Why Does the "Islamic State" Endure and Expand?

By Omar Ashour[1]

Introduction

On 29 June 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) spokesman Taha Subhi Falaha (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani) announced the restoration of the "caliphate" under the leadership of Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri al-Samarra'iyy (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). Adnani declared the group would henceforth be known as the Islamic State (IS) and Baghdadi as Caliph Ibrahim. This announcement came just weeks after ISIS seized Iraq's second city of Mosul on 10 June 2014. ISIS was also expanding in Eastern and Central Syria and consolidating its hold over the areas surrounding the Northern City of Raqqa, the organization's capital. Currently, IS controls territory stretching from parts of Aleppo Governorate in Syria to parts of Salah al-Din Governorate in Iraq, over 400 miles away. This area includes major parts of the Anbar, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Diyala and Salah al-Din Provinces in Iraq and also major parts of al-Raqqa**,** al-Hasaka, Deir al-Zor, Aleppo, Homs, as well as rural Damascus Provinces in Syria. IS also controls parts of al-Hajjar al-Aswad district in the suburbs of Damascus and major parts of the Yarmuk Refugee Camp near Damascus. Overall, the organization has control over territory occupied by an estimated ten million people in Iraq and Syria, and has nominal control over areas elsewhere including parts of Central Libya (Sirte), North-Eastern Nigeria, Eastern Afghanistan (Nangarhar), Egypt (Northeast Sinai), and elsewhere.

The rise of IS as the most dominant, and resourceful jihadist organization is puzzling. Militarily, the organization's strength and power ratios pale beside its

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state-foes. IS is estimated to have somewhere between 20,000 and 31,000 fighters. Considering the Iraqi armed and security forces alone, this translates to at least an 8:1 power ratio. And this discounts the Iraqi forces allies, including Shiite militias, Sunni "Awakenings" tribal militias, Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and a plus 60-state coalition as well as over 44,000 airs-sorties striking its locations since September 2014 (Baldor 2015). On 10 June 2014 the Mosul garrison of 30,000 Iraqi Security Forces fell to an IS attacking force that was estimated to be between 800 to 1,500 IS fighters. The two Mosul-based Iraqi divisions outnumbered the attackers by at least 20-to-1. Compared to the Taliban regime, which fell in a two-month campaign by US-led strikes, the organization is much more resilient. Ideologically, the organization is not only at war with many Muslim-majority states and societies, but also is at war with many Islamist, and even Jihadist, organizations including al-Qaida. Indeed, it fundamentally challenges al-Qaeda's place as the recognized leader of transnational Jihadism. Geographically, many of the large areas that IS control are not rugged, but flat. The population under IS control have also rebelled more than once in both Syria and Iraq, suggesting that significant opposition exist.

This paper seeks to understand the sources of strength of IS and why it has not been defeated so far by much stronger international and regional powers, represented primarily by the US-led coalition and the Russian-Iranian axis supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The paper is divided into five sections. Given the nature of IS – a combination of an insurgency led by highly skilled and experienced individuals and a dedicatedly and organized proto-government structures with both conventional military and terrorism capacities – it will be useful to first review some of the comparative literature on why insurgencies win or survive stronger forces. The second and third parts are dedicated to review the strategy(ies) of the campaign against IS, as well as the military capacity of the organisation. The fourth part focuses on the IS current strategy against the West, especially in the aftermath of Paris attacks. The final part of the paper outlines concluding observations relevant to long-term counter-strategies against IS and like-minded organisations.

Why Weaker Insurgents Survive or Beat Stronger Incumbents?

