The decline of "Islamic State" in Franchising

The so called Islamic State’s¹ (IS) expansion in Iraq started as improvisation. It is a consequence of the lack of engagement of the most important demographic group in Iraq, the Sunni – the tribes that had suffered from the de-Baathification process after the 2003 downfall of the Saddam’s regime. Looking at the past strategy, what emerges is an underestimation of the essential role of the interconnected organization of the Iraqi society (from families to clans) and the complex system of systems.²

The growth of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria coincided with the rise in frequency and technical sophistication of the weapons and of the terroristic-insurrectional techniques utilized on the battleground (suicide bombers, explosive vehicles, improvised explosive devices, etc.). According to experts, “one reason why Islamic State today projects a much larger military asymmetric and de-territorialized strength than it actually has owes to its expert use of these specific technique and procedure of attack. Not only because of the direct military effects, but also, and especially, because of the psychological effects on the enemy compared to a major military action”.³

From 2006 onward the insurrectional phenomenon had focused in pursuing this kind of attacks and techniques in Iraq, in Syria, and then in Europe.

The expansion

Since 2006 the Iraqi provincial capital of Anbar had fallen to “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” (AQI). This crucial event represents an important step in the self-proclaimed Islamic State expansion process as new subject in the Middle East conflicts and dynamics.

The creation of ISI was an evolution of AQI which wanted to show its own jihadi-war in a national form, even if some Sunni insurgent decided to change their approach to the conflict on ad hoc military basis. Thus ISI represents the extreme consequence of the al-Qaeda attempt to take-over the political approach of the Iraqi insurgency.

AQI, as all the ideological and populistic regimes, thrive on myths that delete state borders, even ones that begin as expressions of chauvinism and then have to retroactively rationalise their occupation of foreign lands. AQI was not different; during the first part of the conflict, it had generated a dual perception of itself: on the one hand, as the elite of an Iraqi national insurrectional movement and, on the other hand, as the custodian of a stolen and Sunni identity. Despite a global counter-offensive in 2016, Islamic State managed to cling to key territories in the vast area of the Great Middle East (from Nigeria to Af-Pak areas). The Islamic State territorial and military actions have not only threatened the borders between Syria and Iraq, but their existence as states⁴; but now, because the Coalition direct actions against the Islamic State in Iraq and the offensive conducted by the Russian-Syrian alliance in Syria, the Islamic State is changing its nature, from territorial “proto-State” to “phenomenon”, capable to operate globally and without coordination or direct connection with the physical Caliphate.

---

¹ Initially as “al-Qaeda in Iraq” or “AQI” and then “Islamic State of Iraq” or “ISI”.
⁴ Isis’s advance in Iraq, in Financial Times, 18 March 2016.
Iraq and Syria. From Jabhat al-Nusra to the “Islamic State”

On February, 17, 2011, a protest erupted in the marketplace of the village of al-Hariqa close to Damascus, the Syrian capital. This is the starting point of the Syrian initially labelled “civil war” and then transmuted in a long-term proxy-war involving a galaxy of actors, most of them external to the Syrian society and territory.

Before the U.S. military disengagement from Iraq, the Islamic State sent operatives into Syria under the banner of a new entity: the Jabhat al-Nusra front, the Islamic State franchise in Syria. These elements spent six months in Syria, structuring and establishing a covert jihadi network; al-Nusra demonstrated to be one of the most capable insurrectional group and, thanks to a “moderate” approach, was able to involve local peoples and non-Islamists groups. This choice represents the key of its “triumph”, thanks to an effective narrative and the penetration of the so-called “human terrain” (the bases of the counterinsurgency approach adopted – with short-term results and long-term failure – by the U.S. previously in Iraq and then in Afghanistan).

Furthermore, in December 2013, the number of foreign fighters who joined with the Syrian Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) was up to 11,000, from 74 nations, most of them under the banner of the Islamic State.

On February 2014, al-Qaeda officially concluded its association with the Islamic State issuing a public statement. The Islamic State rise in Iraq in 2014 matched with its occupation of a large part of Syrian territory.

Social reasons of the territorial expansion

The Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria had consideration for tribes and clans and dealt with them with diverse approaches.

Iraqi propaganda covered traditions and folklore and Saddam Hussein socialised with both Sunni and Shia leaders giving them various encouragements in change of their loyalty.

In Syria, the al-Assad regime was mostly ambivalent with tribes and generally not able to co-opting them. On the contrary, it broke the “tribal bodies” to create social rifts on demand.

