



# Adapting for Survival: Islamic State Shifting Strategies<sup>1</sup>

## *Adaptar para Sobreviver: As Estratégias Mutantes do Estado Islâmico*

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Jorge M. Lasmar<sup>2</sup>

Guilherme Damasceno Fonseca<sup>3</sup>

*“I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night. Let me think.  
Was I the same when I got up this morning?  
I almost think I can remember feeling a little different.  
But if I’m not the same, the next question is  
‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”*

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

### Abstract

This article discusses the strategic shifts that the Islamic State (IS) has implemented in order to survive, especially in what regards its propaganda and military tactics. We argue that – for a long time now and in both domains – the IS and its predecessors have been flexible and resilient enough to adapt to new realities on the ground being able to shape and reshape its strategy and tactics towards its enemies’ capabilities and policies. In terms of propaganda, despite a decrease of its online presence, the IS has struggled to adapt some of its main narratives to the new reality brought about by the beginning of the international coalition

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2 Jorge M. Lasmar holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE), UK. He is currently Professor of International Relations at PUC Minas, Brazil and Professor of International Law at Milton Campos, Brazil.

3 Guilherme Damasceno Fonseca is a Brazilian Federal Police Agent and holds a Master in International Relations from PUC Minas, Brazil.

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attacks. However, evidence seems to suggest that the group will likely be able to maintain its online relevance yet for some time. Regarding its military tactics in Syria and Iraq, history and current evidence points to a return to its insurgent roots. This seems to be corroborated by the group's current increasing resort to terrorism and guerrilla tactics. Lastly, we argue that it is still premature to either claim the rebirth of the IS or to declare its demise.

**Keywords:** Islamic State; Iraq; Propaganda; Insurgency; Terrorism.

## Resumo

Este artigo discute as mudanças estratégicas que o Estado Islâmico (EI) tem implementado para sobreviver, especialmente no que diz respeito à sua propaganda e táticas militares. Argumentamos que, já há muito tempo e nas duas áreas, o EI e seus predecessores têm sido flexíveis e resilientes o suficiente para se adaptarem às novas realidades locais e moldarem e adaptarem suas estratégias e táticas às políticas e capabilities de seus inimigos. Em termos de propaganda, apesar de uma diminuição de sua presença on-line, o EI tem buscado adaptar algumas de suas narrativas principais à nova realidade trazida pelo início dos ataques da coalizão internacional. Contudo, a evidência aponta que o grupo provavelmente ainda será capaz de manter sua relevância on-line por algum tempo. No que diz respeito às suas táticas militares na Síria e Iraque, a história e as evidências atuais apontam para o retorno às suas raízes insurgentes. Isto parece ser corroborado pelo crescente recurso ao terrorismo e às táticas de guerrilha pelo grupo. Finalmente, argumentamos que ainda é prematuro declarar o renascimento ou a morte do EI.

**Palavras Chave:** Estado Islâmico; Insurgência; Iraque; Propaganda; Terrorismo.

## Introduction

Over the last three and a half years, the Islamic State<sup>4</sup> (IS) has been suffering uncountable defeats. The group has now lost over 90% of the territories it once controlled (HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b). The Iraqi and Syrian governments have even declared the defeat of the group while US has already signaled that the IS is no

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4 In this article, we chose to use the expression "Islamic State" to refer to the group also known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham); ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), or Daesh (al-Da'ulah al-Islamiyya al-Iraqiyya wa al-Shamiyya), since this is its most commonly used denomination. We are aware that the term "Islamic State" is inadequate to refer to the group as not only it is not a state but also several Islamic leaders strongly contest the "Islamic" nature of the group. Therefore, following Jacques Derrida, the use of this expression in this article should be understood as being "under erasure". In Derrida's words, being under erasure means that even though "these terms are problematic we must use them until they can be effectively reformulated or replaced." (DERRIDA, 1983, p.3).





longer at the top of its security agenda (JOSCELYN, 2018). Nevertheless, many analysts have been warning that territorial losses of the organization does not necessarily imply its demise. In fact, there are increasing signs that the group may not even have been militarily defeated, let alone ideologically socially and politically (CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

Evidence<sup>6</sup> now suggests that the group has been recalibrating its strategies in at least two important areas – propaganda and military tactics – both of which will be the focus of this article. In order to understand how IS has been adapting its strategies in light of recent setbacks, we undertook a thematic analysis of its primary sources. To be more specific, we analysed their propaganda material as drawn from the *Al Hayat Media Centre* and *Al Furqan* as well as content drawn from social networks, especially Twitter. This analysis was further corroborated by the use of secondary sources. Amongst the secondary sources used, we opted for working mainly with material produced by local and/or on-the-ground researchers such as consultants of the Iraqi government (e.g. Renad Mansour and Hisham Al-Hashimi) as well as Syrian academics (e.g. Hassan Hassan and Aymenn al Tamimi). This was in part a deliberate choice and in part a decision incentivised by the content of this piece. Given that we are discussing on-going events that are continuously evolving, there is thus far, little engagement with this subject in academic publications. However, we have also consciously attempted to balance our secondary sources by also leveraging publications by academics from the global North whose research focusses upon monitoring the publications and/or strategic shifts of the Islamic State.

Thus, we will first shed light on the extent to which IS's virtual productions have decreased since its territorial losses as well as highlight the key shifts in its narratives since the beginning of the attacks by the international coalition in Syria. However, while this article clearly demonstrates that IS's propaganda structure is flexible enough to guarantee a degree of relevance in the near future, it is further stressed that the key problem with the idea of a "Virtual Caliphate" is that it falls into the trap of believing that the organization is already permanently defeated on the ground. In light of this assertion, we analyze how the IS has been adapting

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5 See also: JOSCELYN, 2018; DEMPSEY, 2018; HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; BURKE, 2017, BUNZEL, 2016; 2017; COTTEE, 2017; COCKBURN, 2018; 2017; AL-AZM, 2017; MANSOUR; AL-HASHMI, 2017; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017; ABRAMS, 2017; MESEROLE, 2017; SKY 2017.

