p. 5, September 2017. 'Disarray in the Syrian Jihad is Making Perfect Conditions for an AQ Revival', Rita Katz, *SITE*, 16 October 2017.

467 'Bin Laden's son steps into father's shoes as al-Qaeda attempts a comeback', Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, *The Washington Post*, 27 May 2017.

468 'Hamza bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al Qa'ida's Leader in Waiting', Ali Soufan, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 8, p. 5, September 2017.

global support for Al-Qaeda (and the entire jihadist movement).⁴⁶⁹ However, analysts are strongly divided on the position Hamza may assume and the influence he may have. Al-Zawahiri and leaders of regional Al-Qaeda groups could well be significantly more influential.

Bin Laden's calls to conduct individual attacks are also more in line with the attack methods propagated by ISIS, although such attacks were also encouraged and carried out in the past by Al-Qaeda and AQAP, either directly or in their name. Al-Qaeda places greater emphasis on planning large-scale and complex attacks in the West than ISIS does.⁴⁷⁰ In his propaganda messages, bin Laden has praised individuals such as the Fort Hood attacker and the two Nigerian Brits who killed soldier Lee Rigby in the street with an axe. None of these attackers were known Al-Qaeda members.⁴⁷¹ If it returns to the desert in Syria, ISIS will more closely resemble groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Conducting a more classical terrorist campaign from the desert may well be less grand and compelling than defending and expanding the 'caliphate', but it is more practically suited to Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and the strategic vision of the inner core of Al-Qaeda.⁴⁷² ISIS will also start to resemble Al-Qaeda in that, due to the loss of territory and eventually of the whole proto-state. ISIS will become a more mobile and transnational umbrella organisation, which Al-Qaeda has always been.⁴⁷³ While ISIS appears to be departing from the territorial-expansion model due to failures in Libya, Iraq and Syria, Al-Qaeda conversely appears to be moving towards a model based on the acquisition of territory. There are already signs of this development in Syria,⁴⁷⁴ where Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has been slowly but surely carving out a de facto mini-state.⁴⁷⁵

In theory, the fall of the 'caliphate' and the further weakening of ISIS will increase the chances of combatants loyal to both groups to continue within a single umbrella organisation. This may even lead

to the establishment of a new Salafist jihadist group.⁴⁷⁶ It is also possible that local commanders may switch sides and take all or many of their combatants with them. The chances of a partial or full merger of the two groups is extremely low, although this will not stop ISIS and Al-Qaeda from working together at the local level, especially in areas where they have not yet attacked each other.⁴⁷⁷ For example, in Yemen there are signs that ISIS-Y and AQAP may be collaborating despite their bitter rivalry.⁴⁷⁸ The same applies to rapprochement and coordination between ISIS-L and Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi,⁴⁷⁹ and to collaboration between ISIS-L and AQIM in the south of Libya.⁴⁸⁰

c. Fragmentation and collaboration

It stands to reason that various splinter groups of Al-Qaeda and ISIS outside Iraq and Syria will work together. Ultimately, the ideological similarities between the two groups are overwhelming.⁴⁸¹ Even in the event of continual fragmentation of power, the jihadist movement as a whole may gain strength if these groups can succeed in improving collaborations at the strategic level.⁴⁸² However, the likelihood of this happening is small, due to the role that *al wala wa-l bara* (loyalty and disavowal),⁴⁸³ the rigid doctrine, and *takfir* (excommunication and branding as a heretic)⁴⁸⁴ all play in the world view and actions of jihadists. Some even believe that the substantial importance of these factors will not only lead to far-reaching fragmentation of the jihadist movement, but eventually also to its self-destruction,⁴⁸⁵ as was the case in the distant past for the Kharijites, and in the recent past for the Groupe Islamique Armée (GIA) in Algeria.

In practice, signs of this self-destruction process are limited. The excessive use of *takfir* may well result in fragmentation of ISIS, but it has not yet resulted in the self-destruction of the organisation as a whole. For the time being, the internal doctrinal debate with the

469 'Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback? The Factors That Will Determine Its Success', Seth G. Jones, Foreign Affairs, 7 August 2017.

470 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 44' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 44'), National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Summary, p. 5, April 2017.

471 'Bin Laden's son steps into father's shoes as al-Qaeda attempts a comeback', Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, The Washington Post, 27 May 2017.

472 'What Will Happen to ISIS When Its Territory is Recaptured?', James L. Gelvin, Reuters, 30 October 2016.

473 'Marawi: A Safe Haven for ISIS in the Philippines?', Hamza Iftikhar, Raddington report, 17 July 2017.

474 'How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb', International Crisis Group, Middle East and North Africa Report Number 178, p. 31, 24 July 2017. 'Assessing the Feasibility of a "Wilayah Mindanao"', Joseph Franco, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume 11, Issue 4, p. 31, August 2017.

475 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017. In the intervening period, HTS and Al-Qaeda have been distancing themselves from each other (for other reasons).

476 'Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback? The Factors That Will Determine Its Success', Seth G. Jones, Foreign Affairs, 7 August 2017.

477 'Can the Islamic State and Al Qaeda Find Common Ground?', Scott Stewart, Stratfor Worldview, 9 March 2017.

478 'Al-Qaeda and IS – friends or foe in Yemen?', The Region, 13 August 2017.

479 'Letter of the Security Council committee on IS and Al Qaida', S/2017/35, par. 36, 13 January 2017.

480 'Isil "regrouping in southern Libya with support of al-Qaeda and preparing for further attacks"', Adam Nathan, The Telegraph, 1 March 2017. 'Down but not out: How Islamic State clings on in Libya', The Economist, 27 May 2017.

481 'In the Event of the Islamic State's Untimely Demise', Brian Michael Jenkins and Colin P. Clarke, Foreign Policy, 11 May 2017.

482 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after the Islamic State. The Future of the Jihadi movement', Tore Hamming, BICOM, 31 July 2017.

483 For a more detailed description, see the glossary in 'Salafisme: Utopische idealen in een weerbarstige praktijk' ('Salafism: Utopian ideals in an unmanageable reality'), Martijn de Koning, Joas Wagemakers and Carmen Becker, p. 212, Parthenon Publishing, 2014.

484 Ibid., p. 214.

485 'The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction', Nelly Lahoud, Columbia University Press, 2010.

even more extreme Hazimi faction⁴⁸⁶ about the acceptable boundaries of the Muslim faith and Muslim practice will not result in the demise of ISIS as an organisation. The Hazimi faction is too small and has too little influence within ISIS to achieve this.⁴⁸⁷ Furthermore, leading figures within this faction are being put on trial by ISIS.⁴⁸⁸ It is uncertain whether this faction can even still be considered part of ISIS. However, the leadership of ISIS can no longer focus only on external enemies. ISIS's extremism has spawned a new counterforce, which over time could challenge for the leadership of ISIS, just as ISIS once challenged for the leadership of Al-Qaeda.⁴⁸⁹ This counterforce follows a pattern that ultimately occurs within all radical religious organisations.

