

HOW THE ISLAMIC STATE SEES THE FUTURE

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Why the end of times does not mean the end

by

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INTRODUCTION

One would not exactly think of the Islamic State (IS) as a future-oriented organisation: it uses medieval-sounding language and barbaric methods and preaches an archaic lifestyle. In reality, however, it is very much a forward-looking organisation with clear ideas not just on what the future will bring, but on what it *should* bring. In fact, it is this attitude towards the future that has not only enabled its past successes, but also allowed the organisation to persist and endure since losing its territory in Syria and Iraq – and, most importantly, what will determine its next steps and ambition. Understanding how IS conceives its own future will enable law enforcement authorities to take the necessary precautions ahead of time.

This Brief first outlines why it is crucial to understand how the future as an organising principle shapes the strategy and posture of terrorist organisations, and shows that terrorist organisations lacking such a concept will lose traction faster than those that do. It goes on to examine IS's future concept pre- and post-loss of its territory and to elaborate why it was and is an attractive future. Lastly, it seeks to anticipate the future

Summary

- › Although the Islamic State has lost its territory, it still exerts strong appeal for its supporters in Europe and the Middle East.
- › This is because the organisation is skilled at telling the story of its own future regardless of external events.
- › This vision of the future is not invalidated by the loss of its territory, and its supporters will continue to recruit, raise funds, wage attacks – particularly during Ramadan – and take advantage of the disruption and distress caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- › For European law enforcement, this means taking a longer-term approach to fighting the organisation.

trajectory IS will take based on its articulation of an eschatological vision of the future.

OF THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE FUTURE

At first, the future appears to be just another dimension of time, whatever happens next. In reality, the future is a collective and organised principle. It is what humans collectively *imagine* could happen next. This distinction is important in order to understand what the future signifies for terrorist organisations: not a prediction of what *will* happen, but a possibility of what *might* happen – if the organisation acts accordingly. This means that the purpose of a formulated future is always to determine the action, ambition and strategy of a terrorist organisation.

‘Futures’ in this context are not just targets or objectives but comprehensive stories or scripts, 360-degree visions of the world as a whole once the organisation’s goal has been accomplished. For terrorist organisations, ‘futures’ are useful for several reasons: they serve as a basis for strategy, they streamline choices and actions, and most importantly they mobilise support and inspire innovative problem solving. This is because future scripts, in contrast to mere goals, generate emotion – and emotion is necessary to mobilise extensive, substantial and long-term support among a large group of (often geographically dispersed) individuals. The strategic power of future scripts is therefore infinitely stronger than that of goals or objectives: they tell the full story of success. Because of this, they also tell the story of the steps the organisation intends to take both strategically and tactically.

Of course, scripts of the future are useful not just for terrorist organisations, but for any entity in need of their strategic power. Whether political parties, cults or activist groups, all need stories that have the capacity to orientate and mobilise support beyond what is the norm. This is particularly the case when they are on the defensive, which terrorist organisations are by definition.

After all, the very choice of terrorism as a tactic is an expression of the asymmetry that exists between terrorist organisations and the states they seek to challenge, be it in terms of membership, finances or military equipment. This position of weakness explains why terrorist entities are not very successful: a mere

10 % achieve their overall objective (most terrorists are either killed by police or military, or end up renouncing terrorism and participating in a political process) ⁽⁴⁾.

Future scripts help with this asymmetry because they explain away the obvious gap between the poor capabilities and the usually grandiose goals that terrorist organisations have.

Of course, the future story a terrorist organisation tells is not static; it evolves with the context, the pressures it is under and the organisation’s needs. A future story also has more than one time horizon, a near future and a far future (and several futures in between), and it can be articulated in different ways depending on the audience. Futures of a terrorist organisation can be bombastic and detailed (painting a very elaborate picture of the world as it will evolve), but they can also be modest, for instance promising survival at a time of duress. Whether future scripts are minimal or maximal, absurd, rational or even magical, the effect will always be the same, which is to act as the strategic glue that holds an entity together that may otherwise have a very low chance of success.