6 This article is based on a thematic analysis of Islamic States' primary sources. To be more specific, it is based on an analysis of their propaganda material as drawn from the *Al Hayat Media Centre* and *Al Furqan* as well as content from social networks. This analysis is further corroborated by secondary sources (see references).





its military approach in order to, first and foremost, survive thereby waiting for a more promising moment in which to re-invigorate their armed struggle. Finally, we peruse some possible scenarios for the IS's future, especially the two most likely outcomes under discussion today: the first, that the IS is definitively finished, and the second; that the group, although weakened, will rise once again. In contrast, we posit that it is still too early to reliably predict either outcome.

## A “Virtual Caliphate”?

The term “Virtual Caliphate” was initially used by the media and academia around 2015 less than a year after the organization proclaimed the creation of an Islamic Caliphate in the Levant. Winter was one of the first analysts who used the term to describe the entire apparatus of IS propaganda. He used the term virtual Caliphate to refer not only to IS's propaganda structure and capacity but also to incorporate its strategy and support network comprised by formal members, informal fans, disseminators and “media operatives”<sup>7</sup> (WINTER, 2015a; 2015b). Nevertheless, as the group progressively loses control of its territories inside Syria and Iraq, the term “Virtual Caliphate” has begun to be used in a different meaning. The term has recently been used to express the idea that the IS will survive only on the virtual battlefield relying on its online presence and propaganda strategy to both endure and retain its appeal. As it will be discussed below, this understanding is deeply problematic as it is founded upon the premature premise that the IS is facing an irreversible defeat on the ground (HASSAN, 2017b)<sup>8</sup>.

Indeed, it is likely that the organization and its ideology will survive on the internet<sup>9</sup> (WINTER; PARKER, 2018). It will probably maintain itself as one of the most prominent Sunni jihadist groups, at least for the next few coming years

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7 In 2016, the IS published a document named “Media operative: You are a Mujahid too”. It reveals the extent to which the organization made efforts to inflate the ego of its online supporters by equating their importance to those who fights on battles. The IS argues that the jihad fought with words can be even more important than the jihad with the sword and thus considers its online fans who share jihadist contents true “virtual warriors” (WINTER, 2017a).

8 See also: CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; INGRAM; WHITESIDE, 2017.

9 Although it is probable that the IS ideology will survive online for some time yet, its ideology and part of its appeal has been intimately linked to the territorial aspect of its project. In this sense, the failure of the Caliphate may harm the IS'S attractiveness (COOLSAET, 2017). However, the extent to which it will impact the appeal of its narrative is still unknown as the narrative itself has also been adapting to the losses. See also: CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; WINTER, 2017a; GAMBHIR, 2016.





(GAMBHIR, 2016)<sup>10</sup>. The IS has long created a resilient propaganda strategy and structure that has been proving to be able to endure even in the face of both the reduction of its output capacity<sup>11</sup> as well as the more controlled and policed internet (WINTER, 2017b)<sup>12</sup>. This resilience can be attributed to both the operational and material (content) characteristics of the IS's propaganda machinery. On the operational side, the IS's internet propaganda machinery is operated by different kinds of media operatives<sup>13</sup> – such as formal and informal members – which grants it a strong capacity to adapt under unfavorable circumstances (LISTER 2015a; 2015b)<sup>14</sup>. On the material perspective, the very IS's narratives have been constantly changing and diversifying since the group began to dominate vast swaths of territory in 2014 to better reflect their social reality and needs (WINTER, 2015a; GAMBHIR, 2016). In fact, there are already evidences that the organization has been recalibrating its messages and overall narrative since its leaders realized that territorial retraction was inevitable (WINTER, 2017b).

In this sense, it is useful to shed a light on how the messages and their contents changed since the declaration of the Caliphate in 2014<sup>15</sup> before analyzing how the IS has been adapting its narratives and propaganda to survive after the recent

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10 See also: WINTER; PARKER, 2018; WINTER, 2017a.

11 According to Winter (2017c), during its height, the organization was able to publish more than 200 media outputs weekly (including videos, radio programs, magazines and photo reports), as well as daily claims about its military operations. Evidence suggests that media officials had a direct line to the Caliph himself and their work pervaded every aspect of the group in order to create a brand and a utopia of a perfect and functional state. Currently, the IS can hardly release 20 media outputs weekly with the utopian message being replaced by a nostalgic feeling of missing the glorious days of the Caliphate (WINTER, 2017b). As this reduction of its publishing capacity coincides with its territorial losses, it can be inferred that a great part of its propaganda was dependent on its territorial control. However, this decrease can also be explained by Intelligence, counterterrorism (as many strategists and media centers were neutralized by air strikes) and cyberwarfare actions (WINTER; PARKER, 2018; WINTER, 2017d).

12 See also: VIDEO; STERN; BERGER, 2015; WEISS; HASSAN, 2015; ZELIN, 2015.

13 IS has crowdsourced its propaganda in an unprecedented way relying on formal and informal members and followers to spread its publications (BARRETT, 2014). These informal members can act as “disseminators”, IS fans who share their beliefs and ideology and helps the group by sharing all the IS'S official content (BARRETT, 2014; WINTER; PARKER, 2018). Some informal members even produced their own propaganda supporting the group. These informal members have already become increasingly important due to the decrease of IS'S official production. In fact, the informal propaganda is currently responsible for most available pro-IS online material (WINTER; PARKER, 2018). These unofficial “operative member” are one of the reasons why IS can sustain its presence on the internet.

14 See also: WINTER, 2017a, 2017b; GAMBHIR, 2016; STERN; BERGER, 2015; WEISS; HASSAN, 2015; ZELIN, 2015, WARRICK, 2015.

15 The declaration itself represented a turning point regarding the group's propaganda. Although they were already active online before, the declaration of the creation of a Caliphate allowed the construction of new narratives related to the utopian idea of a “truly” Islamic state being constructed on earth (LASMAR; FONSECA, 2017).





setbacks. It was no accident that the IS precipitous rise captured the attention of the international media like no other terrorist group before it (NAPOLEONI, 2015)<sup>16</sup>. The IS created a well-planned branding strategy integrated with a professional production of propaganda and a unique outsourced dissemination network (GARTENISTEIN-ROSS; BARR; MORENG, 2016)<sup>17</sup>. The production of content and narratives of the IS is also very professional and well-thought. The content and message of their propaganda is not homogeneous and vary according to both the different audiences as well as their diverse strategic goals. These goals range from influencing opponents, attracting and seducing potential recruits, to even guiding and managing active members, disseminators and proselytizers (WINTER, 2015a; 2015b). During its height, the IS was also very skillful in customizing and tailoring different narratives to different target audiences (LASMAR, FONSECA, 2017). One example of such customized messaging can be easily perceived in the dissimilar contents found comparing the English and Arabic language IS's propaganda (KHALIL; SHANAHAN, 2016)<sup>18</sup>. Another example is the distinct difference in the messages geared towards western women and those directed at women from Muslim-majority countries (RAFIK; MALIK, 2015)<sup>19</sup>.

