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Islamic State and Revolts from the Margins

Paul Rogers

Introduction

There are indications that what has been seen as a narrow series of extreme Islamist movements is now evolving into a much wider phenomenon of generic revolts from the margins. If so, this represents a far more significant transformation of security challenges than the “war on terror” that followed the 9/11 attacks.

Context

Two years ago, in August 2013, Oxford Research Group published a briefing, *The Evolution of the al-Qaida Movement*, which focused on its transition from a movement to an idea while retaining the movement’s potency. The main conclusion was that:

“The al-Qaida movement was never narrowly hierarchical and closely structured, and the idea that dispersal, assassination and detention would largely destroy it as a threat was little more than wishful thinking. [In 2013] its existence as a centralised entity may be even more limited but the idea remains potent. Its current expression is most clearly seen in different manifestations in Nigeria, Syria and Iraq which, taken together, mean that the movement has substantial potential for further development.”

This analysis was developed in December 2013, *Al-Qaida: an Idea in Search of a Cause*, pointing to the changing nature of the movement by that time:

“The current status of al-Qaida is one of numerous affiliates with variable relations with each other and with what is left of the core of the movement, often with high degrees of individuality. By no means do all of them put global jihad at the top of their agenda, yet all share a vision of some kind of Islamist Caliphate. If the al-Qaida movement is now primarily an idea, it is one that latches on to other conflicts and has the ability to make them its own.”

This briefing returns to that theme and develops it in the context of Islamic State, which was initially a more narrowly focused evolution of the al-Qaida idea centred on the early creation of a geographical Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, but one which is now broadening out and has even overtaken al-Qaida in world-wide impact and significance. What has recently become evident, however, is that there is something even more fundamental developing in a number of regions where extreme Islamist movements have taken root: they are being fuelled by a perception of marginalisation and exclusion which transcends Islamic State’s more narrow vision of defending Islam under attack from the Crusader forces of the West.

The Current Status of al-Qaida and Islamic State

Early in 2014, what was left of “al-Qaida central” was located principally in North West Pakistan with groups in Baluchistan and some of Pakistan’s most populous cities such as Karachi. While its core elements had been much degraded by US drone strikes and Special Forces attacks, its outlook underpinned movements in the Arabian Peninsula (especially Yemen) in Somalia, North Africa and the Sahel. There were also loose connections with a number of groups across South and South East Asia as well as the Caucasus and western China, but these were highly variable in their intensity. Part of the reason for the loose nature of the connections was that the central organisation of al-Qaida was so limited and disjointed, the effect being that it was little in the way of a beacon for other movements even if the idea of an Islamist transformation was attractive in the various contexts.

In the past eighteen months the situation has been transformed by the rapid growth of Islamic State and its acquisition of territory across substantial parts of Iraq and Syria. Its potency in these two countries has provided a new vision to rather disjointed movements across the world since it has shown that an extreme Islamist Caliphate can actually be established. Al-Qaida has sought to achieve this over a number of years by the overthrow of regimes, whereas Islamic State has rapidly taken territory to establish an actual Caliphate and has then expanded from there without yet overthrowing existing regimes.

A further factor demonstrating its symbolic nature has been its survival against a sustained air war fought by the US-led coalition. US sources have recently claimed that some 15,000 Islamic State supporters have been killed in the many thousands of air strikes undertaken since August last year yet other US sources indicate that the core strength of the movement in Iraq and Syria has not been degraded. The implication is that it is readily making up these considerable losses by further recruitment. Furthermore, its partial retrenchment in some parts of Iraq is in contrast to expansion in Syria.

Islamic State as a Focus

The capacity of the movement to survive a substantial onslaught means that its power of recruitment, rooted in presenting itself as the protector of Islam, raises the vision of loosely related groups in other parts of the world and empowers them. If Islamic State can resist the might of the world’s only military superpower and its coalition partners, then the cause must be just.

