



# Can ISIL be copied?

by Florence Gaub

While al-Qaeda made a frightening return with its attack in Paris last week, 2014 was very much marked by a different, yet equally menacing form of terror: the rapid ascent of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant organisation, known as ISIL or ISIS (Daesh in Arabic). Now running a proto-state, ISIL has been elevated from a mere terrorist group to something far more ambitious. Whereas al-Qaeda and its outlets conduct terrorist attacks as trained commandos with pre-identified, high-profile targets, ISIL encourages suicide bombings and 'lone wolf' actions, as also the two Paris attacks (however coordinated) showed. Yet ISIL's aspirations to forge a state based on extremist interpretations of Islam run even higher. A key question therefore is not only whether ISIL can be contained but can other groups replicate its achievements?

## The ingredients of its success

For other Jihadi groups to evolve along the lines of ISIL, the following five elements are needed – to varying degrees:

### *People*

ISIL was able to exploit the political alienation of the Sunni community of Iraq, and therefore tap

into a particularly large pool of potential recruits. Without these active participants and the tacit acceptance of the local population of their regime, ISIL would have lacked the necessary manpower to run its operations. Conditions for recruitment in the territory under ISIL control are ideal: in addition to a large degree of political dissatisfaction, Iraq has one of the youngest populations in the world (with almost 50% under the age of 19) and the country suffers from particularly high levels of youth unemployment.

### *Money*

Before ISIL gained access to oil reserves in 2014, it ran a successful funding operation based on a combination of extortion (generating \$12 million per month), ransoms (thought still to make up 20% of ISIL's income), bank robberies and the sale of stolen antiquities. By late 2006, it was raising some \$70-200 million per year. What pushed it to the next level was the explosion of illicit oil sales, 70,000 barrels a day at \$26-35 per barrel of heavy oil (about 50% below the market price) and \$60 per barrel of light crude oil to black market customers in Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. These activities generate a daily income of \$1-3 million, or up to \$1.1 billion annually. In addition, ISIL took over banks in cities under its control such as



Mosul and Tikrit, seizing an estimated total of \$1.5 billion.

### *Security vacuum*

ISIL conquered territories in part because they were either abandoned by the governments of Syria and Iraq or because the remaining security forces were understaffed, undertrained and underequipped. In the case of Iraq, former Prime Minister Maliki had deliberately weakened the armed forces out of fear that they might stage a coup. ISIL was then able to quickly destabilise this already hollow force through targeted operations.

### *Military capacity*

ISIL's impressive military capacity is the result of it seizing brand new material from the Iraqi armed forces and purchasing equipment on the black market – while allowing military decisions to be taken by former officers in its ranks.

### *Governance capacity*

ISIL seeks to emulate the functions of a small state: the people under its control are not only governed by Sharia law but, crucially, provided with social services ranging from policing to education and humanitarian aid. It also manages waste disposal, infrastructure and electricity supply, has reduced red tape for start-ups, and cut duties on goods crossing the Iraqi-Syrian border to 10% of the cargo's value.

## Can others do the same?

The first of these elements is about *human resources*, i.e. the amount of troops in relation to the population to be controlled. In contrast to terrorist attacks which can be carried out by small groups or individuals, the maintenance of control is highly manpower intensive – even more so if the population is hostile to the regime. The number of personnel necessary to pacify a country depends on the size of the population, and on its overall security situation. Broadly speaking, peaceful populations can be policed with 100 to 400 troops per 100,000 residents, but societies prone to (or emerging from) conflict or resentful of the governing regime will require a higher amount.

In cases of outright occupation, by contrast, 1,000-2,000 troops per 100,000 inhabitants are needed if the forces deployed are to properly secure the ground. Successful examples of such an endeavour – such as the Allied occupation of Germany after

the Second World War, or missions in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina or East Timor – all had 1,000-2,000 troops or more per 100,000 inhabitants for at least five years. Missions that experienced high levels of counter-insurgency such as Somalia, Iraq or Afghanistan, initially stood at 460, 500 and 610 troops per 100,000 residents, respectively. ISIL currently controls 8 million people with 40,000 troops, a ratio of 500 troops per 100,000 inhabitants. It is therefore likely to face some form of counter-insurgency in the future unless it manages to attract more recruits.