In terms of the propaganda's content, one can identify at least nine recurring themes: 1) the religious obligation to migrate to the Caliphate; 2) sectarianism; 3) discrediting competition; 4) brutality; 5) mercy; 6) victimhood; 7) war; 8) sense of belonging; and 9) utopianism (GARTENISTEIN-ROSS; BARR; MORENG, 2016; WINTER, 2015a; 2015b). Possibly one of the main themes in IS's propaganda after the declaration of the Caliphate was the narrative that framed the migration to IS's controlled territories in the same lights of the religious obligation of able Muslims to migrate from one's home when they are persecuted and unable to practice their religion (*Hijra*). This narrative helped portray the migration to the so-called Caliphate as a religious obligation amongst those who accepted such discourse and consequently helped to attract thousands of foreign volunteers to their ranks. However, as the territorial losses increased, the IS almost stopped invoking religion in order to pressure Muslims to travel and join the group (WINTER; PARKER, 2018). Another important recurring narrative is the discredit of other rival groups –

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16 See also: WINTER, 2015a; WEISS; HASSAN, 2015; STERN; BERGER, 2015; COCKBURN, 2015, McCANTS, 2015.

17 See also: WEISS; HASSAN, 2015; STERN; BERGER, 2015; ZELIN, 2015; ALI, 2015; WINTER, 2015a; 2015b; COCKBURN, 2015.

18 See also: EL-BADAWI; COMERFORD; WELBY, 2015.

19 See also: TARRAS-WAHLBERG, 2016; SALTMAN; SMITH, 2015; ALI, 2015.





especially *Al Qaeda* – and the sectarian message fueling conflict between Shias and Sunnis<sup>20</sup> (VALLEE, 2015). Another important aspect of its propaganda has been the displays of brutality used to support their triumphalism<sup>21</sup> (WINTER, 2015a; 2017b). The carefully designed use of violence in their propaganda sought to intimidate adversaries, warn local populations of the dangers associated with espionage or dissent, provoke outrage from the international media and cause hasty and unwise decisions from hostile countries (WINTER, 2015a). The triumphalism, in its turn, sought to prove that not only their victories were the sign that their ideals were righteous and had God’s blessing, but also to highlight the fact that those who joined the group were part of the few enlightened ones (LASMAR; FONSECA, 2017). Thus, war and violence has always played an important element of their propaganda and it is present in roughly 92% of the IS’s current propaganda. However, despite the fact that the IS initially tried to deny its recent military defeats, it has been forced to abandon the triumphalist discourse. The IS still relies on violent images related to the war in Syria and Iraq – such as battles, armored vehicles and martyrdom operations – but has increasingly focused more on its external operations and the promotion of terrorist attacks around the world. This is especially true after mid 2015 when the international coalition began to bomb its positions (CLARKE, 2017; LASMAR; FONSECA, 2017). Thus, currently, violence and brutality persist in their propaganda materials and narratives. Nevertheless, the way violence is framed has significantly changed revealing an underlying shift in their objectives. The narrative of violence is no longer used with the objective of recruiting or demanding the migration to its territories. Rather, it has become geared towards the instigation and guidance of worldwide terrorism (WINTER; PARKER, 2018; WINTER, 2017d).

“Mercy” is another powerful sentiment commonly explored in their material. Aimed at potential fighters of other groups as well as civilians who are looking for a “second chance”, the IS is portrayed as a merciful group that can forgive any previous sins committed by their new recruits. “Victimhood” and “belonging”

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20 Sectarianism is not only an intrinsic part of IS’s ideology but also historically crucial to its strategy. Even now, while the dream of the Caliphate was at least interrupted in the Middle East, the IS continues to instigate sectarian tensions by targeting Shias and even Christians in countries such as Afghanistan and Egypt (HUME, 2018; HASSAN, 2017c).

21 However, since the group can no longer boast about its military victories, the IS currently avoids repeating the idea that its successes in the battlefield against infidels were enough proof that the Caliphate project was sanctioned by God thus abandoning most of the triumphalism present in its older statements. As its military victories and territorial control were important features of its narrative, it is possible that the territorial losses will have a significant impact in the attractiveness of its propaganda.





are another classic and recurrent themes in the propaganda of all jihadist groups which also figures in a significant share of IS's publications<sup>22</sup>. The first conveys the message that Muslims worldwide are victims at the hands of a perceived global war against Islam. The latter was mostly drawn to its western recruits and used to emphasize the idea of brotherhood in the Caliphate (WINTER, 2015a). Although these two narratives will always exist, their use has considerably decreased due to the IS's territorial losses (WINTER, 2017d). However, the feeling of "victimhood" is being reshaped to explore a feeling of nostalgia about the "unforgettable days" of the Caliphate, a project only momentarily interrupted. However, the most impacted narrative is that about the utopian life in the Caliphate. In 2015, the propaganda about the utopian life in the Caliphate represented more than a half of its media output painting a perfect civilian life ranging from free schooling and thriving agriculture to an exemplar social welfare. Today, the depictions of the Caliphate utopia have almost vanished with only some nostalgic productions about its glorious days remaining (WINTER, 2017b; 2017d).