For the time being, the less extreme faction seems to have the support of the 'caliph'. If this faction is successful, this may facilitate a possible rapprochement with Al-Qaeda. This kind of development may contribute to a split within ISIS, resulting in a number of warring factions. In this case, it is possible that less radical movements will seek alliances with groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

d. Competition

Upon the declaration of a 'caliphate' on 29 June 2014, ISIS positioned itself as the leading Sunni jihadist organisation and directly challenged all other Sunni jihadist groups, including Al-Qaeda. The rivalry that this created was unprecedented within Sunni jihadism, although the increased competition did not lead to a state of competitive escalation and radicalisation. ISIS was initially successful in conquering territory, recruiting Al-Qaeda combatants and eventually even breaking off from Al-Qaeda. However, neither ISIS's successes nor its violent campaign prompted Al-Qaeda to adopt a comparatively violent approach in conflicts in the region or in its global campaign.⁴⁹⁰ The violent escalation was mainly one-sided, taking place within ISIS alone.⁴⁹¹ Nevertheless, ISIS's split from Al-Qaeda resulted in major competition, with these and other jihadist players increasingly fighting for political and ideological authority. This power struggle

and ideological competition did result in *fitna*⁴⁹² (chaos and discord),⁴⁹³ but did not result in a state of violent escalation.

It is unclear whether this competition will continue in the years to come, although it will likely manifest itself in different ways in different places.⁴⁹⁴ In some regions, there will be violent confrontations (such as in Somalia⁴⁹⁵ and Sinai);⁴⁹⁶ in other regions, there will be non-interventionist measures; in others still, there will be strategic or even tactical and operational collaborations (such as in Yemen).⁴⁹⁷ Strategic competition and violent skirmishes in countries such as Afghanistan and Syria do not necessarily mean tactical collaboration – sometimes based on old personal ties – is impossible. The latter factor was a major part of the large-scale attacks in Paris (2015), Brussels (2016), and Kenya (2016).⁴⁹⁸ The ISIS operatives who perpetrated these attacks used their personal connections with Al-Qaeda supporters during the preparation.⁴⁹⁹

Sub-conclusions

For the time being, the relationship between the inner core of ISIS and the inner core of Al-Qaeda is characterised more by enmity and competition than trust and collaboration. However, the fall of the 'caliphate', the possible death of al-Baghdadi and the possible rise of Hamza bin Laden may well change this.

The ceaseless military pressure on the inner core of ISIS may cause it to partially or fully fragment. Regardless of this pressure, it is likely that some of the combatants, whether individually or in groups, will renounce their loyalty to ISIS in order to gain admission to Al-Qaeda or groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda, which could result in further radicalisation of these groups.

486 Followers of Ahmed al-Hazimi take a completely uncompromising position regarding whether ignorance can be used as an excuse to not be branded an infidel in the event that the person in question has violated serious religious laws (*shirk*). Hazimi teaches that ignorance (*jahl*) is no excuse (*udhr*) for breaking religious laws and that any true Muslim is obliged to denounce (*takfir*) the offender (*musrik*).

487 Support for these teachings is significant among Indonesian IS combatants in the Middle East, among other groups. 'Marawi, the "East Asia Wilayah" and Indonesia', IPAC, IPAC report No. 38, p. 21, 21 July 2017.

488 'Caliphate in Disarray: Theological Turmoil in the Islamic State', Cole Bunzel, *Jihadica*, 3 October 2017.

489 'The Extremist Wing of the Islamic State', Tore Hamming, *Jihadica*, 9 June 2016.

490 'The Al Qaeda-Islamic State Rivalry: Competition Yes, but No Competitive Escalation', Tore Hamming, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, p. 13, 11 July 2017.

491 'The Extremist Wing of the Islamic State', Tore Hamming, *Jihadica*, 9 June 2016.

492 For a more detailed description, see the glossary in '*Salafisme: Utopische idealen in een weerbarstige praktijk*' ('Salafism: Utopian ideals in an unmanageable reality'), Martijn de Koning, Joas Wagemakers and Carmen Becker, p. 203, Parthenon Publishing, 2014.

493 'The "Islamic State" Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism', Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015.

494 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017.

495 'Third report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2016/830, par. 26-28, UN, 30 September 2016. 'A Legitimate Challenger? Assessing the Rivalry between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia', Jason Warner and Caleb Weiss, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 10, pp. 27-32, November 2017.

496 'Al-Qaeda-aligned group claims attacks on IS in Egypt's Sinai', BBC Monitoring, 11 November 2017. 'The Re-Emergence of Jund al-Islam: A New Chapter in the Conflict Between al-Qaeda and ISIS', Ahmed Salem, the Atlantic Council, 29 November 2017.

497 'Third report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL', S/2016/830, par. 23-24, UN, 30 September 2016.

498 *Ibid.*, par. 8.

499 *Ibid.*

The thought that ISIS and Al-Qaeda could pool their strength by merging or closely collaborating is worrying, as their combined power would pose a significant threat. However, this bleak scenario is an unlikely one, given their substantial doctrinal and strategic differences. Furthermore, there is considerable mutual enmity that will only abate gradually over time.

The inner core of ISIS and the inner core of Al-Qaeda will probably continue to compete with each other at the strategic level, although the situation at the local level will differ greatly from place to place and could involve confrontation, non-intervention or collaboration. This strategic competition will probably not result in a process of violent escalation on both sides. Considering the Paris and Brussels attacks, in which ISIS operatives collaborated with Al-Qaeda supporters, it is to be expected that the two groups may find it easier to collaborate on an operational level in Europe than in many non-European regions. This may be due to both organisations seeing Europe as a hostile environment.

Excessive use of excommunication and denunciation may lead to fragmentation of the inner core of ISIS, although there are no signs of self-destruction yet.

11. Does the end of the 'caliphate' mean the end of the idea?

The loss of territory could mean that ISIS will slowly disappear and that some of its combatants will join other groups.⁵⁰⁰ The question is whether the fall of the 'caliphate' will result in the end of the mobilisation of new recruits for its ideology. Has it lost its eschatological appeal? In other words, is it possible that ISIS will simply dissolve and go out of fashion?

The first and second jihadist waves both lost their appeal eventually. During the first wave in the 1990s, popular support for the GIA in Algeria and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt rapidly declined following their merciless butchering of civilians. The second wave – the spectacular series of attacks by Al-Qaeda in the United States, Kenya, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, and Spain – did not result in destabilisation of the West or the overthrow of existing regimes in countries with a Muslim majority. These attacks did not gain the resonance among Muslims that Al-Qaeda had expected. On the contrary, just like during the first wave, Muslims grew weary and support dwindled.⁵⁰¹

The loss of territory reduces the global appeal of ISIS and may make it more difficult for the organisation to recruit and keep hold of supporters.⁵⁰² It is even possible that this will lead to a crisis of legitimacy from which ISIS will never recover, given that its self-declared status as the leading jihadist player is largely based on

its control of territories and its ability to govern them.⁵⁰³ The loss of the 'caliphate' could result in Muslims concluding that their utopia is or has become unachievable (in this world at least), leading them to abandon the movement. The combatants' countries of origin could accelerate and reinforce this process by offering 'their' combatants a way out by allowing them to return.⁵⁰⁴

However, one could also argue that, while the territory was indeed vital for establishing the brand (enabling enforcement of the purest form of Islam via excessive violence), the brand will remain intact after the territory has been lost.⁵⁰⁵ Furthermore, if ISIS's goal was to continue to exist as a state, the organisation would not have systematically provoked the international community in the way that it has. It would also not have conquered a city with a population of millions, an action that breaks every rule in the guerrilla handbook. You would assume a group trying to bring about the second coming would not act in this way. What the group actually appears to be striving for is ideological hegemony of jihadism.⁵⁰⁶ The beheadings and war crimes provoked military interventions that hurt ISIS, such as the loss of Mosul, although in religious terms, this loss – just like the previous territorial losses – was portrayed simply as the will of Allah.⁵⁰⁷ According to this line of reasoning, the fallen 'caliphate' would serve as the jihadist utopia, something that ISIS could look back on for many years and use to attract and inspire

500 'Future of ISIS', Ben Smith, House of Commons Library, Number CBP 8029, p. 8, 30 June 2017.