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been a steady rise in the insurgents' capacities. Mack (1975), Arreguín-Toft (2001), Lyall and Wilson (2009), Connale and Libicki (2010), Jones and Johnston (2013), Schutte (2014), and other scholars have shown a significant rise in the victories of insurgents over stronger incumbents or in the inability of incumbents to defeat much weaker insurgents. This is a change in historical patterns. Lyall and Wilson (2009) showed that in 286 insurgencies between 1800 and 2005, the incumbents were only victories in 25% of them between 1976 and 2005. This is compared to 90% incumbent victories between 1826 and 1850. Connable and Libicki (2008) produced a similar finding while studying 89 insurgencies. In 28 cases (31%), the incumbent forces won and in 26 cases (29%), the insurgent forces won. The outcome was mixed in 19 cases (21%) (Connable and Libicki 2008, 5).[2]

The literature provides a wide range of explanations to why weaker insurgent beat or survive stronger state force. These explanations focus on geography, population, external support, military tactics and military strategy. Mao ([1938] 1967) highlighted the centrality of population loyalty for a successful insurgent by stating that an insurgent "must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea." The *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* concludes that insurgencies represent a "contest for the loyalty" of a mostly uncommitted general public that could side with either the status-quo or non-status-quo, and that success requires persuading this uncommitted public to side with the status-quo by "winning their hearts and minds" (Petraeus et al. 2007, 79-136). Thompson (1966), Mason and Krane (1989), Wood (2003), Kalyvas (2006), Kalyvas and Kocher (2007); Braithwaite and Johnson (2012), Condra and Shapiro (2012) show

[2] The armed conflict is still ongoing in the remaining 16 cases.

that the brutality of the incumbents against local population affects their loyalty, and therefore help the insurgents in terms recruitment, resources and legitimacy. General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, refers to this effect as the "insurgent math:" for every innocent local the incumbents' forces kill, they create ten new insurgents (Deyfuss 2013). Kilcullen (2009) earlier coined the term "accidental guerrilla," a reference to the consequences of indiscriminate repression leading elements of the local population to be drawn into fighting the incumbents, without being a priori enemies of them.

Geography-centric explanations were also proffered by the literature. Fearon and Laitin (2003) stressed that rough terrain is one of four critical variables supportive of an insurgency.[3] Mao ([1938] 1967, 7) argued that guerrilla warfare is most feasible when employed in large countries where the incumbents' forces tend to overstretch their lines of supply. Macaulay (1978) and Guevara (1961) explained how tiny numbers of armed revolutionaries in Cuba manipulated the topography to outmanoeuvre much stronger forces and gradually move from the easternmost province of the island towards the capital in the West. Galula (1964) was more deterministic when it came to geographical explanations. In his seminal work *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, he stresses that "the role of geography…may be overriding in a revolutionary war. If the insurgent, with his initial weakness, cannot get any help from geography, he may well be condemned to failure before he starts" (Galula 1964, 26). Boulding (1962) introduced the concept of the "Loss of Strength Gradient" (LSG) to geographical explanations. Briefly, it means that the further the fight is from the centre, and the deeper it is into the periphery, the more likely for the incumbents forces to lose strength. Schutte (2014) builds on and modifies the concept to argue that it is accuracy, not necessarily strength, which gets lost as a function of distance. He introduces the "Loss of Accuracy Gradient" (LAG): incumbents' long-range attacks are more indiscriminate and less accurate (in killing insurgents) than short-range ones. Hence, civilian alienation

[3] The other three variables are political instability, large population, and poverty.

becomes a function of distance, as a result of inaccuracy and indiscriminate killings (Schutte 2014, 8).[4]

Other scholars highlighted the importance of foreign support. In their study of 89 insurgencies, Connable and Libicki (2010) argued that insurgencies that "benefitted from state sponsorship statistically won a 2:1 ratio out of decided cases [victory is clear for one side]." Once foreign assistance stops the success ratio of the insurgent side fell to 1:4 (Connale and Libicki 2010, 8-9). This is relevant only to clear-cut victories, not to mixed cases or enduring insurgencies.