However, one of the most important shifts in IS's propaganda in the last 3 years is that related to the far-near enemy dilemma (CLARKE, 2017). Traditionally, the IS and its predecessors have always chosen to focus on its closer enemies, i.e. the "apostate" regimes ruling Muslim-majority countries (near enemy). Even while considering *Al Qaeda* in Iraq – the most famous IS's predecessor – it disobeyed Bin Laden's instructions of focusing the attacks on the United States of America (far enemy). Nevertheless, after the beginning of the coalition strikes in 2015, IS's propaganda increasingly began to instigate terrorist attacks abroad, especially in the Western far enemy countries. Even though most part of the group's energies were spent on local battles against its adversaries on the ground, the IS propaganda became more and more interested in portraying any violence against Western civilians as a legitimate retribution against the coalition (LASMAR; FONSECA, 2017). Insofar as the group was losing control of most of its territories, the messages that instruct and instigate international terrorism against its "far enemies" became one of its main narratives. The scale and number of attacks attributed to IS (being it inspired or directed) in the West after 2015 further blurred the lines between the

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22 During its height, between 2014 and 2015, the IS used the narrative of victimhood less than other jihadist groups since it was trying to portray itself as victorious and invincible army. The IS has always overstated its gains while also downplaying its losses and vulnerabilities (GARTENSTEIN-ROSS; BARR; MORENG, 2016). However, after the beginning of coalition's bombings, the group started to develop the thesis of an existent international conspiracy against the Caliphate and the Muslim world (FRONSOM; SIMON, 2015; LASMAR; FONSECA, 2017).







far/near enemy focus. Furthermore – and rather unfortunately – since the group began to change its focus, it has become more effective on inspiring, facilitating and enabling foreign terrorist entrepreneurs than *Al Qaeda* in its best moments<sup>23</sup>.

There is yet another interesting revision on the IS's narrative. From the moment the group's setbacks became evident, the group has been relying more often on classic jihadist concepts such as "long war". This is because they want to downplay its defeats by painting them as a merely temporary complication. The IS has ever since sent messages conveying the idea that they are fighting a cross-generational war. Therefore, according to the IS's leaders, the apostates and the "enemies of Islam" are being deceived by thinking that the loss of territories equals the IS's demise (HASSAN, 2017b; COTTEE, 2017). An audio released in 2016 by the then IS's number two, al-Adnani, is a good example of how the group started to change its narrative insofar IS's setbacks was becoming undeniable (CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018)<sup>24</sup>:

Whoever thinks that we fight to protect some land or some authority, or that victory is measured thereby, has strayed far from the truth. Oh America, would we be defeated and you be victorious if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa? Certainly not! We would be defeated and you victorious only if you were able to remove the Quran from Muslims' hearts (AL-ADNANI Apud COTTEE, 2017, p. 1).

More recently, the IS has also re-calibrated their narratives regarding hot-topics such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. Even more so after Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and decided to relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv. The IS has become increasingly critical and vocal about the Palestine authorities and organizations such as Hamas. In their view, these groups should call for less words and more action. The IS takes advantage of Trump's moves to criticize other Islamist groups: "sixty years and Jerusalem has been in the hands of Jews, and it is only now that people cry when the crusaders announced it today as their capital" (OSTAEYEN; HAMMING, 2018, p. 1).

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23 The IS not only proved to be more effective on using internet, and especially social media platforms but also was more efficient on taking advantage of more recent apps which provide the possibility to encrypt messages. Some attacks initially attributed to lone actors were later classified as "directed attacks" or even "remote controlled" by the IS (CALLIMACHI, 2017).

24 See also: HASSAN, 2017b; COTTEE, 2017.





Last, but not least, the IS also changed the narratives regarding the tactics it has been forced to implement to survive. One interesting example of this shift lies in its repositioning on whether or not women can actively engage in combat (WINTER; MARGOLIN, 2017)<sup>25</sup>. While the IS's predecessor groups (AQI and ISI) did extensively use female suicide bombers, the IS and other jihadist groups strictly ruled that women should focus on their roles as mothers and wives instead of becoming fighters. Possibly, the recent setbacks and sharp decrease in its recruitment forced the group to lift its moratorium on women combatants. Recent videos and announcements clearly call women to action<sup>26</sup> (PEARSON, 2017; DEARDEN, 2018; 2017)<sup>27</sup>. However, it is still controversial whether the group has, in fact, lifted the restrictions regarding the role of women in military operation and how much of the discourse is actually implemented on the ground<sup>28</sup>. (COTTEE; BLOOM, 2017). Nevertheless, it is clear that IS has indeed changed its narrative on the discourse level. Considering the significant implications of this change – and regardless if it is only a propaganda strategy or an actual military shift – the debate on the women's role in war is another example of how the IS has been adapting its narratives to survive.

There is no doubt that the virtual arena is one of the main domains in which the IS struggles to maintain its prominence<sup>29</sup> and keep alive the idea of an Islamic Caliphate. If, on the one hand, we can verify a relevant decrease of its propaganda

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25 See also: PEARSON, 2017; DEARDEN, 2018; 2017.

26 It is important to highlight that this is a controversial topic. Charlie Winter is one of the analysts who have been extensively researching the IS's propaganda. In a sequence of tweets posted on February 9<sup>th</sup> on his Twitter account, Winter (2018) outlined an interesting timeline showing the evolution of the IS's messages regarding how the group saw the role of women in combat.

27 See also: WINTER; MARGOLIN, 2017.

28 Until September 2017, before witnessing the most recent publications, Cotee and Bloom (2017) were skeptical about an actual shift in terms of ideology. In spite of acknowledging that the IS had already stipulated some very specific situations in which women were allowed to fight – as it can be easily seen in documents such as the al-Khansaa Brigade “manifesto” (AL KHANSAA BRIGADE, 2015) –, the authors seemed to believe that it was more a matter of tactical innovation, or a propaganda strategy to shame wavering male supporters into action, than a true ideological adaptation.