501 'Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West', p. 155, Gilles Kepel, Princeton University Press, 2017.

502 'The Battle against ISIS: The Trump Administration's 30 Day Review', Bruce Hoffman, The Cypher, 26 February 2017. 'With the destruction of the caliphate, the Islamic State has lost far more than territory', J.M. Berger and Amarnath Amarasingam, The Washington Post, 31 October 2017.

503 'Does ISIS Need Territory to Survive?', Martha Revkin, The New York Times, 21 October 2016.

504 'What Will Happen to ISIS When Its Territory is Recaptured?', James L. Gelvin, Stringer/Reuters, 30 October 2016.

505 'Brand Control is More Important Than Territory', Jacob Olidort, The New York Times, 21 October 2016.

506 'How ISIS Survives the Fall of Mosul', Charlie Winter, The Atlantic, 3 July 2017.

507 'How the Islamic State is Spinning the Mosul Battle', Charlie Winter, The Atlantic, 20 October 2016.

combatants. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to say that the loss of Mosul and the rest of the 'caliphate' was all part of a brilliant strategy by ISIS, as some are inclined to do.⁵⁰⁸

ISIS can present the fall of the 'caliphate' as the result of a conspiracy by the anti-ISIS coalition that seeks to conquer and rule Sunni territory. This will offer a long window of opportunity for ISIS to mobilise international supporters to punish Western and other states for this 'policy'.⁵⁰⁹ Former combatants and freelancers could continue in small groups or independently, although the fall of the 'caliphate' will reduce ISIS's ability to capture its supporters' imagination and inspire them. The 'caliphate' – and especially the 'caliphate' in Syria – appeals strongly to the apocalyptic prophecies that ISIS's supporters often believe in. Its fall will reduce ISIS's eschatological appeal, although this decline will probably only happen gradually due in part to its enormous digital archive.

It is possible that the proto-state will rematerialise elsewhere, although this appears unlikely given ISIS's experiences in Iraq and Syria and the state of the *wilayats* and affiliated groups in other parts of the world. The global jihad appears to be transitioning from the third wave – the 'caliphate' – to the fourth wave; the personal or leaderless jihad.⁵¹⁰ ISIS seems to be evolving from an extremely centralised hierarchical structure – which culminated in the declaration of the 'caliphate' – into a more decentralised, leaderless movement now that autonomous cells and lone actors have started to operate in the name of ISIS in Europe, North America, Australia, and other parts of the world.⁵¹¹ The leaderless jihad was predicted by Abu Musab al-Suri in his 'Call to Global Resistance', which was mainly a reaction to the loss of the Taliban's Emirate in Afghanistan in 2001. Al-Suri's strategy to keep the global jihad going was based on three elements: (i) lone actors or small groups who (ii) form a network and (iii) make use of new media and information technology.⁵¹² A network of small cells would be the best way to keep the jihadist flame burning by carrying out a series of media-friendly attacks.⁵¹³

There may well be lessons to be learned from another movement that fought against the international order, the anarchists of the 19th and early 20th century. Eventually, this wave died out, as states implemented political and social reforms, modernised the political and justice systems, and improved international collaboration.⁵¹⁴

Sub-conclusions

The loss of the 'caliphate' will not cease the mobilisation of ISIS's ideology. ISIS's eschatological message will remain intact and the power of the ISIS brand will probably be very slow to diminish.

The global jihad is a social movement. Whatever happens to ISIS, Al-Qaeda or any other jihadist group, their ideology and the movement will live on in some form or another. The global jihad will probably return to an earlier phase, transforming from the 'caliphate' back to a personal or leaderless jihad. Besides the inner core of ISIS, a network will form of individuals and small cells that are inspired – although not controlled or coached – by ISIS. As a result, the threat will change, but it will not necessarily decrease.

508 'The Myth of ISIS's Strategic Brilliance', Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, *The Atlantic*, 20 July 2017.

509 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. The Western odyssey in defeating ISIS', Kyle Orton, bicom.org.uk/blogpost, 16 May 2017.

510 'The Four Waves of Global Jihad, 1979-2017', Glenn E. Robinson, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, pp. 82-83, Autumn 2017.

511 'Facing the Evolving Jihadi Threat in Europe', Thomas Renard, *Clingendael Spectator*, 19 September 2017.

512 'The Four Waves of Global Jihad, 1979-2017', Glenn E. Robinson, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, pp. 83-84, Autumn 2017.

513 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

514 'What Will Happen to ISIS When Its Territory is Recaptured?', James L. Gelvin, *Stringer/Reuters*, 30 October 2016.

Conclusion – continued roles, but different threats

The above information establishes a large number of possible development paths and associated threats without examining how coherent and compatible they are. We will therefore examine this aspect in these concluding observations.

It is difficult to define the importance of the fall of the ‘caliphate’ in terms of the Westphalian view of the international state system. In contrast to modern states, ISIS’s authority is not legitimised based on fixed and inviolable territorial borders. ISIS rejects the idea that the state should be defined based on a specific predefined region. As a result, it is easier for ISIS to deal with the loss of territory than it is for other states.⁵¹⁵ In addition, the wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan cannot simply be defined in terms of the *clash of civilisations* as hypothesised by Samuel Huntington: an epic conflict between different cultures or civilisations (Western, Orthodox, Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu or Chinese) as a successor of the Cold War between democratic and communist political and economic systems.⁵¹⁶ The numerous bloody and complicated disputes plaguing the Middle East and other countries with a Muslim majority can be better described as a *clash within a civilisation*, rather than a *clash of civilisations*.⁵¹⁷ However, this conflict within Islam – to the extent that it can be described as one single culture – also involves geopolitical dimensions, due to the involvement of the United States and Russia. Furthermore, the struggle between the mainly Sunni Saudi

Arabia and the Shiite-dominated Iran to gain both regional and global influence will continue to substantially fuel this conflict.⁵¹⁸

Home-grown terrorism and threat from returnees remain the main threats to national security

Upon the fall of the ‘caliphate’, some foreign combatants will return to their country of origin. Although fewer returnees may return than expected, European travellers in particular will pose a threat to the Netherlands.