Finally, scholars explained insurgent victory based on either their military tactics and/or their military strategy. In terms of tactics, Lyall and Wilson (2009) argue that modern combat machinery have undermined the incumbents' ability to win over civilian population, form ties with the locals, and gather valuable human intelligence. Jones and Johnston (2012), Kilcullen (2014), and Sieg (2014) argue that insurgent access to new technologies in arms, communications, intelligence information, transportation, infrastructure, and organizational/administrative capacities has allowed them to enhance their military tactics to levels reserved historically for state-affiliated armed actors. This significantly offset the likelihood of being defeated by incumbents' forces. Strategically, Arreguín-Toft (2001) offers a complex model of strategic interactions between militarily weaker actors and their stronger opponents. His study concludes that weaker forces can overcome resource paucity by employing opposing strategies (direct versus indirect) against stronger ones. A guerrilla warfare strategy (an indirect strategy) is the most suitable to employ against direct attack strategies by stronger actors including "blitzkriegs" (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 100, 122).[5]

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[4] One of the most publicized LAG examples in Egypt is the killing of the Mexican tourists by the incumbent's Apache helicopters in September 2015. The killings of Egyptian civilians due to LAG are common Sinai, but much less publicized.

[5] According to Arreguín-Toft, strong actors won 76 percent of all same-approach strategic interactions, while weak actors won 63 percent of all opposite-approach interactions (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 111).

Several elements of these explanations well-apply to the case of IS in both Iraq, Syria and elsewhere at different stages and points in time, most notably the LSG, the LAG, military tactics, and strategy arguments. But the story of its endurance and expansion also deviates from the above review. Certainly the political environment in the Arab-majority Middle East has its own particularities. A combination of arms and religion/sect or arms and chauvinistic nationalism in most of the Arab-majority world has proved to be the most effective mean to gain and remain in political power. Votes, constitutions, good governance and socio-economic achievements are secondary means and, in many Arab-majority countries, relegated to cosmetic matters. IS can certainly endure and expand in a regional context where bullets keep proving that they are much more effective than ballots, where extreme forms of political violence are committed by state and non-state actors and then legitimated by religious institutions, and where the eradication of the "other" is perceived as a more legitimate political strategy than compromises and reconciliations. This is not to suggest, in any way, that the region is inherently violent. However, its dominant socio-political elites, with few exceptions, consistently choose to conduct politics via violent methods, ranging from systematically torturing individuals to genocidal policies.

On Counter-Strategy(ies): An Overview

Between late-2013 and mid-2015, IS expanded its control in Northern and Western Iraq and as well as in Eastern and Central Syria. The group has incorporated some of the Iraqi Sunni individuals and clans who hold significant grievances against the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. Those individuals include former members of Saddam Hussein's regime and alienated tribes, several armed Syrian opposition groups (from different ideological backgrounds) and thousands of foreign fighters from over 100 countries. IS has well capitalised on already existing sectarian divisions, intra-Sunni disputes, frustrations of Syrian revolutionary forces, repressive and corrupt ruling elites, and generally a violence-engendering political environment. The greatest military success of IS came in mid-2014, when the organisation further expanded in Iraq

and Syria partly overpowering both incumbent and insurgent forces in the two countries, while there were international fears that IS may expand into neighbouring states, especially Jordan (Ashour 2015c).

As a result, the United States and its allies have developed a strategy to confront IS. First, the US and the allies employed air strikes, which sought to degrade and contain IS but not necessarily destroy it (Cordesman 2014, 3-5). Building on that, a second element of the strategy was to arm and support local partners on the ground who would attack and, eventually, destroy IS (The White House 2014). This is based on the Obama administration's (as well as the UK government and other NATO allies) decisions that the United States must refrain from sending ground troops. Hence, the alternative is to build up the capacities of local partners (The White House 2014). In Iraq, the United States and the allies have armed, trained, funded and provided intelligence support and military advices to Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Kurdish *Peshmerga* as well as several Sunni tribal militias. The United States and the allies are also gradually ramping up their support for selected Syrian opposition groups, despite major setbacks that included attacks by *Jabhat al-Nusra* ((JAN) (The Support Front) and Russian airstrikes on American-supported Syrian revolutionary groups. The third pillar acknowledges that IS is a symptom, not a cause, of the broken politics in the region (The White House 2014; Lewis 2014, 4-5). Therefore any long-term solution must reform the political environment that has consistently engendered violent radicalisation for more than four decades. Certainly, defeating IS militarily would only temporarily mask the deep structural problems at the source of its emergence, just like the earlier defeat of the mother-organisation, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), in 2007-2008, has done. Given that widespread levels of repression and corruption and senses of frustration and alienation among Arab Sunnis, the emergence of a new expression of anger would be inevitable perhaps one worse than IS (who is currently more extreme than al-Qaida). The outcome of this strategy is not necessarily ideal. It is more likely to be containment of IS, not necessarily the destruction of it on the short term. Certainly, a failure of to significantly boost local partners and find political solutions in Iraq and Syria would *de facto* lock the United States and the