29 It is also important to emphasize that the IS propaganda is not restricted to online productions. Much, if not most, of the IS's propaganda is primarily designed and implemented for offline purposes. On the ground, many locals interviewed said that the bulk of IS's propaganda efforts were put in face-to-face interactions and written materials such as pamphlets and letters as well as others kinds of campaigns such as intimidation of clerics who oppose the group. To properly address the extent to which the territorial losses will damage the IS's appeal in the region, it is relevant to understand whether off line propaganda will also be damaged to the same degree. Moreover, even the online production decline appears to have been inconsistent, with output levels partially recovering in 2018 probably due to production hubs being relocated (WINTER; INGRAM, 2018).





output, on the other hand, the IS has long been structuring its networks and adapting its narratives to remain relevant and alive, winning both hearts and minds. However, as argued before, the biggest problem with the idea that the IS will become only a “virtual Caliphate” is that it takes the IS’s defeat for granted ignoring how the group has, time and again, proved its resilience and overcame even harder times throughout its history. As we are going to discuss in the next section, there is evidence that the IS has also been changing its military approach in tandem with the reshaping of its propaganda (DEMPSEY, 2018). In fact, hints of a shift in its military strategy – now much more visible – were already present in previous IS’s statements dating back to 2016.

## Going underground...again!

There is a general agreement amongst analysts who have been following the history of IS and its predecessors<sup>30</sup> that the recent territorial losses do not necessarily imply the defeat and demise of the organization (SPYER, 2018)<sup>31</sup>. In spite of having lost over 90% of the lands it once controlled, there is a chance that the group might actually not be definitively defeated in neither military nor social/ideological terms (AL-AZM, 2017)<sup>32</sup>. As will be discussed below, there is some evidence that, following its narrative amends, the IS has also been changing its military strategy. Increasingly, the group is going back to acting underground and progressively relying more on guerrilla tactics and terrorism (SPYER, 2018)<sup>33</sup>. In some instances, the group seems to be even avoiding combat in order to preserve its manpower to use it in more favorable times<sup>34</sup> (HASSAN, 2017b, AL-AZM, 2017). Therefore, repeating a now familiar cycle of expansion and contraction, it is very

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30 Almost two decades if we take into account that the IS originated with the foundation of the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad back in 1999.

31 See also: CLARKE, 2018; CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; JOSCELYN, 2018; JONES; DOBBINS; BYMAN; CHIVVIS; CONNABLE; MARTINI; ROBINSON; CHANDLER, 2017; DEMPSEY, 2018; HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; BURKE, 2017, BUNZEL, 2016; 2017; COTTEE, 2017; COCKBURN, 2018; 2017; AL-AZM, 2017; MANSOUR; AL-HASHMI, 2017; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017; ABRAMS, 2017; MESEROLE, 2017; SKY 2017; HASSAN, 2017c.

32 See also: JONES; DOBBINS; BYMAN; CHIVVIS; CONNABLE; MARTINI; ROBINSON; CHANDLER, 2017; BUNZEL, 2016; 2017.

33 See also: CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; DEMPSEY, 2018; JONES; DOBBINS; BYMAN; CHIVVIS; CONNABLE; MARTINI; ROBINSON; CHANDLER, 2017; HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c.

34 This strategic and temporary “cease-fire” can be compared to the idea of *Hudna* implemented in certain occasions by islamist groups such as Hamas.





likely that the IS will once again act from the shadows of the urban centers and remote areas of desert attempting to preserve some strength while it awaits an opportunity to reemerge (DEMPSEY, 2018)<sup>35</sup>.

It can be argued that the campaign to destroy the Caliphate started in 2014 has largely achieved its objective. After three and half years, the international coalition and its regional partners were able to recover as much as 90% of the territories that IS once seized (SPYER, 2018; HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b). The flux of foreign fighters to the region was also interrupted, seriously reducing the group's capacity to expand and threaten other countries. As mentioned above, the territorial losses also impacted the group's ability to produce propaganda in a large scale. In sum, one can say that the IS is in its weakest moments since 2014 and it no longer represents the same degree of threat (JOHNSTON, 2017)<sup>36</sup>. Nevertheless, although all these statements are true, these accomplishments are not enough to draw any conclusions. Whereas the IS might have been adapting itself to survive, some of the conditions and external events that enable its last resurgence – such as the American withdrawal or the Arab Spring – are unlikely to be replicated in the near future (COCKBURN, 2018; ZELIN, 2017).

It is important to remember that the organization has overcome worse periods before. Around 2010, for instance, before the US withdrawal, the IS had almost suffered a total defeat. However, it managed to rise again doing exactly what they seem to be currently doing. Even before 2010, the IS predecessor (named ISI, Islamic state of Iraq) adapted its strategy downsizing and returning to guerilla and terrorism tactics. It avoided open battles against US counterinsurgency and the Sunni tribe forces that had rebelled against the group (CHANDLER, 2017)<sup>37</sup>. The pattern of the recent attacks on the ground seems to support the IS's statements suggesting that it has already contracted in order to preserve its manpower and regroup in a more favorable operational environment (COCKBURN, 2018)<sup>38</sup>. Although since 2016 the group has been increasingly adopting terrorism and guerrilla tactics in Syria and Iraq, the great mark on the strategic and tactical shifts happened after the liberation of Mosul (CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; HASSAN, 2017b). In the fall of 2016, the IS's leader al-Baghdadi called on IS fighters to fight to death in

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35 See also: HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; BUNZEL, 2017; AL-AZM, 2017.

36 See also: HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; BURKE, 2016, BUNZEL, 2016; 2017; COTTEE, 2017; AL-AZM, 2017; MANSOUR; AL-HASHMI, 2017; BAHNEY.

37 See also: JONES; DOBBINS; BYMAN; CHIVVIS; CONNABLE; MARTINI; ROBINSON; HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; STERN; BERGER, 2015; WEISS; HASSAN, 2015; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017.