Research shows that, so far, only a small proportion of European terrorists carried out their attacks on the orders of ISIS, although the majority of the attackers did have some kind of contact with ISIS combatants and were inspired by them. Only a tiny minority of returnees have been involved in planning an attack. Only a few of the 1,000+ returnee jihadists from Iraq and Syria to the EU have been involved in attacks in Western countries. In these cases, it mainly involved jihadists sent back by ISIS under orders to carry out an attack, and these attacks often claimed the most fatalities. Upon the fall of the ‘caliphate’, it is possible that more trained jihadists will return and that a larger proportion of them will be involved in attacks.⁵¹⁹ One deeply troubling factor is that the majority of returnees retain their jihadist ideology. In such cases, one cannot describe them as having been deradicalised, and some have not even been disengaged. ISIS remains determined to perpetrate more attacks, particularly in Western Europe.⁵²⁰ In this light, it is relevant that many ISIS combatants in Iraq and Syria come from

515 ‘Defeat as Victory? How the Islamic State Will Rely on Hijrah to Claim a Win’, Burak Kadercan, *War on the Rocks*, 13 October 2017.

516 ‘The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order’, Samuel P. Huntington, 1996.

517 ‘Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State’, Ali Soufan, p. 293, 2017. ‘The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory’, Brian H. Fishman, p. 216, 2016.

518 ‘The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory’, Brian H. Fishman, p. 10, 2016.

519 ‘Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45’ (‘National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45’), Summary, p. 5, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

520 ‘Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 43’ (‘National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 43’), Summary, p. 1, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, November 2016.

North Africa and that their return to their home country also means they will be close to or even bordering on Europe.

After the fall of the 'caliphate', ISIS will probably focus on attacks in the West in order to (i) confirm its relevance in response to the Western threat to Islam, (ii) exact revenge, and (iii) undermine relations between Islamic and non-Islamic communities and indirectly provoke Islamophobia. ISIS's goal remains to polarise, destabilise, provoke interreligious violence and recruit supporters.⁵²¹ The more ISIS comes under pressure in Iraq and Syria, the more likely it seems that the organisation will also start to use women to carry out attacks in Europe.⁵²² Women are already performing recruitment and facilitation tasks and are far from the innocent brides that some see them as. IS is now appealing to women to fight alongside men on the battlefield and carry out attacks.⁵²³ After the fall of the 'caliphate', it will probably become more difficult for ISIS's external attack unit in Iraq and Syria to carry out complex, orchestrated attacks in the West.⁵²⁴ However, any decline in planning capacities in Iraq and Syria could be partly compensated by ISIS-L⁵²⁵ or another franchise.⁵²⁶ The loss of territory in Iraq and Syria may result in the decentralisation and fragmentation of attempts to conduct external operations.⁵²⁷

Despite the growing number of returnees, the threat in the Netherlands appears to be mainly coming from home-grown terrorists via networks and violent lone actors who have been inspired, coached or supervised by ISIS, but have never actually travelled to the 'caliphate'. However, home-grown terrorists and returnees are by no means isolated from one another. As the Paris and Brussels attacks show, these two groups are capable of working together, and returnees can inspire, train, guide, and facilitate individuals ('lone wolves') and national networks by sharing knowledge and experience gained in the Middle East.

ISIS to continue as a guerrilla and terrorist organisation in Iraq and Syria

The most obvious development path in the Middle East is that ISIS will return to 'the desert' and continue the conflict from there using a combination of guerrilla and terrorist tactics. The organisation has been preparing for this development path for a substantial amount of time and the situation is now more favourable than the last time the organisation was forced to retreat to the desert. ISIS will use targeted violence to further widen sectarian divides. A return to the desert will almost definitely make it more difficult to carry out attacks on Western targets.

A fundamental part of ISIS's narrative is that, in contrast to other jihadist groups, ISIS actually controls territory. While Al-Qaeda is preoccupied with a 'Trotskyist' permanent revolution,⁵²⁸ ISIS has constructed an actual 'caliphate' in which 'social justice' rules supreme.⁵²⁹ Yet, international intervention, among other things, has significantly weakened this narrative.

However, armed Western interventions in the Middle East and North Africa rarely have the intended consequences. The regime changes initiated by the West in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq have not resulted in stable, effective states.⁵³⁰ Worse still, a large-scale military intervention by the USA and allied states could actually aid a revival of ISIS, Al-Qaeda or other jihadist groups.⁵³¹ Occupation is rarely a good idea. Regardless of what political leaders think or declare, the local population frequently sees these foreign military interventions as occupations rather than liberations. Scores of examples testify to this: the Soviets in Afghanistan, the United States in Iraq, AMISOM in Somalia, and Saudi Arabia in Yemen.⁵³²

It is therefore realistic to assume that, if the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria is defeated, jihadist violence in Sunni areas in these two countries will continue.⁵³³ At the moment, the loss of territory has not brought ISIS's organisation in Iraq into a state of chaos.⁵³⁴

521 'After Mosul: Islamic State's Asian and African Future', Paul Rogers, Oxford Research Group, 28 June 2017.

522 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 5, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

523 'IS Urges Muslim Women to Fight in Battlefield Alongside Men to Defend Group', SITE, 10 October 2017. 'Isis calls on women to fight and launch terror attacks for first time', Hayat Boumeddiene, The Independent, 6 October 2017.

524 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 4-5, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

525 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 6, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

526 'The Global Threat and Counterterrorism Challenges Facing the Next Administration', Bruce Hoffman, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 11, p. 2, November/December 2016.

527 'The Islamic State's Libyan External Operations Hub: The Picture So Far', Johannes Saal, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 11, p. 22, December 2017.

528 The term 'permanent revolution', coined by Karl Marx and used by Leon Trotsky during and after the Russian Revolution, was meant to signify that the Marxist revolution would never be successful if it took place in just one country. 'The Four Waves of Global Jihad, 1979-2017', Glenn E. Robinson, Middle East Policy, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, p. 74, Autumn 2017.

529 'How Realistic is Libya as an Islamic State "Fallback"?', Geoff D. Porter, CTC Sentinel, Volume 9, Issue 3, p. 3, March 2016.

530 'Future of ISIS', Ben Smith, House of Commons Library, Number CBP 8029, p. 8, 30 June 2017.

531 'Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback? The Factors That Will Determine Its Success', Seth G. Jones, Foreign Affairs, 7 August 2017.

532 'The Lesser Jihads: Bringing the Islamist Extremist Fight to the World', Phil Gurski, pp. 186-187, 2017.

533 'Future of ISIS', Ben Smith, House of Commons Library, Number CBP 8029, p. 8, 30 June 2017.

534 'Predicting the Shape of Iraq's Next Sunni Insurgencies', Michael Knights, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 7, p. 20, August 2017. 'ISIS Could Rise Again: What Its Last Resurrection Says About Its Future in Iraq and Syria', Benjamin Bahney and Patrick B. Johnston, Foreign Affairs, 15 December 2017.