Jihadi groups vary in their ability to control populations: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) could secure an area with up to 400,000 people, Boko Haram up to 800,000, al-Shabab up to 500,000, and Ansar al-Sharia in both Tunisia and Libya up to 100,000 each. These numbers could increase if these groups manage to expand – to achieve this, however, they would need to draw on a large pool of people (mostly male) under the age of 30, who are devoid of other opportunities and sufficiently disillusioned to be attracted to such networks.

In purely numerical terms, such pools do exist in all the countries concerned: Algeria, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Tunisia, Libya all have demographic and unemployment rates which would theoretically allow for large-scale recruitment campaigns. A closer look, however, reveals that the youth bulge is significantly less pronounced in these countries than it was (and is) in Iraq or Syria. The youth rate is projected to decline in Algeria and Tunisia over the next two decades, while it is expected to increase only moderately in Libya. In Somalia, youth levels are comparable to Iraq, with 70% of the population under 30, while they stand at over 53% in Nigeria and at 48% in Mali.

In addition to the mere availability of recruits, a high degree of political disenchantment is required (fuelled, for example, by discrimination along ethnic lines or dissatisfaction with government policies), as is an enabling or permissive social context. Although more difficult to assess than the numerical dimension, levels of popular frustration are not as prevalent in the other countries listed as in the Iraqi Sunni community, from which ISIL largely drew its troops. It is therefore fair to assume that, currently, no other organisation has a comparable pool of potential recruits like ISIL.

The operational outreach of jihadi groups is to a large extent determined by their *financial resources*. Depending on their size, strategic objectives and local context, jihadi networks require funds to pay



salaries (to fighters as well as their families) and purchase equipment (such as weapons, vehicles etc.). AQIM, for instance, is believed to spend roughly \$2 million each month on operating costs.

These groups use similar methods of financing; just like ISIL, AQIM relied heavily on ransoms and is believed to have made between \$60 and \$90 million over the last decade. It also charges drug traffickers which operate in areas under its control. Al-Shabab, one of the less wealthy jihadi groups, survives on donations from other networks such as al-Qaeda or private and state donors, piracy, kidnapping, extortion, smuggling and the trade in ivory, sugar and charcoal. Boko Haram operates along similar lines: financial transfers from AQIM are only a fraction of its budget, which is mostly funded by kidnappings and ransoms (\$1 million for wealthy Nigerians and several times this amount for Westerners). Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia is believed to receive funds from al-Qaeda and its namesake in Libya, which in turn is funded through weapons smuggling, government hand-outs, kidnappings and other criminal activities. Currently, AQIM, al-Shabab and Boko Haram are all in a financial situation akin to ISIL back in 2006. The question, therefore, is whether there is the potential for any of these groups to increase their income substantially.

For the time being, the trafficking of drugs and diamonds seems to have plateaued for those groups engaged in such activities. The smuggling of oil is a possibility only for Ansar al-Sharia in Libya and AQIM in Algeria. Although Nigeria also possesses significant oil reserves, Boko Haram's centre of gravity is too distant from the southern oil-producing delta area, whereas Somalia has only just discovered offshore oil fields and Tunisia's oil reserves are very modest. However, the illegal exporting of oil is already taking place in Libya, sometimes on a dramatic scale. In Algeria, where fuel is cheap thanks to government subsidies, a quarter of all fuel is said to be smuggled to neighbouring countries, particularly Morocco.

Libya is the more worrying of the two cases, as the state lacks the capacity to deter or suppress such activities. Should Ansar al-Sharia manage to expand its control to areas where Libyan oil reserves are located (incidentally, not too far from

its current area of operation), it could boost its capacity both to recruit troops and purchase weapons. In contrast to ISIL, however, Ansar al-Sharia Libya will have difficulties in finding a market large enough for its produce. While ISIL sells its oil mainly in Iraq and Syria, and to some extent Iran and Turkey, Ansar al-Sharia would face stiffer resistance from neighbouring states. Nevertheless, Libya remains the place where access to hydrocarbon resources is currently easiest for jihadi networks.

Terrorist groups thrive not only because they possess sufficient manpower and capital, but also because they operate in a *security vacuum* and, more generally, where governance is weak. Al-Shabab, Boko Haram, and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya are all active in environments where the central government has either virtually imploded or is weak due to corruption, a lack of funding or political paralysis.