38 See also: CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; BURKE, 2017; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017.





order to defend the city. Such a call was strictly obeyed by thousands of people who ended up killed after bloody urban battles and airstrikes that left Mosul in ruins. Since losing its second major urban center, the IS has not again fought to the last man to maintain control of any other city or village, even in crucial areas (HASSAN, 2017b)<sup>39</sup>. In regions such as Tal Afar and Hawija, hundreds of fighters chose to flee or even surrender rather than resisting the liberation forces. In Raqqa – while most analysts were expecting the same determination displayed in Mosul – hundreds of local IS's fighters seemed to have even struck a deal to be evacuated from the city without being killed (SOMMERVILLE; DALATI, 2017)<sup>40</sup>. Even more surprisingly, the resistance in the Euphrates River area, around towns as such Deir ez-Zor, was low. These towns were once the most important remaining IS base of operations. In summation, recently, IS forces have largely melted away from places rather than openly confronting Iraqi, Syrian and Kurdish forces (COCKBURN, 2018)<sup>41</sup>. Surely, many factors have contributed to explain why IS's fighters have been vanishing before the battles: loss of morale after the fall of Mosul; the desire of less committed fighters to save themselves, and; the disintegration of part of the group leadership after years of war. Still, the lack of resistance displayed suggests that these withdraws are actually part of an old strategy of dispersing and conserving its manpower in order to adopt a more calculated insurgency (BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017)<sup>42</sup>. Regarding some liberated areas and even zones where the IS never had the full control, such as Baghdad and Diyala Province, the group has been mounting successful terrorist attacks. As it did around 2010, the IS is already working to provoke the Iraqi government to crack down on Sunnis and, thus, cause sectarian strife. The Sunni/Shia opposition in Iraq has been one of the group's core narratives for recruiting locally and forms a strong part of its political legitimacy claims (CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018)<sup>43</sup>. The use of tactics such as hit-and-run strikes as well as assassinations of authorities are increasing at these areas and at the borderlands straddling Iraq and Syria<sup>44</sup>. This is also

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39 See also: COCKBURN, 2018; 2017, BURKE, 2017; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017.

40 See also: HASSAN, 2017b; COCKBURN, 2018; 2017.

41 See also: CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; HASSAN, 2017b.

42 See also: JONES; DOBBINS; BYMAN; CHIVVIS; CONNABLE; MARTINI; ROBINSON; CHANDLER, 2017; CLARKE; MOGHADAM, 2018; HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; COCKBURN, 2018; 2017; BURKE, 2017.

43 See also: HASSAN, 2017b; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017.

44 Interestingly Hassan (2017b) compares what the border between Syria and Iraq means to the IS to what the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan means to the Taliban. According to the author, even though the IS has suggested that it could withdraw to the desert as in the past, its attacks will still focus on urban centers with rural areas as pathways allowing the movement between the two terrains. In this sense, the border region





important because these attacks are rarely accounted for in official statements related to the progress of the fight against the IS (HASSAN, 2017b). Additionally, the group is already taking advantage of all areas where the geography and social environment is difficult for counterinsurgency operations, such as deserts<sup>45</sup> and certain urban centers and rural areas (HASSAN, 2017b).

Some analysts state that actually this shift is part of a strategy planned around mid 2016. In that occasion, the IS leadership realized that territorial losses were inevitable due to the involvement of Russia and Turkey with the international coalition (DEMPSEY, 2018)<sup>46</sup>. This claim is based on the fact that the IS has been sporadically hinting at this kind of strategic shift since some unclear messages came out in 2016. The speech given by al-Adnani in May 2016, for example, conveyed that the rise and fall of his group was only part of a larger historical flow – as a deliberate process – since the early days of the Iraq war. Therefore, territorial losses would be just a new chapter in which the objective of weakening the enemies would assume other forms. Hence, the propaganda works in tandem with the tactics (DEMPSEY, 2018) increasing the morale of its members with the idea of an organization impossible to be defeated in much the same way as the mythical Phoenix (HASSAN, 2017b). Coincidentally or not, after this speech IS's videos and publications such as *Al Naba* increasingly began to portray the desert as the best place to launch its post-Caliphate insurgency<sup>47</sup>. In recent statements, the IS's leaders have explicitly compared the current situation with the dire conditions faced by the group around 2008 and suggested that adopting the same strategy will work now as it did before (BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017)<sup>48</sup>. In a series of articles published in *Al Naba* in September and October 2017, the group explains why it would be unwise to openly confront military forces that have the continuous support of American and Russian air forces. These articles argued that such enemy's ground forces had as their main objective to expose IS's ground fighters so that they could be targeted by drones and aerial strikes

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between the two countries – an area full of desert areas, river valleys, rural towns and small urban centers – will likely be crucial to the IS's strategy as it provides a hospitable environment and strategic sanctuaries.

45 According to Cockburn (2017), since 2016 the IS has prepared bunkers, weapons caches and food stocks in the deserts and semi-deserts between Iraq and Syria as they did around 2011 in order to prepare for its comeback.

46 See also: HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b; 2016; BUNZEL, 2017; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017.

47 Multiple videos released by the IS reflect the return of the group's insurgency activities in liberated areas using hit-and-run attacks as well as assassinations in order to lower the enemy's morale and spread fear, just like the IS did around 2010 (HASSAN, 2017b).

48 See also: HASSAN, 2017b.





(HASSAN, 2017b). According to Hassan (2017b) these statements likely support and reflect the shifts in the IS's strategy after the fall of Mosul<sup>49</sup>.

## The future of Isis

Prudence is always warranted when making predictions, perhaps more so when it comes to the Middle East. Although history and current signs of adaptations seem to suggest that the IS could rise again, it is premature to state either its rebirth or its demise. Many intermediary outcomes may take place between these two extremes of the spectrum. Possible future scenarios include the disintegration of the organization (FARAS, 2017); and the appearance of splinters or sub-organizations (which usually are more extreme than their parent organization). A less probable scenario of merger with *Al Qaeda* or other insurgent or terrorist groups; a shift in focus towards other regions such as Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen or Philippines in order to create new sanctuaries, and so on. So far, however, it is hard to identify any other geographical theater exerting the force of attraction that Iraq and Syria have most recently (COOLSAET, 2017).

Altogether, the problems with stating that the IS has already been defeated are threefold. First, and as explained in the previous section, the IS has overcome worse moments before. The second reason why assuming a definitive defeat of IS would be a hasty analysis is that the international coalition may have defeated the organization militarily, but not ideologically, socially or even politically (BURKE, 2017)<sup>50</sup>. The United States and its partners may claim to have won the war that began in 2014 but they certainly seem to have lost the political and social battles that began much earlier, especially given the evidence that the Sunni communities in both Syria and Iraq feel more hopeless now than ever before (MESEROLE, 2017)<sup>51</sup>. The coalition has not yet identified any Sunni actors in either country who command broad local legitimacy and, in the absence of effective Sunni governance, it is likely that the population will turn to new, old or rebranded armed militant groups (BUNZEL, 2017)<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, with many actors posing as victors in

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49 It is important to highlight that even the coalition's US commander, Gen. Joseph Votel, had acknowledged in 2016 that the IS was apparently "reverting in some regards back to their terrorist roots" (HASSAN, 2017b, p.4).