A withdrawal of American and Western military forces – in particular their special forces and air forces – could fuel the revival, especially if Shia parties use their increased freedom of movement to conduct sectarian politics and violence.⁵³⁵ Both Western (especially American) military intervention and Western abstinence could have undesired effects. Only well-considered foreign policy – hand-in-hand with equally well-thought-out military action – will stand a chance of avoiding such undesirable effects. However, many people question whether the current and future actions of the American government in the Middle East are or will be sufficiently well-considered.⁵³⁶ The most important regional players (Iran and its Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah, Israel, Iraq, Syria, Russia, the United States, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and the Kurds) have very different interests and goals

in relation to the future of Iraq and Syria.⁵³⁷ This hugely complicates the issue, making it very difficult to realise peace, reconciliation, economic development, rebuilding efforts, and good governance. Nevertheless, this must be achieved in order to stamp out Sunni political violence from ISIS or any other jihadist group.

There is therefore equally little reason to assume that ISIS will disappear entirely from Iraq and Syria after the fall of the ‘caliphate’. In Iraq and the eastern region of Syria, ISIS will remain the only actual form of Sunni resistance, as the group has already destroyed all other competitors in these areas. It is unlikely that other Sunni groups will be quick to take ISIS’s place after the fall of the ‘caliphate’.⁵³⁸

The Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad is so dysfunctional and corrupt that it is not in the position to take care of its ‘own’ (i.e. Shia) people, let alone the Sunnis. There are still no plans or funds to rebuild Mosul, Tikrit or other Sunni cities, which will further stoke the already substantial feelings of resentment and appetite for revenge among Sunnis.⁵³⁹ Furthermore, the American-led anti-ISIS coalition has so far focused solely on defeating ISIS militarily, rather than also tackling the factors that encouraged many Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis to support ISIS in the first place.⁵⁴⁰ This focus is ineffective, as ISIS was merely a symptom of the true disease – the implosion of the state.⁵⁴¹

However, it will not be easy for ISIS to pop up again as it did in 2013 and 2014. A unique combination of events and circumstances conspired to enable the seemingly endless series of victories in these years: the political and military vacuum created in Syria by the civil war, the dysfunctional Iraqi government and the sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the collapse of the Iraqi army, assistance from ISI sympathisers within the Iraqi army, and the indifference of the international community until it was too late. The same combination of circumstances will not repeat itself any time soon,⁵⁴² if only for the reason that (i) the most prominent Iraqi Shia cleric, Ali al-Sistani, has called for the development of a

535 ‘Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback? The Factors That Will Determine Its Success’, Seth G. Jones, *Foreign Affairs*, 7 August 2017.

536 ‘Trump’s thinking on the caliphate is simplistic and dangerous’, Jennifer Rubin, *The Washington Post*, 9 June 2017. ‘Trump’s vision on Syria’s foreign policy is still completely incoherent: “Trump made a 180 on this”’, Casey Quinlan, *ThinkProgress*, 7 April 2017. ‘Donald Trump Is Clueless About the Middle East: And he’s playing a dangerous game’, Dilip Hiro, *Mother Jones*, 9 July 2017. ‘What’s Trump’s plan for Syria? Five different policies in two weeks’, Spencer Ackerman, *The Guardian*, 11 April 2017. ‘Analysis // Trump’s Unpredictability Threatens Israel’s Balanced, Rational Syria Policy: With the fall of the de facto capital of ISIS seemingly imminent, no one knows whether the U.S. president will opt for isolationism or a continued presence in the Middle East’, Amos Harel, *Haaretz*, 2 July 2017. ‘US has abandoned global leadership role, Iraqi Vice President says’, Mick Krever, *CNN*, 30 June 2017. ‘A timeline of Trump’s clearly made-up “secret plan” to fight ISIS: The latest anti-ISIS strategy from the Pentagon looks a lot like the one under the Obama administration’, Rebecca Tan, *Vox*, 3 July 2017. ‘Pentagon, State Dept “Clueless” on Trump’s Assad Allegation: White House Didn’t Discuss Matter With Security Agencies’, Jason Ditz, *Anti-War.Com*, 27 June 2017. ‘The Vice President says the United States has no clear plan for dealing with the various crises it faces in the Middle East, according to one of the top US allies in the fight against ISIS’, Mick Krever, *CNN*, 30 June 2017. ‘Trump’s foreign policy: Bizarre and inconsistent, or more strategic than we think? Trump’s global dance with Vladimir Putin has played out in Syria and Ukraine in deeply bewildering fashion’, Danielle Ryan, *Salon*, 30 June 2017. ‘Acting on Instinct, Trump Opens his Own Foreign Policy’, Mark Landler, *New York Times*, 7 April 2017. ‘The Brilliant Incoherence of Trump’s Foreign Policy’, Stephen Sestanovich, May 2017. ‘The Observer view on Donald Trump’s foreign policy: Observer editorial’, *The Guardian*, 16 April 2017. ‘How the Trump Administration Broke the State Department’, Robbie Gramer, Dan de Luce and Colum Lynch, *Foreign Policy*, 31 July 2017. ‘The US has no coherent policy for Syria or the wider region’, David Gardner, *The Financial Times*, 21 June 2017. ‘The World Is Even Less Stable Than It Looks: Chaos is spreading – and that’s even before getting to America’s lack of competent leadership’, Stephen M. Walt, *Foreign Policy*, 26 June 2017. ‘Trump’s principled realism is an incoherent mess’, Ishaan Tahroor, *The Washington Post*, 20 September 2017. ‘What the End of ISIS Means: Five Questions to help understand what exactly America’s latest Middle Eastern war has, and hasn’t accomplished’, Stephen M. Walt, *Voice*, 23 October 2017. ‘Iraq and Iran, Sharing a Neighborhood’, Paul R. Pillar, *The National Interest*, 27 October 2017. ‘Raqqa is free as ISIS loses steam, but hold off on the victory dance’, Thomas Sanderson, *The Hill*, 21 October 2017. ‘The Perils of a Post-ISIS Middle East’, Joshua A. Geltzer, *The Atlantic*, 27 December 2017. ‘A Vision of Trump at War: How the President Could Stumble Into Conflict’, Philip Gordon, *Foreign Affairs*, 1 May 2017. ‘What Happens When ISIS Goes Underground?’, Daniel Byman, *The National Interest*, January – February 2018. ‘Donald Trump’s Year of Living Dangerously’, Susan B. Glasser, *Politico*, January/February 2018. ‘If You Thought 2017 Was Bad, Just Wait for 2018’, Hal Brands, *Foreign Policy*, 8 January 2018.

537 ‘Raqqa is free as ISIS loses steam, but hold off on the victory dance’, Thomas Sanderson, *The Hill*, 21 October 2017.

538 ‘Charting the Future of the Modern Caliphate’, Colin Clarke and Craig Whiteside, *War on the Rocks*, 3 May 2017.

539 ‘Islamic State’s Demise: A Terror Group in its Death Throes?’, Christoph Reuter, *Der Spiegel*, 30 August 2017. Despite Iraq having one of the largest oil reserves in the world, a third of the population lives below the poverty line and the state is not even capable of paying its own civil servants.

540 ‘Away from Iraq’s front lines, the Islamic State is creeping back in’, Loveday Morris, *The Washington Post*, 22 February 2017.