In general in Syria, tribal networks played an important role after the unarmed uprising became military confrontation, in early 2012, supporting the different groups according to tribes’ priorities and inclinations. It is interesting to underline the fact that some Syrian AOGs were also formed because of tribal links.

The principle of “divide et impera” has been the Islamic State approach to local tribes and to managing the conflict “crescendos”.

Observing the social and trans-national increase of the Islamic State from the so-called area of Syraq, we can assess that the Islamic State is the first and only jihadist franchise in history to quarry members of the some tribes against the others, persuading them to forced and protracted fratricides in Iraq. A strategy which guarantees that any tribal uprising against the Islamic State will be fratricidal.

The Islamic State has also proposed itself as intermediary for clashes in tribal areas. For this new role, the Islamic State has appointed an emir in charge of “tribal affairs” to solve local protests or grievances. The outcome is that the role of foreign-natives arbiters looks to be well recognised.

This strategy has been followed since its battleground resurge in 2011. It has followed the aforementioned divide-et-impera policy to guarantee that tribal and social rivalries are more important than any unified enmity to the Islamic State.

---

5 Source: ICSR and Boaz Ganor, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), Israel.
This tribal strategy is not perfect and does have explicit limits; firstly it is a momentary governing subject, a partnership based on temporary conveniences or opportunities. Clearly, tribes do not support the Islamic State on ideologically bases.

**Territorial expansion and the international relations**

As reported by Richard Falk on the *Foreign Policy Journal*, “the most significant challenge to the state-centralism has been mounted by the Sunni theocratic almost-state labelled as Islamic State in its proclamation of the new caliphate, whose contours were based on its de facto capability to maintain a basic territorial governance in the operational area of Syraq.

Islamic State furtherly ended the “Sykes-Picot” system, the 1916 agreement signed by UK and France that defined the modern Middle East. The Islamic State has accomplished to challenge the sovereign political and territorial authority of both Syria and Iraq, but with complete lack of international relations and diplomatic legitimacy.

There are three elements of the IS proto-state project that are worth observing.

1. Firstly, the Islamic State seems to have not the objective to be accepted at international level as a “conventional” state (and the adoption of a “New insurrectional Terrorism” approach confirms this hypothesis) or to be treated as a means of self-determination for Iraqis and Syrians communities/groups.

2. Secondly, the Islamic State is demanding for itself a larger political legitimacy to that deliberated by international diplomatic procedures or through admission to the United Nations; this request has appeal for the people living within the so called “Caliphate”.

3. Thirdly, substantial percentages of the Sunni population (the main presence within the “Caliphate”) initially received positively the Islamic State as an opposition and freedom force able to offers basic social services and support.

**The Islamic State’s franchise expansion**

The Islamic State is sharing franchises, through the premium-branding dissemination, but is not able to share material capabilities. In fact, several AOGs, local militants, have formally stated their loyalty to the Islamic State. Reports issued that Somalia-based group al-Shabaab is divided between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda; the same dynamics in Afghanistan and in the Indian sub-continent, as well as in Libya.

Neither it’s comparable to al-Qaeda’s impulse for global spread during the 90s. Al-Qaeda was more focused on attacking US and Western objectives and interests, and its impulse for global spread was a different expression of trans-nationalism.

**Analysis, assessments and forecasts**

Additionally, few considerations on the limits of the Islamic State in franchise.

The Islamic State’s Libya franchise is the most strictly associated to the Islamic State of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Many Libyan combatants returned from the war along with the Islamic State in Syraq and have individual relations with the Caliphate that look like those between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda, in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), or between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda, in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

---

In addition, Libyan fighters delineate their objectives in line with the local Libyan situation, not the region-wide Islamic State outline. Ideological relationships will not modify until fighters, money, institutional knowledge or comprehensive real coordination flow become more apparent.

The Islamic State faces its own limitations in meaningfully interfacing with its franchises. It is under substantial financial and military pressure and must focus on preserving its conquered ground positions. It cannot easily increase other groups elsewhere by distributing fighters or money. The Islamic State's real strength is in fighting asymmetrical and manoeuvre warfare, preparing itself for the further evolution toward a threat represented by the nature of this evolution: the “Islamic State as phenomenon” under the label of its premium-brand, able to operate everywhere at any time.

Any substantial impulse to support other AOGs in the future would serve only to add to these AOGs’ “insurrectional capability” rather than their “terrorist capability”, and the two things are quite distinct.\(^7\)

---

7 Stratfor Analysts, *Islamic State is adding franchises, but not capabilities*, March, 17, 2015.