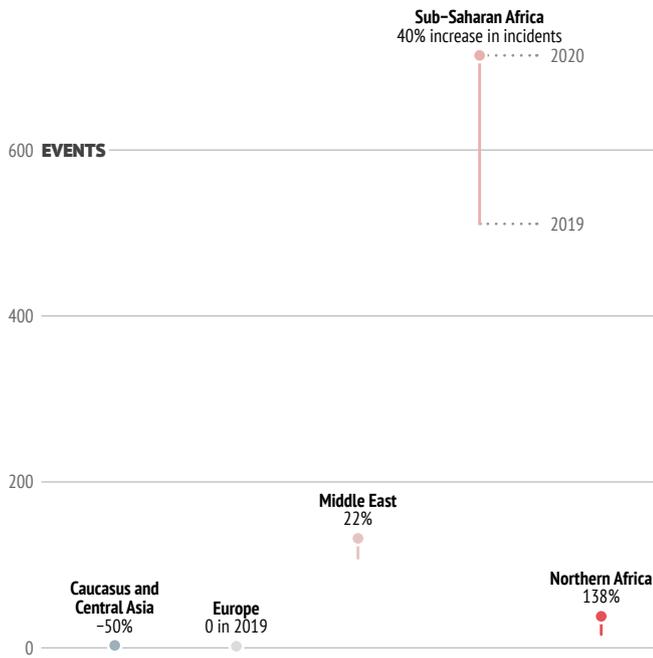
Four ingredients are required for a future script to work accordingly in this context:

- › the final goal has to be formulated clearly and unambiguously;
- › the state of the world once this goal has been accomplished has to be spelled out in detail;
- › intermittent steps need to be conveyed, acting as signposts on the path to the desired future, and have to be included in this description;
- › future scripts have to delineate the roles of heroes and villains or supporters and antagonists in the scenario – this helps supporters consider themselves part of the story.

The power of a future script can be increased by making these elements very elaborate. Another way to enhance their effect is to specify a deadline, a precise moment in time when this future will come about. This is not without risk: once the deadline has passed without the future having materialised, this could invalidate the story’s power (although studies show that this does not happen immediately and sometimes even leads to more support – more on this below).

On the rise

Increase in the number of violent events in which IS was involved, 2020 vs 2019



Data: The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 2021

TERRORIST FUTURES

While this process seems straightforward in theory, not all terrorist future scripts are equally comprehensive or effective. For instance, Sayyid Qutb, one of the founding fathers of Islamic revivalism, developed a future script that was strong on the first three elements. He articulated the goal (in his view, a society based on what he conceived to be the purest form of Islam) and what exactly the world would look like once this has been achieved. He himself called it ‘our *concept of the future*, whose coming we do not doubt!’ His description of the world beyond this goal stated that ‘it bestows on them blessings beyond imagination ...’ and promises ‘total harmony between human life and the law of the universe ... Only in this state will they be at peace with themselves and at peace with the universe ... cooperation among individuals follows automatically’⁽²⁾. He also assigned clear roles for his supporters. The ‘Islamic vanguard’, as he called it, was going to be responsible for bringing about this future. He added detailed instructions on what they should do – cut themselves off from non-Muslim friends and family and turn to the Koran for guidance, as well as proselytise and remove political leadership by force. He also warned of frustration and sacrifice along the way. However, although Qutb named his book *Milestones*, his future script included no specific signposts other than that the group of supporters would grow over time. While his future was (and still is) a compelling one for many, the absence of these signposts has also

meant that subsequent futures had to clarify what the different steps along the way would be.

An interesting counter-example is al-Qaeda’s future, which remains a rather poorly developed one. This is in part because al-Qaeda mostly subscribed to Qutb’s future, but it is also because its own leadership was convinced that this future was so distant that it would not live to see it⁽³⁾. Instead, al-Qaeda focused on the element Qutb had fleshed out the least: the signposts or steps to be taken to achieve this future. In its reasoning, regional leaders bolstered by American support were the most significant obstacle. Attacking American forces would therefore lead to a domino effect that would free the way to the end state. ‘The Saudis will be forced to defend them, which means they will lose their legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslims. This will lead the religious establishment to defend the Americans, which in turn will make them lose their legitimacy’⁽⁴⁾. This constituted the only signpost al-Qaeda had formulated, but served as the basis for its entire strategy. As a result, its rhetoric was to a much lesser extent dedicated to the far future it was seeking to achieve – a state based on Islamic principles – than to the near future, which saw the achievement of the most important signpost along the way, the withdrawal of American troops from Muslim soil.

This near future fulfilled its purpose insofar as it gave al-Qaeda supporters clear guidance on the steps to be taken. However, it fell short of bringing to life the very reason for which this struggle was being waged. Al-Qaeda became vulnerable to competitors who had a more powerful story to tell about the far future – IS.