541 ‘ISIS was a symptom. State collapse is the disease’, Thanassis Cambanis, *The Boston Globe*, 15 July 2017.

542 ‘What Will Happen to ISIS When Its Territory is Recaptured?’, James L. Gelvin, *Reuters*, 30 October 2016. According to Iraqis, corruption, sectarian tension and Prime Minister al-Maliki’s treatment of Sunnis were the main reasons for the rise of ISIS; see ‘Iraq After the Fall of IS: The Struggle for the State’, Renad Mansour, *Chatham House*, *The Royal Institute for International Affairs*, p. 12, July 2017.

civil state,⁵⁴³ (ii) Muqtada al-Sadr (leader of the Sadrist movement) has been trying for some time to reduce sectarian tensions,⁵⁴⁴ and (iii) the current Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, has been implementing more inclusive policies than his predecessor al-Maliki, gaining favour among Sunnis.⁵⁴⁵ In order to keep ISIS from rising again, the Iraqi government must provide security, stability and basic facilities.

Nevertheless, the Iraqi government is at least hesitant and at worst unwilling to support moderate Sunni groups. In Syria, the regime has given signs that it would be willing to reconcile with the secular opposition, although it remains very much to be seen whether the moderates within the Sunni majority are also willing to reconcile.⁵⁴⁶ In the end, ISIS in Iraq and Syria can only be sustainably defeated if a political alternative is available to the Sunni citizens in these countries.⁵⁴⁷

However, other ethnic and religious groups (Christians, Shiites, Yazidis, Iraqi Turkmens, Alawites, and others) will be reluctant to give the Sunnis this kind of political influence. ISIS's actions have not only resulted in massive physical destruction, but also astronomical psychological damage. ISIS has burned itself into both the individual and collective Arabic psyche. Many Shiites, Alawites, Christians, and Yazidis now believe that practically every Sunni has at least a small dose of ISIS in them, a dose that will fuel revenge, hegemonic ambitions and the denunciation and prosecution of dissenters and different faiths.⁵⁴⁸

It is likely that some of the surviving foreign ISIS combatants will travel to new war zones, as they will find it difficult to operate underground in Iraq and Syria and they will not wish to return to their country of origin. These battle-hardened combatants will most likely wish to travel to areas with similar ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In the past, ISIS has distributed (some or all of) its foreign combatants based on their (Western) language background. This may also play a role in this scenario. However, in other places, some foreign jihadist combatants have successfully integrated into their local community, and in Bosnia, isolated

Salafist communities have been set up in the mountains.⁵⁴⁹ Recently, Bruce Riedel estimated that thousands of combatants have successfully fled Iraq and Syria, and that some of them have relocated to the Balkans to hide out before later attempting to infiltrate other parts of Europe.⁵⁵⁰

Diaspora undermines relatively stable countries in the region

As was the case with Al-Qaeda in the past, some of the ISIS combatants will spread out. Many combatants originating from relatively stable countries in the region – such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia or Tunisia – will return to these countries and reinforce local jihadist organisations or set up new franchises. It is possible that al-Baghdadi will then play a similar role to the one al-Zawahiri plays for Al-Qaeda, that of a theoretical and remote leader.

Negligible chance of relocating the core organisation and leadership

It is unlikely that ISIS will move the 'caliphate' and its leadership outside Iraq and Syria to a country in which an affiliated organisation wields a degree of power. In all of these areas, there is powerful competition from other groups (jihadist or otherwise) or the government is taking major counterterrorist action. ISIS will probably not set up another 'caliphate' in a different country, as the inner core of ISIS is predominantly an Iraqi (and to a lesser degree Syrian) organisation and its eschatological ideology depends heavily on Syria and the final battle that is to take place at *Dabiq*. ISIS's 'caliphate' is based in the Levant, just like the historic 'caliphate', and any 'retreat' would be hard to swallow for a large proportion of the supporters of ISIS.

ISIS's network organisation will probably loosen in structure

Not only will ISIS live on in Iraq and Syria, but the organisation will also maintain an international chain of franchises even after it loses all of its territory in these two countries. While ISIS is on the brink of losing control of all territories in Iraq and Syria, South-East Asian groups affiliated with the 'caliphate' are claiming new territories.⁵⁵¹ In the past three years, ISIS has developed into a global organisation with provinces. As a result, four years after the declaration of the 'caliphate', the organisation now has a solidly structured network and bureaucratic system and an internal and external resilience that are unique to a non-state actor.⁵⁵² As researcher Craig Whiteside argues, this bureaucratic structure

543 'Sistani Calls for "Civil State" in Iraq', Mustafa al-Kadhimi, 16 January 2013, Al-Monitor.

544 'What's behind controversial Iraqi cleric's visit to Saudi Arabia?', Hamdi Malik, 11 August 2017. 'Iraq after ISIS: Three Major Flashpoints', Omer Kassim and Randqa Slim, Middle East Institute, 6 April 2017.

545 'A striking positive shift in Sunni opinion in Iraq is underway. Here's what it means', Munqith al Dagher and Karl Kaltenthaler, The Washington Post, 14 September 2017.

546 'The Islamic State After the Caliphate – Can IS Go Underground?', Thomas R. McGabe, Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 11, Issue 4, p. 96, August 2017.

547 'Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 41' ('Summary of the National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 41'), National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, March 2016.

548 'The end of the Islamic State will make the Middle East worse', Emile Hokayem, The Washington Post, 28 October 2016.

549 'Seeds of Jihad Planted in the Balkans', Jeff Swicord, VOA News, 17 November 2015.

550 'Islamic State: What happened to all the foreign fighters?', Michel Moutot, AFP, 16 December 2017.

551 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after Islamic State. The Islamic State: Baqiya?', Aymenn al-Tamimi, BICOM, 16 May 2017.

552 'Can the Islamic State Survive if Baghdadi is Dead?', Colin P. Clarke, Foreign Affairs, 30 June 2017.

and strategic vision will enable ISIS's organisation to conduct a long-term Maoist-style revolutionary war.⁵⁵³

It is clear that ISIS will transform into a decentralised and amorphous organisation that conducts itself in a more asymmetrical manner.⁵⁵⁴ Upon reaching a similar turning point, Al-Qaeda had sufficient structure to ensure continuity of and guidance to the network of Al-Qaeda franchises. In ISIS's case, it is uncertain whether enough of the top and middle levels of ISIS will remain to provide coordination, strategic continuity, and operational management of the ISIS network given the speed at which this structure is being destroyed in Iraq and Syria.⁵⁵⁵ Furthermore, the network of ISIS franchises has always been loosely organised and it remains to be seen whether this network will remain intact after the fall of the 'caliphate'.⁵⁵⁶ Al-Qaeda also had the advantage that it had not declared a 'caliphate' on which a substantial part of its authority was based.⁵⁵⁷

It is clear that the inner core of ISIS will return to the desert near the border between Iraq and Syria and continue the conflict from there, and that, from that point onwards, the franchises will continue as either largely or entirely independent organisations, whilst continuing to use the powerful ISIS brand – its logo, reputation and narrative.