NATO allies into a long-term conflict and a containment strategy (Lewis 2014, 28; Juneau 2015, 38-39).

The critics of this strategy, and its ineffectiveness in defeating IS, are numerous however. Among the most well known is Sir David Richards, the former British Chief of Defence Staff, who led the coalition forces in Southern Afghanistan against the Taliban between 2006 and 2008. Before the rise of IS, in 2010, Sir Richards warned that the war on al-Qaida network will fail, and that the elimination of Islamist militancy is "unnecessary" and "will not be achieved." (Richards 2010; Rayment 2010).

"This is not a counterterrorism operation. This is a conventional war against an enemy that has armoured vehicles, tanks and artillery. It is rich, controls land, and intends to defend it. So we must consider this war as a conventional military campaign," said Sir Richards in an interview (Rayment 2010). Sir Richards and other experts insist that the strategy may fail to neutralize IS, and that IS must be engaged in ground warfare, with at least a hundred thousand troops. This line of argument is politically costly. But both military and counterinsurgency studies and historical precedents back it. For example, the period which saw the decline of ISI (one of five previous titles of IS) began in late 2007, after former U.S. President George W. Bush sent 32,000 additional troops to Iraq, bringing the total number of U.S. forces there by April of the same year to 150,000. This was known as the "surge." But this was not the only existing anti-ISI force at the time. The "Awakening Councils" – which began fighting after the rapid escalation between some of the Sunni tribes in Anbar and Diyala provinces and ISI/al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) since the end of 2005. By October 2008, the Councils had more than 54,000 fighters supporting the efforts of the US forces and the ISF. In other words, between 2007 and 2008, there were more than four hundred thousand soldiers and fighters (US forces, regular Iraqi and Sunni militias) seeking to eliminate the same enemy. This large force did not succeed in eliminating ISI, but only succeeded in weakening it and minimizing its activities and influence. The phrase that was used then to describe ISI status was "down, but not out."

Comparing the military capacities and the resources of ISI in 2006-2007, and those of IS in 2014-2015, one can understand the scepticism of the critics.

On IS Military Capacity

IS and its five predecessors[6] employed mainly three types of tactics and field operations. First, there were the common tactics of "urban terrorism." They include attacks in cities and towns via a combination of car bombs, suicide attacks, and targeted assassinations. The second type was classic guerrilla warfare. Small, mobile units employ hit-and-run tactics on security and military targets. They were usually lightly armed and consistent in avoiding a prolonged direct confrontation with the regular forces (Ashour 2015b, 22-23). The third was the conventional military force, where IS used heavy artillery, armoured vehicles and tanks as well as various types of guided and unguided missiles. The latter type of warfare was undermined by the airstrikes. But IS response to consistent Western airstrikes has been to disperse and conceal equipment and blend in with civilians when not directly on the attack (Quintana and Eyal 2015, 12-13). While on the offensive, IS fighters use tactical surprise and take full advantage of "the fluid, confusing battle space where both sides use the same mismatch of American- and Russian-made equipment, making discernment of friend from foe extremely challenging. This is exacerbated by the limited number of joint terminal attack controllers" (Quintana and Eyal 2015, 12-13).