50 See also: BUNZEL, 2017; HASSAN, 2017a.

51 See also: BURKE, 2017; HASSAN, 2017a; 2016.

52 See also: HASSAN, 2016; 2017a; MESEROLE, 2017; AL-AZM, 2017.





the war against the IS – including the Kurds, Iranians, Russians and Turks – and, more importantly – with all of them more concerned with war spoils rather than effective governance, it is fair to expect that most of the ongoing arrangements regarding who will administer the areas once controlled by the IS will engender more instability as well as ethnic and sectarian tensions. All this uncertainty will potentially continue to fuel extremism creating conditions that could eventually warrant the rise of a reincarnated version of the IS in the region (Al-AZM, 2017). Unless this aspect of the war on the IS is acknowledged, Western-backed forces are likely to “keep winning” the same war countless times. Yet whilst they congratulate themselves, as the world has been witnessing since 9/11, entire towns face multiple destructions, their populations suffer and extremism becomes both more widespread and much more deeply entrenched (BURKE, 2017; HASSAN, 2017a). To sum up, the prospects of a new IS resurrection in the Levant depends upon three main factors: 1) the quality of governance and legitimate Sunni leadership in Sunni areas; 2) the continuation of sectarian politics by the Shia dominated central governments of Iraq and Syria; and 3) the capacity to rebuild Sunni majority towns destroyed in the war against IS, either through external assistance or through initiatives undertaken by local institutions (BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017). If these issues remain unresolved, they could potentially enable the IS to continue using its preferred tactics of insurgency and terrorism, which would in turn undoubtedly provoke a harsh government response against local Sunni communities that are perceived to provide legitimacy to the organization. The danger thus lies in potentially engendering a cyclical pattern of violence and retribution, which would make conflict resolution in the region even more difficult, if not downright impossible (BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017; HASSAN, 2017a).

A third reason as to why it is too early to state whether or not the IS has already been defeated is related to its finances. Only two years ago, the organization was regarded as one of the wealthiest terrorist group in existence. Its funding was derived from a variety of sources ranging from levying taxes and human trafficking to the export of commodities such as oil and blood antiquities (AL TAMIMI, 2015)<sup>53</sup>. Much of its revenue was contingent upon its control over vast tracts of territory across Iraq and Syria. In the recent months the IS has lost considerable swarths of areas it previously dominated and concomitantly an estimated 80% of its funds (MANSOUR; HASHIMI, 2018a; 2018b). In addition, the United States

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<sup>53</sup> See also: FATF, 2015; STERN; BERGER, 2015; BARRETT, 2014.







and its allies undertook an aerial bombing campaign striking not only revenue-generating locations but also warehouses, caches and trucks holding IS cash. Still, some analysts continue to believe that this damage is not enough to undermine IS's capacity to finance and organize a dangerous insurgency (MANSOUR; HASHIMI, 2018a; 2018b; 2017; HAID, 2017). One of the problems seems to be that, as is the case with its ongoing tactical innovations<sup>54</sup> and narrative adaptations, not much attention is being paid to how the IS's economic practices are also evolving. This pattern of evolution in all three fields is effectively enabling the group to rapidly adjust to its significant losses on the ground. It is important to note that while territorial losses jeopardize the IS's sources of revenue on the one hand, they also generate tremendous opportunities for financial innovation and evolution thanks to the existence of a 'war economy' (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2017)<sup>55</sup>.

Mansour and Hashimi (2018a; 2018b) argue that, according to their Iraqi government sources, the IS has smuggled an estimated 400 million dollars out of Iraq and Syria during its recent retreat. Apart from the "hawala system"<sup>56</sup> that has been used to transport cash outside the Caliphate (HAID, 2017), it has been reported that since 2016 the group is using the cash looted from Mosul as well as that earned from its diverse funding sources to speculate on international stock markets. Evidence suggests that much of its money was wired to Jordanian banks and could be re-introduced into the Iraqi financial system (i.e. the white market) via Baghdad or even through "hawala" (FREEMAN, 2016)<sup>57</sup>. The group has also already heavily invested in the Iraqi market via legitimate businesses, relying on middlemen who are inspired not by the IS's ideology but by the prospect of economic gain (MANSOUR; HASHIMI, 2018a; 2018b; 2017; HAID, 2017). Many of these middlemen are tribal leaders or businessmen with clean records who can easily hide their links to the organization. According to analysts, the IS's *modus operandi* involves providing a sum of cash to these middlemen who then invest it in a business enterprise – for instance, car dealerships, electronic shops or pharmacies and small exchange houses – and the group then simply takes a cut from the profits accrued. These sorts of enterprises typically do not require formal qualifications or high investments and tend to be cash-intensive. As a result, they

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54 On terrorist groups' innovation, see SINGH, 2016.

55 See also: MANSOUR; HASHIMI, 2018; 2017; HAID, 2017; EMERSON, 2018.

56 *Hawala* denotes "in the care of" in Hindi. This popular way of transmitting cash across state boundaries does not involve any formalised movement of money. Thus, there is no way to trace the transaction.

57 See also: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2018; HAID, 2017.





are particularly attractive to terrorist groups because cash intensive businesses are characterised by high-volume, low-value transactions, often with lax financial oversight, which can be easily manipulated to hide gains and/or co-mingle with illegal assets (FATF, 2015; SINGH; LASMAR, forthcoming).

On the other hand, and at the other end of the spectrum, a resurrection by the IS would be more difficult feat to accomplish than the last time because local, regional and international forces supposedly would not make the same mistakes. In other words, whilst undoubtedly the IS has learned since the American intervention of Iraq in 2003, most of its enemies have also grasped how the organization tends to behave during unfavorable periods (COCKBURN, 2018). Furthermore, even those Sunnis who once welcomed the rule of the IS has learnt from experience that the tyranny of the IS can be worse than that of previous leaders, suggesting that these communities would be less likely to view the group as the lesser of two evils a second time (COCKBURN, 2018). Moreover, analysts like Zelin (2017) also highlight the many differences between the current overall circumstances and the environment that existed in the region in 2013-2014, which makes it highly unlikely that the IS would be able to once again dominate territory to the extent, and at the pace, that it did previously. It seems more likely that the IS's current territorial swarth will dissolve into a series of unconnected strongholds rather than the large swaths of land it once dominated. As stated previously, the fortuitous sequence of events that enabled the rise of IS after 2011 such as the American military withdraw from Iraq, the Arab Spring or massive operations such as "Breaking the Walls"<sup>58</sup> are unlikely to occur again.