While the 'caliphate' is bracing itself in Iraq and Syria, the inner core of the organisation will be forced to use its influence in other regions more subtly. It is possible that ISIS will switch from its traditional centralised *wilayat* system to a more decentralised command-and-control system consisting of a network of more loosely affiliated units. This kind of network would be more

resilient to counterterrorist activities than a centrally controlled system.⁵⁵⁸

Such a transition to a more decentralised network would also be more suited to the transition that the global jihad movement appears to be making, i.e. to a personal or leaderless jihad,⁵⁵⁹ which is conducted by (i) lone actors or small groups who (ii) form a network and (iii) make use of new media and information technology.⁵⁶⁰ This more personal form of jihad capitalises fully on the proliferation of weapons.⁵⁶¹ This transition of the international jihad may also be shaped by the rise of other types of entrepreneurs in jihadist-inspired violence, such as mercenaries, consultants, and nomadic mujahideen. It is expected that entrepreneurs will collaborate with each other or with formally established terrorist organisations within networks;⁵⁶² it is furthermore to be expected that these networks will be facilitated by criminal organisations, e.g. through the supply of weapons or travel documents.

ISIS is growing as a criminal organisation and the nexus with organised crime is changing

It is highly unlikely that the territorial 'caliphate' will survive its fourth year, not only due to the loss of territory, but also because the existing revenue model is no longer sustainable and the organisation is at risk of going bankrupt in the short to medium-term.⁵⁶³

ISIS's connection with the criminal world has always existed and it is logical that it would continue to exist if the organisation moves underground. With the fall of the 'caliphate', a vast number of ISIS's funding sources in Iraq and Syria will dry up partially or entirely. This means that not only the organisational model and the military strategy will change, but also the funding model. ISIS will probably expand its criminal activities in order to raise the funds it needs, which will result in increasing connections with organised crime. In order to get around international efforts to fight terrorism, ISIS will continue to use methods that are in vogue with cross-border organised crime, especially now that the fall of the 'caliphate' is

553 'New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)', Craig Whiteside, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2016.

554 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 8 June 2017. 'Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State', Ali Soufan, pp. 291-292, 2017.

555 In the last three years, 80% to 90% of the upper echelons of ISIS have been killed, mainly by American drones and rockets. 'Islamic State's Demise: A Terror Group in its Death Throes?', Christoph Reuter, *Der Spiegel*, 30 August 2017. 'Coalition kills 2 Islamic State external operations commanders in Iraq and Syria', Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, *The Long War Journal*, 15 November 2017. 'What the New York Attack Says About ISIS Now', Robin Wright, *The New Yorker*, 2 November 2017.

556 'Can You Kill the Islamic State?', Ali H. Soufan, *The New York Times*, 20 June 2017.

557 'Al-Qaeda versus ISIS: Competing Jihadist Brands in the Middle East', Charles Lister, *Middle East Institute, Counterterrorism Series #3*, p. 15, November 2017.

558 'Assessing the Feasibility of a "Wilayah Mindanao"', Joseph Franco, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 11, Issue 4, p. 36, August 2017.

559 'The Four Waves of Global Jihad, 1979-2017', Glenn E. Robinson, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, pp. 82-83, Autumn 2017.

560 *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

561 'Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding Cooperation Among Terrorist Actors', p. 48, Assaf Moghadam, Columbia University Press, 2017.

562 *Ibid.*, pp. 268-269.

563 'End of ISIS Approaching as Caliphate Loses Money and Land', Jack Moore, *Newsweek*, 30 June 2017.

forcing the organisation to either invest its financial reserves in the region or export them.

It is also possible that more attacks in Europe will be funded by the proceeds of criminal activities, now that the 'caliphate' has fallen and all or part of the funding from ISIS has dried up.

Virtual 'caliphate' will largely remain intact and relevant, for the time being

Although the ISIS proto-state and traditional war machine is on the brink of collapse, it remains a formidable opponent in cyberspace and as a propaganda machine.⁵⁶⁴ The virtual 'caliphate' will live on after the fall of the physical 'caliphate', and for the time being, it will remain a powerful source of inspiration and an echo chamber for jihadists. ISIS will continue to present itself as the defender of Sunnis and its narrative in the years to come will support this theme by further focusing on sectarian issues.⁵⁶⁵

However, it is now more difficult for the 'caliphate' to generate support, and it will therefore be less dangerous. The virtual 'caliphate' can only replace the physical one to a limited extent.

There is speculation about the threat posed by remote coaching by virtual entrepreneurs, although so far, cybercoaching has delivered only limited results.

It is currently unlikely that ISIS will devote attention to the purchasing, development or use of complex cyberweapons in order to continue the jihad. It is equally unlikely that ISIS will carry out any advanced digital attacks on specific targets in the short term.

Focusing on the virtual 'caliphate' is predominantly a transitional strategy for the jihadist movement, an attempt to unite and further inspire the various groups within it in order to survive.

Chances of escalation are real, yet small

Whatever happens, ISIS will continue its campaign of excessive violence against Shiites and Christians in an attempt to maintain its status as the protector of Sunnis and the standard bearer for militant Sunnism. Now that the organisation is increasingly in retreat in Iraq and Syria, ISIS may be tempted to escalate the battle. This would entail major sacrifices for ISIS, but the possibility of turning the tide with regard to the regional dynamics may be more attractive to ISIS than slowly but surely being pushed back. Due to the huge sacrifices involved and the likely decline in ISIS's ability to carry out complex attacks, this strategic decision is unlikely to become a reality.

564 'Military setbacks don't ensure Islamic State's demise', Metin Gurcan, Al-Monitor, 20 July 2017.

565 'Its dreams of a caliphate are gone. Now Isis has a deadly new strategy', Hassan Hassan, The Guardian, 31 December 2017.

Relationship with Al-Qaeda remains multifaceted and complicated

The idea that ISIS and Al-Qaeda could pool their strength is worrying, as their combined power would pose a significant threat. However, this bleak scenario is an unlikely one.⁵⁶⁶ According to jihadist-Salafist ideologist Abu Qatada, the jihadist movement will undergo a great deal of change and further fragmentation in the years following the fall of the 'caliphate' and the revival of Al-Qaeda.⁵⁶⁷ The failed collaboration and subsequent conflict between Ahrar al-Sham and JFS⁵⁶⁸ is a typical example of this. At the same time, all of these similar yet divided actors form a continuum of parties that still consider themselves part of the same jihadist movement, despite their differing ideological and strategic insights, methodologies, and degrees of rigidity. In this regard, they resemble communists, who were also ideologically divided despite their common intellectual inheritance.⁵⁶⁹ Every time a new violent jihadist extremist group is created (e.g. the Algerian GIA, the Iraqi AQI or ISIS), the tendency is to set up a counternarrative in order to resist these groups. However, in all three of the aforementioned cases, the key to defeating these jihadist groups was not formulating good ideas to fight their bad ideas, but capitalising on the mistakes they made and/or supporting their opponents. Nevertheless, on every occasion, this military support had substantial human-rights implications. Furthermore, these military operations did not contribute to healing damaged *politeia* or in forming inclusive and effective government institutions.⁵⁷⁰

In recent years, groups within this jihadist movement – including the groups mentioned earlier – have demonstrated their ability to execute a wide variety of pragmatic survival strategies. As strategic competition can also involve tactical collaboration,⁵⁷¹ the fragmentation will not necessarily lead to the jihadist movement as a whole being weakened. If they are able to operate their mutual competition in a more strategically effective manner, this may even strengthen the jihadist movement as a whole.⁵⁷² However, there is little chance of this happening. In Syria, groups affiliated with both ISIS and Al-Qaeda have spent plenty of time and energy trying to

566 'Can the Islamic State and Al Qa'eda Find Common Ground?', Scott Stewart, Stratfor Worldview, 9 March 2017.