IS draws its military skills from three categories within its members. The first category is the former members of regular armed forces, including Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, Georgian, and others. From Iraq, soldiers and officers include former Special Forces, Republican Guard, Military intelligence, Artillery, Armored, as well as Police officers. The second category is battle-hardened guerillas who fought earlier in local or foreign insurgencies such as in Afghanistan or formerly in Iraq.

[6] In addition to ISIS and ISI, the other predecessors were the *Mujahidin* Consultative Council (2006), al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers commonly known as AQI (2004-2006) and *al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* or Monotheism and Holy Struggle (2003-2004).

The third category is the persistent local insurgents, who accumulated significant experience of both combating the incumbents' forces and building logistical support networks over the last decade.

Beside the locals, foreign fighters can belong to any of the aforementioned categories, and therefore bolster the military capacity and the overall morale of IS fighters. In April 2015, the United Nations estimated that at least 22,000 foreign fighters (FFs) from 100 countries had joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq, including an estimated 3,000 Tunisians, 2,500 Saudis, 1,500 Jordanians, 1,550 Frenchmen, 700 British, and 700 Germans. Unnamed intelligence officials suggested in April 2015 that the number of British fighters was likely much higher, as many as 1,600 (Kerbaj 2015, 4). The more distant United States has seen only an estimated 200 citizens travelling – amounting to 0.6 per million; a much lower ratio compared to smaller European countries such Belgium (40 per million) and Denmark (27 per million) (RFE/RL 2014).[7] For IS, the type of soldier that a foreign fighter represent is much needed: ideologically committed and willing to die for their cause. Hundreds of the foreign fighters turned to be suicide bombers. Generally, this type of fighter supplements and not necessarily contradicts locally rooted insurgents, due to ideological symmetry.

On IS Strategy Towards the West

Before 2015, the strategy of IS was primarily geo-centric. It aimed initially to capture geographical territory, then to cleanse and control it, and then to state-build within it according to its ideology. After doing so (and in some cases while doing so), IS expands into close by territory via attacking their nearby enemies. This pattern started to gradually change from the summer of 2014, especially after the airstrikes began in June and August 2014 (first by the Iranians and then followed by the Americans).

[7] The United Nations Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee gives similar estimates. See also: http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/resources/index.html#ftf_documents

Based on open sources, IS affiliates and sympathizers has allegedly conducted no less than 25 plots/attacks against Western citizens and interests since October 2014.[8] This is compared to only two alleged plots and one attack before that date (Whitehead 2015; Cruickshank 2014). The attack was on a Jewish Museum in Brussels and it was planned and executed by a militant who allegedly trained in IS camps. But the IS connection in these attacks/plots were just a declared support for the organisation, as opposed to an order form an IS high-level commander.

This has significantly changed after the airstrikes, starting October 2014. And not only for IS, but also for JAN. "The directive that came to us so far is not to target the West and America from *al-Sham* [Syria and other parts of the Levant]. And we are committed to the directive of Dr. Ayman [al-Zawahiri] may God protect him. But if this situation [airstrikes] continues, I think that there will be consequences which are not in the favour of America or the West," said Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the Emir of JAN in May 2015 in an Al-Jazeera Interview (Al-Jolani 2015). Al-Jolani also said that al-Qaida may attack from elsewhere, but not form *al-Sham*, as a result of the order from al-Zawahiri. Assuming that his statement is genuine, the words seem to contradict the modified strategy of IS towards the West, highlighted in November 2015 by the deadly terrorist attacks in Paris.