The only two states currently in a position to address the challenges posed by jihadi networks are Algeria and Tunisia, although both face their own constraints. The AQIM-affiliated attack on an Algerian oil facility in early 2013 displayed the limits of Algiers' approach to counterterrorism, and was facilitated by the chaos in neighbouring Libya, where the attackers trained and equipped themselves.

Since then, Algeria has almost doubled its defence budget, sought international assistance to combat AQIM, and reshuffled its security structures. Tunisia has virtually no experience with combating terrorism and has thus sought assistance from other states, primarily the UK and the US. It is Libya and Somalia, however, which remain true safe havens for all types of criminal networks. Both of these countries are likely to witness a rise in extremism because jihadi groups can operate there unimpeded.

The extent of a terrorist group's *military capacity* is not in itself a criterion of success. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and automatic weapons are comparatively cheap and easy to procure. Boko Haram, for instance, is mainly armed with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, and crude bomb-making materials. But a group with territorial ambitions will need heavier weaponry to be able to carry out security functions. Not only

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are such heavy weapons generally more difficult to obtain on the black market, but they are also rather costly.

The main way jihadi groups get hold of these weapons is by stealing them from the regular armed forces – like ISIL did in Iraq or Boko Haram in Nigeria. In Somalia, weapons procured by the state have simply been sold to al-Shabab. But the main trouble zone – yet again – is Libya, where various groups possess large quantities of arms as a result of three major developments: the fall of Qaddafi in 2011 made large amounts of the regime's arsenal available to militias; large-scale weapons deliveries took place during the conflict (in spite of a UN arms embargo) worth several hundred million dollars; and equipment was stolen from the official security forces (as well as from foreign ones, such as the US). Today, the country is flooded with weapons, including surface-to-air missiles, armoured vehicles and rocket-propelled grenades, most of which are in civilian hands.

Libya has now turned into a vibrant black market for arms for all kinds of illicit groups in Africa. AQIM and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, which have not been able to steal weapons from the Algerian or Tunisian security forces, have benefited from Libya's lethal combination of a weapons surplus and the absence of civilian authority. The 2013 attack on an Algerian gas installation in Ein Amenas was said to be carried out with weapons from Libya's east, and the Air Algeria plane which crashed over Mali in summer 2014 was rumoured to have been downed by Libyan missiles sold to AQIM. The amount of weaponry available in Libya is impossible to estimate – but what is certain is that the country remains a dangerous supplier of arms for terrorist networks, and continues to bolster those groups with territorial ambitions.

But in order to replicate ISIL's success, more is required than just the strict application of Sharia law and the display of considerable military might. While Jihadi networks have managed to conquer sizeable chunks of territory in the past, credible and accepted *governance* is required in order to hold them. ISIL was not the first to attempt and partly achieve this – al-Shabab had also established regional and municipal administration in accordance with Islamic principles in Somalia. Although it has since lost control over some of its territories, its adherents have gained significant governmental experience over the past decade. AQIM and its allies – although in control of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal for only a few months in 2012 and 2013 – have had the opportunity to

test their administrative abilities as well. Similarly, Boko Haram has recently taken control of several towns in northeastern Nigeria and applied its interpretation of Islamic law. Ansar al-Sharia in Libya is only operating in very small pockets and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia has no such experience at this stage.

Should jihadi networks be able to learn from ISIL's experience, they could indeed strengthen their overall governance capacity. ISIL must yet overcome many challenges: its so-called Islamic State has no common currency, faces issues with job creation and infrastructure management, and has not succeeded in dismantling the borders it declared itself to be null and void.

### Not there but close

At this moment in time no other group fulfils all five of the aforementioned conditions, but several are coming close. Ansar al-Sharia in Libya and al-Shabab, in particular, are likely to morph into bigger and more dangerous terrorist entities replicating ISIL's ambitions of running a proto-state.

Disrupting the capacity of any of these groups to achieve a similar status as ISIL will entail the targeted cutting-off of finances and the build-up of security forces in Nigeria, Tunisia, Algeria and Mali.

Most importantly, the Libyan situation needs to be tackled urgently, as it is here where large amounts of oil and weapons and a tangible security vacuum form a toxic combination which might have serious spillover effects. Time is of the essence: should jihadi groups manage to export Libyan oil in large quantities, the military response to counter them will have to be ratcheted up accordingly. Denying these groups access to lucrative oil fields is therefore an immediate imperative.

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