

Understanding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

PART THREE: ISIL'S DURABILITY AND RESILIENCE

Now that we have discussed the factors that led to ISIL's rise and ISIL's core capacities, we will more directly consider the question of ISIL's durability and resilience. Will ISIL fall as quickly as it rose, or will it endure?

ISIL's sustainability and longevity will be based on its capacity to control the population within its claimed borders, and its ability to garner the support of the population beyond those borders.

Although there is strong consensus among the researchers involved in these studies regarding the factors leading to ISIL's rise and ISIL's core capacities, experts are split into three groups regarding the question of ISIL's future.

The first school of thought is that ISIL is a durable and resilient organization, and this resilience is due to its pragmatic leadership and organizational style, its successful intimidation tactics, its exploitation of existing Sunni grievances, and its use of a well-developed narrative and media outreach to motivate followers. In this view, ISIL is able to control the regional population through its capacity to govern and its capacity to threaten local populations into compliance, resulting in ISIL's appearance as the best or only option for local populations to support.

Its ability to gain support from the broader Umma derives from ISIL's messaging and narrative deftness, which positions ISIL as a social movement rather than an organization, and which positions ISIL's vision of the world as ideologically pure and superior. This narrative can foster in ISIL's followers a deep loyalty to ISIL's long-term objectives rather than loyalty to any one short-term quality or objective.

By contrast, the second school of thought among researchers is that ISIL is not a durable organization. In this view, ISIL's durability is limited because its current legitimacy and power relies on pre-existing sectarian conflict to acquire land, wealth, and power. These conflicts are deeper and broader than ISIL itself, and shape the loyalties of local populations. Rather than ISIL being a social movement or cause unto itself, it is only a means to an end, and its power can therefore be disrupted if groups involved in these pre-existing conflicts identify alternative means to this end.

ISIL's durability may also be limited because its appeal is limited to disaffected Sunni youth. ISIL might have strong messaging, but these messages are insufficient to motivate broader populations when combined with ISIL's alienating tactics of violence, intimidation, and exclusion. For populations beyond ISIL's narrow main demographic, ISIL is not an inherently appealing organization to support.

In addition, in this view, ISIL is not durable because it is unable to expand into territories controlled by functioning states and does not possess the expertise required to effectively govern. ISIL emerged from a region of failed states, and has succeeded only within the narrow context of displacing existing weak, dysfunctional forms of governance. It has limited capacity to expand into neighboring states with stronger government structures, and does not have leadership experienced with governing in successful states. The pragmatism that allowed ISIL's leadership to thrive in a dysfunctional environment is ill-suited to undertaking the responsibilities of managing a normal state.

The third and final school of thought among the researchers consulted for these studies is that the real challenge is not ISIL itself; rather, the challenge the U.S., our allies, and all who oppose ISIL must address is the sense of disempowerment, anger, and frustration in the Muslim world.

In this view, ISIL's durability isn't as important to consider as the durability of the underlying conditions that have produced a follower base for ISIL. Regardless of whether ISIL endures, these underlying problems will nevertheless continue to result in regional instability.

This sense of disempowerment in the Muslim world is evidenced by rising fundamentalism and declining nationalism, and is further fueled by perceptions of inequality, thwarted aspirations, and other contextual factors.

The perfect storm that led to ISIL's rise emerged from systemic problems in the region that will not be ameliorated by eliminating ISIL alone. The environmental, economic, geopolitical, and demographic factors that created a space for ISIL's

success are the same factors that must be addressed if enduring stability and prosperity is to take hold in this region of the world.

Although it is essential that those opposed to ISIL come to understand ISIL's capabilities and the motivations of its followers, solutions that only seek to undermine ISIL are insufficient to address the underlying causes of conflict.

Another way to approach the question of ISIL's durability is to consider the competition between the ISIL and its associated movement, and al-Qa'ida and its associated movement. Terrorism theory predicts that when terrorist groups compete with one another, violence will escalate as they attempt to outbid one another. Similarly, an analysis of terrorist organizational data over time using a group-level dataset maintained by Victor Asal and Karl Rethemeyer at SUNY Albany found that both competition between terrorist groups, and collaboration among terrorist groups are two of the most significant predictors of increasing group lethality over time. This would suggest that as al-Qa'ida and ISIL compete against one another for primacy in the global jihadist movement in an abstract sense, and on the ground in Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan Syria, the Sinai, Southeast Asia, the Caucasus and Libya for the next recruit and the next donor dollar, the frequency and lethality of their violent campaigns will increase. In fact we see increasing levels of violence in many of the places where al-Qa'ida and ISIL are competing if we compare 2013 attack data to 2014 data, suggesting a correlation exists.

In this competition, ISIL appears to be well-situated for five reasons.

First, ISIL is best situated to exacerbate and benefit from sectarian tensions. Where-as al-Qaida has sought to inspire individuals and groups to attack "far-enemy" targets like foreign businesses and embassies, ISIL intentionally attacks ethnic and religious communities that do not subordinate themselves to ISIL as a way to destabilize the government. An individual can 'sit-out' al-Qa'ida's war on the West, but there are no sidelines in ISIL's internecine violence. One is forced to pick a side, and that polarization helps ISIL recruit Sunnis and mobilize resources.

Two: Righteousness: While al-Qa'ida emphasizes the importance of doctrine in its rhetoric, ISIL has evidenced a fervent desire to enforce an uncompromising interpretation of Islamic law through its actions.

Three: Obligation: Al-Qa'ida relies on an abstract argument – that Islam is under attack everywhere – to convince Muslims that it is their individual duty to defend Islam everywhere, obfuscating offensive tactics with notions of defensive jihad. ISIL has established a physical Caliphate, and with it, the pragmatic obligation to defend the Caliphate and build its institutions.

Four: Strength: Al-Qa'ida is a cautious and nomadic terrorist organization that has shied away from equating terrain with success, trying instead to reorient extant militant groups from the periphery of their respective conflicts in a slow war of attrition with the West. ISIL, by comparison, appears decisive, confident, and contemporary as they opportunistically seize terrain, antagonize their enemies, and publicize their exploits.

Five: Urgency: ISIL sees the Caliphate as the means to the final apocalyptic battle between Muslims and the non-Muslim world. For those ideologically inclined individuals, it is essential to participate in ISIL's campaign now, before the opportunity passes. Without the Caliphate, al-Qa'ida's call to arms lacks the same urgency.

On the flip side – ISIL has promised an ever expanding utopian society – a promise they will certainly fail to deliver on, and a failure that governments should help to expedite. In light of this competition between ISIL and al-Qa'ida, however, it is equally important for ISIL's excesses not to fool us into seeing al-Qa'ida and its affiliates as somehow more legitimate or mainstream.

In this training, we have attempted to explore two key questions about ISIL by examining ISIL from three different angles.

Our questions were:

What makes ISIL magnetic to a specific but large portion of the Islamic population?

And: Is ISIL a durable organization?

We have found, based on our discussion of researchers' inquiries into ISIL's genesis, capacities, and potential durability, that any projection of ISIL's future course must take into account the deeper systemic factors that shape the lived experiences of the populations within ISIL's region of control.

This calls for approaches to ISIL that look beyond the immediate threat and instead seek to address the factors that have enabled ISIL's rise to power.

For further information on the topics and research methods described in Part 3, refer to the white papers listed here.



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