In the last two issues of IS multilingual magazine,[9] *Dabiq*, the narrative escalated and focused on inciting terrorism inside the West. This differed from earlier issues, where the focus was on legitimating IS rule, de-legitimating state and non-state actors at war with IS (including al-Qaida and the Taliban), and calling on Muslims to migrate to IS-controlled territory. The only *Dabiq* issue that equally incited attacks within the West was the fourth: "The Failed Crusade." This was published in October 2014 in the aftermath of the Coalition airstrikes and it included the following directive: "at this point of the crusade against the Islamic State, it is very important that attacks take place in every country that has entered into the alliance against the Islamic State, especially the United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Germany" (*Dabiq* October 2014, 44). In the

[8] Author's preliminary dataset on IS-related attacks and plots in the West.
[9] Issues no. 11 (August 2015) and no. 12 (November 2015).

ninth issue of *Dabiq,* IS made this directive a secondary choice by stating: "either one performs *hijrah* to the *wilayat* [provinces] of the *Khilafah* [Caliphate] or, if he is unable to do so, he must attack the crusaders" (*Dabiq* May 2015, 54). Overall, calls to attack the West represented a tiny proportion of the contents of *Dabiq* when compared, for example, to *Inspire* magazine issued by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

If IS prioritized terrorist attacks within the West after the Coalition airstrikes, then what does IS aim to achieve from these attacks? After all, such tactics failed miserably in the case of al-Qaida. After attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, the organization lost its bases in Afghanistan by end of the same year as a result of the American-led counteroffensive. The Taliban, al-Qaida's main host and ally, also lost control of Afghanistan by the end of 2001. Additionally, most of al-Qaida's commanders were killed or captured, including Osama bin Laden. However, some of al-Qaida's affiliates and Jihadist figures have different calculation. They argue that by bringing the United States and its allies to Afghanistan and Iraq, they succeeded in bringing their "far enemy" nearby and, therefore, were able to cause more damage due to attacking from closer distance. IS leadership could be aiming for either a similar scenario or for "deterring" the West from attacking the territories it controls. This does not mean that the terror strategy in the West will be successful this time. But it does mean that threat level is higher. IS resources and capacities are much more significant compared to those of al-Qaida.

On Strategy and Environment: Concluding Observations

The counterstrategy employed by the American-led coalition had some positive impacts. Airstrikes and air presence over Iraq and Syria have compelled IS to limit the usage of conventional military tactics, as it used to do before in mid-2014 when it invaded swaths of territory by moving convoys of tens or hundreds of vehicles. Airstrikes also provided limited space and some time for capacity-building efforts and, perhaps optimistically, for political solutions to be found. But

this element of the strategy did not prevent advances and victories made by the group in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. This is partly due to the lack of well-trained, equipped and committed military partners on the ground. The efforts to build a Western-backed armed opposition in Syria have not been promising and currently undermined by the Russian military intervention. In Iraq, the military performance of the ISF forces and loyalist militias (many backed by Iran) has been far from ideal militarily. Politically, the actions of the some of these militias is Sunni-majority areas has exacerbated the sectarian dimension of the conflict.

Related to the political dimension, it is critical to realize that IS is a symptom, not a cause, of the deeply dysfunctional politics in the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. Hence, the military defeat of IS would not be enough. A sustained political reform and reconciliation process will be necessary eventually. This strategic prospect is not missed by some of the Western politicians and military commanders. "We do not understand the movement [Islamic State], and until we do, we are not going to defeat it," said Maj. Gen. Michael Nagata, the commander of U.S. Special Operations forces in the Middle East.

More generally, regarding the political environment, the Arab-majority uprisings have given scholars and practitioners several important lessons about how changes within the political environment can affect the rise and/or the transformation of armed radical groups. Violent extremist rationale, that political violence is the only significant method for socio-political change, was briefly undermined by successful civil resistance campaigns that brought down two dictatorships in Tunisia (2010/2011) and Egypt (2011) and initiated democratic transition processes. But the brutal tactics of the Qaddafi and the Assad regimes in dealing with protestors have shown the limits of civil resistance. These limits were also highlighted in Iraq (April 2013 crackdowns by al-Maliki government on Sunni-majority sit-ins) and in Egypt (during and in the aftermath of the July 2013 military coup).