Furthermore, the region is unlikely to receive a massive flow of foreign fighters as it did in the 2012-2015 period, not only because their countries of origin have already implemented new legal regimes in order to impede the recruitment of potential volunteers but also because neighboring Turkey has cracked down on foreign fighter movement through its territories. Without the same scale of foreign recruitment, the IS will have less potential manpower (ZELIN, 2017). According to Zelin (2017) another difference would be that regional Shia forces, under expanding Iranian influence, will not tolerate any visible efforts by the IS

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58 During the American counterinsurgency campaign against the IS predecessor (ISI), the US and Iraq governments arrested most of the captured group's members in just a few prisons. This allowed the IS to both recruit new members in prison as well as to keep their ideology alive. Later, between 2011 and 2014, the IS stormed Iraqi jails in operations, such as "Breaking the Walls" and filled its ranks with thousands of freed inmates that were hardcore jihadists and veteran insurgents.





to reconsolidate and rebuild in the Levant, making future territorial gains by the group more difficult to both achieve and/or sustain (ZELIN, 2017). The ground in Syria is also now much less favorable to the IS since, unlike in 2011, the group now faces a multitude of new actors in the region (e.g. Russia and Turkey), which, once again, makes it more difficult to conquer territory and/or recruit local Sunnis than it has in the past (ZELIN, 2017). Lastly, Coolsaet (2017) points out that prediction exercises often tend to overestimate the capacity of jihadist groups to survive significant setbacks, especially given that in times of crises terrorist leadership is more inclined to be preoccupied with its own survival rather than organizational integrity, as was seen with Al Qaeda's core immediately post-9/11 for instance.

The future of the IS or the appearance of a successor depends much more on local politicians and institutions rather than measures implemented by world and regional powers intervening in Syria and Iraq. Still, some external assistance may well be necessary to strengthen Iraqi institutions thereby preventing other insurgent/militant actors from filling any vacuum left by the IS (JOSCELYN, 2018; SKY, 2017). Just as the 2010 Iraqi elections exerted a significant impact upon the group's rebirth in the post-2011 period, the presidential elections due to be held in 2018 also represent a critical turning point for the future of Sunni extremism in Iraq. The chances of an IS resurgence is more likely if Iraq once again fails to achieve effective Sunni political representation and a more inclusive government (JOSCELYN, 2018; SKY, 2017). In short, the territorial defeat of IS should not lull the United States and other powers into a false sense of security with the concomitant danger of military and political disengagement (HASSAN, 2015b)<sup>59</sup>. One of the key problems of the current administration in Washington is that it seems determined to disengage from the region, especially given that the 2018 National Defense Strategy appears to have shifted the United States' focus from terrorism to what appears to be long-term strategic competition with countries like Russia and China<sup>60</sup> (JOSCELYN, 2018). Even though the future of the region is heavily dependent upon local actors and their capacity to rebuild effective political and social institutions, diplomatic efforts by the US and the international community can still play an important role in enabling more inclusive and less sectarian politics and thus help to undercut extremism and instability in the region.

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59 See also: JOSCELYN, 2018; SKY, 2017; WEISS, HASSAN, 2015 c.

60 Recently, president Trump has also talked about an American withdraw from Syria and Iraq.





## Conclusion

So far, the campaign to destroy the Caliphate project is questionably successful even though the international coalition and its regional partners have largely recovered almost all the land the IS once controlled. The campaign also successfully interrupted the massive flow of foreign fighters to the IS and other regional Islamist groups. As described above, these territorial losses also negatively impacted the IS propaganda output. Thus, one can argue that the IS is at its weakest since 2014 (HASSAN, 2017a; 2017b)<sup>61</sup>. Nevertheless, there is much evidence that the group is already adapting to survive, especially in what regards its propaganda and military tactics.

This is also true in another important battlefield: the internet. The IS has been recalibrating its on-line narrative on a variety of issues ranging from new understandings about the women's role in combat to an increased focus on "external terrorist operations" in order to keep its ideology alive. It is important to understand that due to its decentralized and flexible network of informal disseminators, the group ideology will likely remain alive online despite all the efforts to curb its propaganda and output. However, the survival of an idea of a virtual Caliphate is as dangerous as the existence of a territorial Caliphate. The danger lies in believing that the current military defeats of the IS in Iraq and Syria necessarily equals to a permanent military, social and political demise of the group. In fact, as argued here, there are strong evidences that the IS has long prepared for surviving a loss of territory by morphing, adapting, and returning to low-intensity warfare tactics such as terrorism, assassinations and hit-and run attacks. It is important to remember that this would not be the first time the IS adopted this *modus operandi*.

However, we argue that predicting either the demise or the survival of the IS is still a premature endeavor. The current scenario on the ground is starkly different from 2011 when many believed the group was defeated. When predicting the future of the IS in the region it is necessary to acknowledge that it will be heavily impacted, first and foremost, by Syria and Iraq's ability to not only develop their political and social institutions but also address Sunni and Shia grievances in their respective territories. Furthermore, the role of ideology cannot

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<sup>61</sup> See also: BURKE, 2016; BUNZEL, 2016; 2017; COTTEE, 2017; AL-AZM, 2017; MANSOUR; AL-HASHMI, 2017; BAHNEY; JOHNSTON, 2017.





be understated. Indeed, unless and until Iraq, Syria as well as intervening countries and international society are unable to understand both the power of ideologies as well as that the fact that the existence of the IS and similar groups are symptoms of deeper local problems rather than the cause, the challenges in the region will persist. This is significant because, as Sky says, “what happens in Iraq, does not stay in Iraq” (SKY, 2017, p. 1).

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