MORE THAN WORDS: THE FUTURE ACCORDING TO THE ISLAMIC STATE

When IS began losing its territory in Iraq and Syria from 2017 onwards, analysts were quick to proclaim its demise – in other words, it did not have a future. However, ‘future’ here is an assessment of probability rather than a story IS tells itself about the future. In fact, IS and its supporters continue to formulate and share future scripts.

The reason for this is that IS’s future was never accomplished when the caliphate was proclaimed; instead, the proto-state was not the future itself, but only a signpost on the way to the end state. For IS, and in contrast to most other Salafi–Jihadist entities, the end state is not the establishment of an Islamic State but Judgment Day. Also known as Armageddon or Domsday, this is the day in Islam and Christianity

when God will resurrect all sentient beings, judge them and consign them to either paradise or hell. Although often seen as the end of the world, Judgment Day actually constitutes a new beginning.

Judgment Day is an interesting future script because it is not one that occurs through direct action – God decides when it will occur, and speculating about the exact date is forbidden in both Islam and Christianity (not that this has stopped such speculation from taking place) ⁽⁹⁾. This means that rather than serve as direct guidance for action, this future gives IS actions a meaning much larger and more powerful than any other narrative. IS is not an actor here, but rather a signpost on the way to the end state. This future has all four ingredients previously identified for a successful future script: a clearly described end state (Judgment Day), a detailed description of what will happen thereafter (paradise for supporters, hell for opponents), signposts indicating that this future is materialising (including the establishment of a caliphate) and clearly delineated roles for supporters and antagonists.

What is important to understand is that the Judgment Day future does not make IS's future script a nihilistic one. Although its trajectory is directed towards Doomsday, its focus is on the period that precedes it. In religious texts (both Islamic and Christian) this stretches over an extended but unspecified time continuum during which several signs (or signposts) serve as indicators that Judgment Day is looming. The advantage of this long period is that the benefits of apocalyptic fervour – a phenomenon that will be explained below – can be exploited for even longer. This is why the *nasheeds* (religious acapella songs) call IS supporters the 'generation of the future', the future being the space between the here and now and the end state.

As in other instances, IS uses the religious Islamic texts to bolster its narrative and cloak itself in religious legitimacy. (It is worth noting that while Judgment Day is indeed a religious concept, it is not a prominent one in the vast majority of Muslim communities.) As the Koran remains almost silent on the Armageddon, IS primarily relies on *hadiths* (sayings attributed to Prophet Mohammed) to weave together a picture that proves that major and minor signs preceding the apocalypse are materialising ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Of course, IS picks and chooses from the texts whatever suits its narrative. For instance, while it controlled territory in Iraq and Syria, it highlighted the *hadiths* that explicitly mention the establishment of a caliphate, the imminent battles with the 'armies of Rome' in the Syrian town of Dabiq (then under its control), the formation of an international alliance and the arrival of supporters from abroad as signs of the upcoming Armageddon. Its slogan, 'a caliphate according to

the prophetic method', propaganda magazine *Dabiq* and numerous articles and statements alluding to the end of times all fit the narrative that IS is an executor of divine prophecy ⁽⁷⁾. New recruits would identify this prophecy too, whether in the choice of the *nom de guerre* (equally modelled on an end-of-time *hadith*) or the black flag ⁽⁸⁾.

However, IS omitted other elements of the end-of-time *hadiths* that either did not fit its narrative or sided with interpretations of vague *hadiths* that suited it better, as the diagram shows.

THE APPEAL OF THE END AS THE FUTURE

At first glance, the end of times seems to be an odd choice for a future script, as it implies finality. However, a closer look reveals that the Doomsday narrative has strong appeal beyond supporters of IS. As previously mentioned, this is because the apocalypse is not an end, but in fact the beginning of something new and better: paradise awaits the righteous ⁽⁹⁾. Individuals who join organisations with an end-of-times narrative are therefore not suicidal *per se*, but instead wish for a radical change ⁽¹⁰⁾. The end-of-times theme also has other effects: it creates cohesion because only those adhering to the belief are 'in the know' and it gives meaning and purpose to life in general since all actions will be judged ⁽¹¹⁾. Adherents to this future script are therefore not 'crazy'. In fact, Doomsday stories tend to be popular at times of distress both in the Western world and in Muslim countries ⁽¹²⁾.