567 'The Expected Transformations to Occur in the Jihadi Current', Abu Qatada, quoted in 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after the Islamic State. The Future of the Jihadi movement', Tore Hamming, BICOM, 31 July 2017.

568 The Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant, now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

569 'The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes', Mohammed Hafez, CTC Sentinel, Volume 10, Issue 10, p. 6, November 2017.

570 Ibid., p. 7.

571 '18th report of the ISIS and Al Qaida Monitoring Team', S/2016/629, par. 3 and par. 27, 19 July 2016.

572 'The day after ISIS: the Middle East after the Islamic State. The Future of the Jihadi movement', Tore Hamming, BICOM, 31 July 2017.

kill each other.⁵⁷³ Although conflicts between jihadist factions can benefit the international community, they also come at a price: fragmented violent movements are notorious for committing major atrocities. Divided rebels may not be capable of winning civil wars, but they can frustrate resolution efforts and extend conflicts.⁵⁷⁴

One thing that is clear is that, in the years to come, the world will not be confronted by a single active organisation or even a collective of organisations, but by a radical and ideological movement plagued by internal rivalries and fault lines.⁵⁷⁵ This movement may well be less virulent, violent, and effective, although it will remain fiercely anti-Western.

The ceaseless military pressure on the inner core of ISIS may cause it to partially or fully fragment. Regardless of this pressure, it is likely that some of the combatants, whether individually or in groups, will renounce their loyalty to ISIS in order to gain admission to Al-Qaeda or groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda, which could result in further radicalisation of these groups.

The inner core of ISIS and the inner core of Al-Qaeda will probably continue to compete with each other at the strategic level, although the situation at the local level will differ greatly from place to place and could involve confrontation, non-intervention or collaboration. This strategic competition will probably not result in a process of violent escalation on both sides.

The ideology continues to inspire

The loss of the 'caliphate' will not cease the mobilisation of ISIS's ideology. ISIS's eschatological message will remain intact and the power of the brand will probably be very slow to diminish.

Leaderless jihad to replace the 'caliphate'

The global jihad will probably enter a new phase, from the 'caliphate' to a personal or leaderless jihad. Besides the inner core of ISIS, a network will form of individuals and small cells that are inspired by ISIS, but are not controlled or coached by them, or at least less so. As a result, the threat to the Netherlands will change, but it will not necessarily decrease. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Mali, Somalia, and elsewhere have created a global generation of physical and virtual combatants who are fully indoctrinated into some form of jihadist ideology and for whom violence has become

a normal and legitimate method of political expression.⁵⁷⁶ Jihadism is the revolutionary paradigm of our time. Its appeal to deprived and alienated individuals and groups is unparalleled.⁵⁷⁷ Even if ISIS fragments, this will not result in jihadism losing its position as the most attractive radical ideology.⁵⁷⁸

Importance of eliminating the drivers of jihadist terrorism

Current or future wars (civil or otherwise), a new Arab Spring or the collapse of one or more governments in the Arabic world could boost the position of ISIS and Al-Qaeda, as it will give them new areas of operation and safe havens.⁵⁷⁹

In addition, there are a number of underlying drivers present in the Middle East and North Africa that instigate people to seek radical solutions such as jihadism. This includes:

1. lack of political freedom combined with repressive regimes;
2. patriarchal tribes combined with an absence of liberal traditions and participatory democracies;⁵⁸⁰
3. an extremely young population combined with chronically stagnant economies and major youth unemployment;
4. unresolved territorial conflicts combined with stifled independence ideals;
5. climate change combined with declining availability of fresh water and reduced farming yields;
6. extremely intolerant variations of Islam combined with unwillingness and inability to participate in the modern era⁵⁸¹ and the globalised society it has created.
7. As long as these underlying drivers are not addressed, the Middle East, North Africa, and other areas will remain a breeding ground for jihadist terrorism.

In a nutshell

All things considered, European security services are correct to pay considerable attention to the threats posed by the return of jihadist combatants. They will likely play a key role in the recruitment and

573 'The Islamic State After the Caliphate – Can IS Go Underground?', Thomas R. McGabe, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, p. 97, August 2017.

574 'The Curse of Cain: Why Fratricidal Jihadis Fail to Learn from Their Mistakes', Mohammed Hafez, *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 10, Issue 10, p. 7, November 2017.

575 'Beyond Iraq and Syria: ISIS' Global Reach', Lorenzo Vidino, *Written testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 8 June 2017.

576 'The Wider Jihadi Movement Will Take Over Where the Islamic State Left Off', Tore Hamming, *World Politics Review*, 29 November 2017.

577 'Anticipating the post-ISIS Landscape in Europe', Rik Coolsaet, *Clingendael Spectator*, 7 November 2017.

578 'The Wider Jihadi Movement Will Take Over Where the Islamic State Left Off', Tore Hamming, *World Politics Review*, 29 November 2017.

579 'Will al Qaeda Make a Comeback? The Factors That Will Determine Its Success', Seth G. Jones, *Foreign Affairs*, 7 August 2017.

580 'Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State', Ali Soufan, p. 207, 2017.

581 *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

training of the next wave of jihadists, although home-grown terrorism poses a greater risk at the national level. The fall of the 'caliphate' means the prospect of jihadist adventures has lost a great deal of pulling power. However, the 'pushing power' within Western societies remains undiminished. From a global perspective, jihadist combatants travelling home pose a lesser threat than combatants travelling to other war zones outside Europe or other countries where state power is weak.⁵⁸²

The fall of the 'caliphate' is causing ISIS in Iraq and Syria to transform back into a guerrilla movement,⁵⁸³ intensify its attempts to undermine social cohesion in Western states, and escalate its efforts to spread its message and seek support in countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen or the Philippines. Just like other jihadist groups, ISIS will attempt to recruit supporters from among the tens of millions of youths in South-East and Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East who have been educated to a reasonable extent, but who will enjoy very few opportunities to get ahead in life.⁵⁸⁴

The continuing campaign to take out the top level of ISIS with rockets means it is very likely that the franchises will be forced to continue largely or entirely under their own steam, although they will continue to use all facets of the powerful and global ISIS 'brand'.

However, in the Netherlands, the threat posed by the new jihad will predominantly be home-grown, leaderless, and virtual.

582 'How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb', International Crisis Group, Report Number 178, p. 31, 24 July 2017.

583 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 45' ('National Terrorism Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45'), Summary, p. 6, National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, June 2017.

584 'After Mosul: Islamic State's Asian and African Future', Paul Rogers, Oxford Research Group, 28 June 2017.

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