In the context of partly democratic institutionalized transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Iraq and Yemen (especially between 2011 and 2013), a few critical policy-relevant observations can be deduced regarding the political environment and the long-term strategic vision. First, former violent extremist organisations that transformed to non-violent political activism have notably stuck within their transformation. Groups such as the Egyptian Islamic Group (IG) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), and factions and individuals from the Egyptian al-Jihad organization established political parties, competed in elections, participated in constitutional assemblies, and made significant political comprises to bolster transitions away from authoritarianisms. For example, in 2011, the IG became a mainstream political party in Egypt that organised anti-sectarian violence rallies and issued joint statements for peaceful coexistence with the Coptic Church of Assyut (a southern city and an IG stronghold). In Iraq, American officers and employees of Task Force 134 – the unit commanding all detention operations in Iraq, including Camp Bucca the former home of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – have witnessed similar transformations. A rehabilitation program with a "de-radicalization" component was introduced by the United States in Iraqi prisons in 2007. It had some initial positive effects and by 2008 about 10,000 prisoners were freed while the country was in a process of de-escalation and political transformation. But by 2010 most of the effects dissipated, largely due to the deterioration of the mainstream political process as a result of increased sectarianisation.

Another policy-relevant observation has to do with security sector reform (SSR). From previous research, de-radicalisation and transition from violent to non-violent activism is less likely to be sustained unless there is a thorough process of reforming the security sector (Ashour 2009; 2012). The reform process should entail changing the SOPs, training and education curricula, leadership and promotion criteria, as well as oversight and accountability by elected and judicial institutions. The violations of the security sector, and the lack of accountability to address such violations, have been a major contributor to sparking and sustaining violent extremism. This goes way back; since Sayyid Qutb significantly altered his

ideology after witnessing a massacre in former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's prisons in 1957 (Ashour 2009). Jihadism and Takfirism, in their purist forms, were both born in Egyptian political prisons in the 1960s where torture was an endorsed systematic practice by multiple and overlapping security establishment; not that different from today's Egypt. Ultraconservative and extremist ideologies such as Salafism and Wahabbism were also born and developed under authoritarian systems. None of the aforementioned ideologies have come out of a consolidated or a mature democracy.

Related to SSR are the unbalanced civil-military relations in most of the Arab-majority countries (Ashour 2015; Sayigh 2013; Chitani, Ashour and Intini 2013). The supremacy of the armed institutions over all other state institutions has engendered a political environment in which state repression became the most important method for attaining and remaining in political power. Such a context in which state-sanctioned violence is legitimated in various forms (including official religious institutions and hyper-nationalist propaganda) is less likely to lead to de-radicalisation or sustained stability.

Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) are also critical processes matter can engender or undermine political environments supportive of violent extremism. The politicization of these processes and their failures in Libya and Yemen in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution and Yemeni uprising have led to the rise of multiple armed non-state actors. This resulted in facilitating necessary resources and logistics to organisations such as IS as well as al-Qaida affiliated groups. DDR is directly related to SSR. Most armed non-state actors in post-conflict environments will refuse to disband and demobilize if there is no mutual trust or weak institutional arrangements to balance the relations with the official security and military sectors. This is especially the case when these official sectors have been traditionally above oversight, accountability and law. This is among the reasons for the failure of de-escalation in towns and regions including Derna in Eastern Libya to Sinai in North-Eastern Egypt, Central and Northern parts of Iraq, and Southern and South-Eastern and Northern parts of Yemen, where

armed actors representing the authorities are deeply mistrusted due to historical violations and impunities. SSR and DDR failure can undermine any future political solution in Syria and hence on the long-term empower various non-state actors.

A final observation is also critical: popular support for national reconciliation, compromises, inclusion and general de-escalation. This support is crucial for undermining violent extremism and the environments that engenders and sustain it. Popular support for these processes is partly a result of a political culture that "can be created and promoted via elementary, secondary and higher education, as well as a result of a responsible free media that promotes such concepts, as opposed to a hysteric media that promotes social and sectarian polarization, which is currently the case in many of the Arab-majority states" (Ashour 2015d).

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