IS uses the religious Islamic texts to bolster its narrative and cloak itself in religious legitimacy.

In the Arab world, this sentiment of distress was particularly widespread in the years following the Arab Spring. In a 2012 survey, 72 % of respondents in Iraq, 67 % in Tunisia and 56 % in Lebanon were convinced that they would witness the return of the Mahdi ⁽¹³⁾ in their lifetime ⁽¹⁴⁾. (It is worth noting that, at the same time, 41 % of adults in the United States,

54 % of Protestants and 77 % of Evangelicals were convinced that the end of times would begin in 2050 at the latest ⁽¹⁵⁾.) IS, which had professed an apocalyptic rhetoric even before the Arab Spring, managed to capitalise at least in part on that feeling.

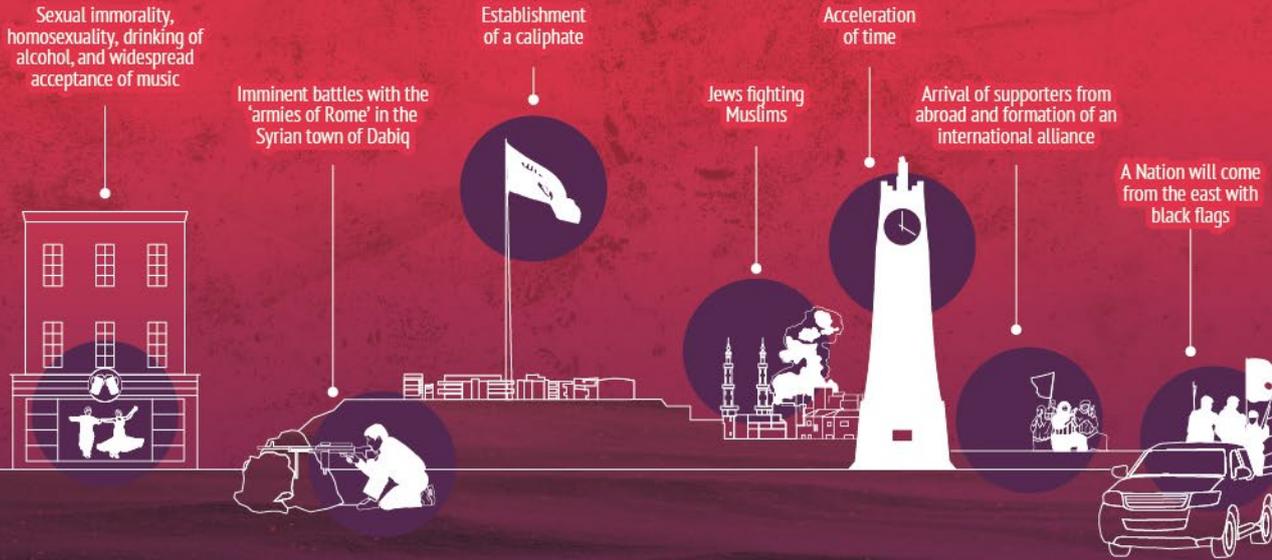
What is more, support for an end-of-times narrative is not easily invalidated. Even when events contradict the script – such as the loss of Dabiq or indeed of the entire territory – a psychological mechanism will ensure that not only is a belief maintained, but attachment to it increases. The uncomfortable state of holding two pieces of contradictory information (called cognitive