Partly because of this, the movement is now the main focus of the al-Qaida idea, and this is reflected in allegiances developing with movements in other regions, often supplanting the previous connections with al-Qaida. The most significant of these are the Caucasus Emirate in southern Russia and the coastal belt of North Africa, especially Libya but also now including Egypt.

There are indications that up to two thousand Russian Muslims have joined Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and within the Caucasus region the main extreme Islamist paramilitaries are increasing pledging allegiance to the movement. The Putin government has used harsh measures to suppress Islamist movements but with 16 million Russians being Muslims, including several million in the greater Moscow region, the potential for growth

in the face of repression is considerable. Islamic State affiliates in Libya have benefitted greatly from the chaotic instability which has followed the NATO intervention to terminate the Gaddafi regime, and there is now support for Islamic State in Egypt, especially in Sinai.

In addition to North Africa and Russia, Islamic State support is to be found across the Sahel, especially northern Nigeria, and increasingly in eastern Africa, especially down what is sometimes referred to as the “Swahili Coast” from south Somalia to Kenya and Tanzania. Meanwhile, Islamic State has gained significant support in Afghanistan, a trend that may be aided by recent leadership disputes among the Taliban and other armed opposition groups following the acknowledgement of the death of the former Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, two years ago.

From the Margins

Where all this is gaining a new dimension is the manner in which other factors are aiding the increase in support for Islamist movements. In Tunisia, which is one of IS’s most potent recruiting grounds, the steady transition to democratic governance has not so far aided the process of responding to deep socioeconomic divisions. The problems are formidable, with a 30% graduate unemployment rate and the economy further damaged by IS attacks on the Bardo Museum and against foreign tourists in Sousse. The many thousands of educated but deeply frustrated young people with limited life chances are of great value to Islamic State as potential recruits.

Beyond Libya in Egypt, the Sisi government is intent on repressing Islamist dissent in any form, but this is resulting in a little-reported but deep-seated radicalisation of young people, especially men, many of whom see jihad as the appropriate response both to the repression and the lack of economic prospects. Indeed many who supported the protests against the Mubarak regime in the early months of the Arab Awakening are now turning to the Islamist model in the wake of the failure in the democratic transition.

Marginalisation may be a valuable element for Islamic State in a number of western countries but where it is a far greater aid is in sub-Saharan Africa, in spite of the increased rate of economic growth that has been achieved in recent years in a number of countries.

The problem is that the growth is singularly unbalanced with relatively small elite populations benefiting markedly. In many countries, the marginalised majority has disproportionately large Muslim populations frequently aggrieved and amenable to proselytization. The Economist listed Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda as countries facing jihadist groups and identified an endemic issue:

“from Mali and Nigeria to Kenya and Tanzania the story is the same: extremists emerge from and woo Muslim populations on the national periphery who are fed up with decades of neglect, discrimination and mistreatment by their rulers. Jihadists are able to exploit existing religious tensions and latch on to disgruntled Muslim communities.”

(*Economist*, “Jihafica”, 18 July, pp 46-7)

This demonstrates that extreme Islamist movements may have an added potential through utilising much more general grievances rather than being purely religious phenomena. Elsewhere, neo-Maoist movements such as the Naxalites in India, or broadly similar movements in Nepal, the Philippines or elsewhere may serve a similar purpose in providing a violent response to economic as well as political repression. This may be nothing new – just a new version of responses from the margins. Where it is significant is that this is in an era where the neoliberal economic transformation is signally failing to prevent greater socio-economic divisions and is even exacerbating them.

Conclusion

Oxford Research Group's analysis of the major challenges to international security – economic divisions and environmental constraints – has long argued that one result, unless the core problems are addressed, is an increased risk of revolts from marginalised peoples. It has been expressed as the prospect of an “age of insurgencies” rather than a “clash of civilisations”. While Islamic State is the current main vehicle for dissent and is rooted in an extreme variant of one of the world's major belief systems, if the underlying factors lie well beyond that immediate response then there is little prospect of countering such a movement unless these factors are addressed.

About the Author

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG) and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His **Monthly Briefings** are available from our website, where visitors can sign up to receive them via our newsletter each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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