End times? It depends

Signposts of the coming apocalypse according to Islamic texts

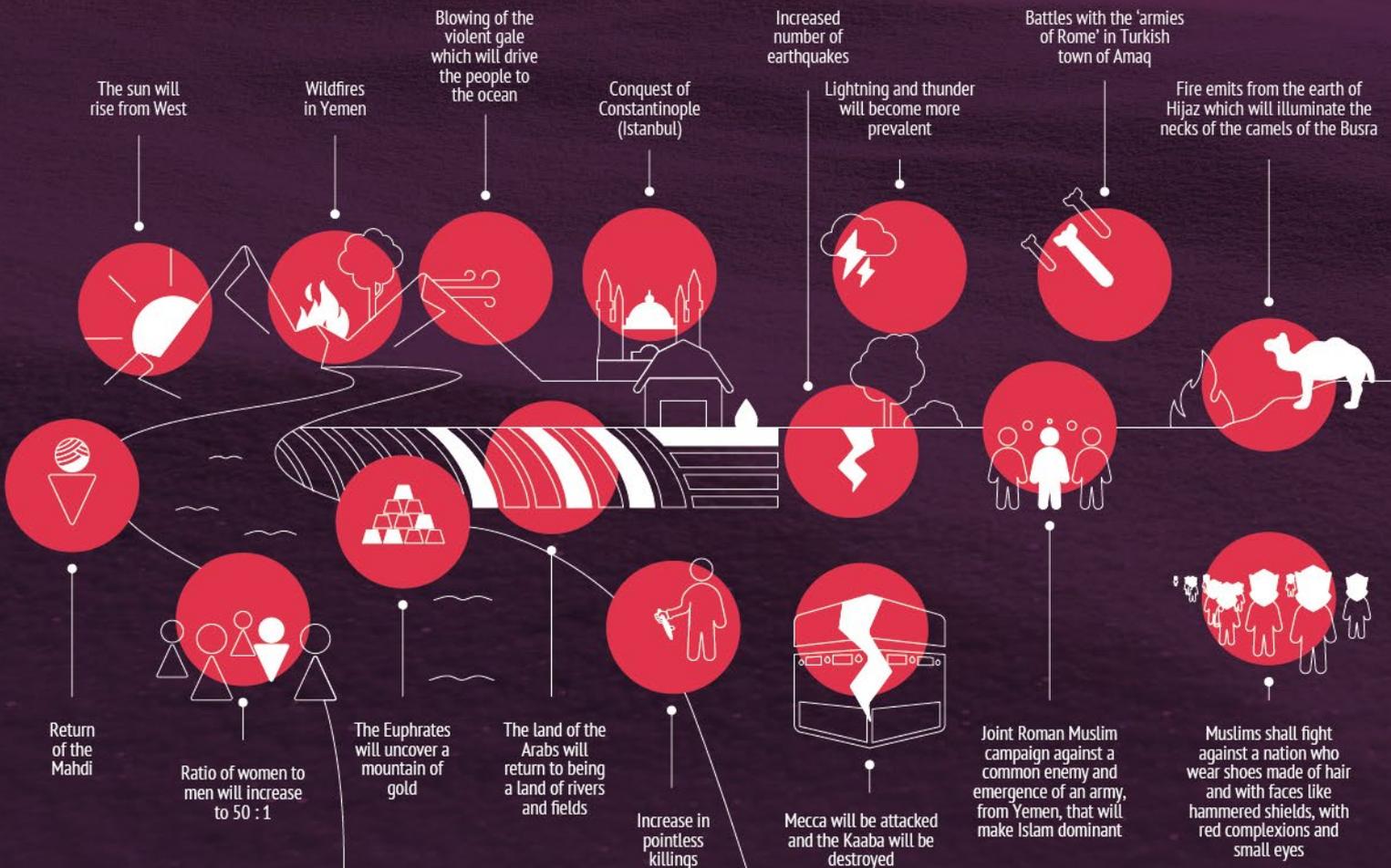
EMPHASISED

by the Islamic State



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by the Islamic State



dissonance) is dissolved not so much by changing one's mind, but more by adding new information that validates the existing belief. The latter occurs particularly when the following five conditions are met.

1. A belief must be held with deep conviction and it must have some relevance to action, that is, to what the believer does or how he behaves.

2. The person holding the belief must have committed himself to it; that is, for the sake of his belief, he must have taken some important action that is difficult to undo. In general, the more important such actions are, and the more difficult they are to undo, the greater is the individual's commitment to the belief.

3. The belief must be sufficiently specific and sufficiently concerned with the real world.

4. Such undeniable disconfirmatory evidence must occur and must be recognised by the individual holding the belief.

5. The individual believer must have social support. It is unlikely that one isolated believer could withstand the kind of disconfirming evidence we have specified.¹⁴⁶

These five conditions apply broadly to IS supporters: as an organisation with a categorical view on not just politics but also lifestyles, it offers convictions that are absolute in nature. Its supporters therefore subscribe not just to parts of its ideology but to the whole package, and streamline their lives with that of the organisation's ideals. They are part of a larger group that shares and validates these beliefs and confirms that the loss of the territory is not the end of the future IS promised. Glimpses of this were already visible when Dabiq was lost, as IS supporters were quick to point out that this would not contradict the apocalypse script: 'the expected Mahdi ... had not yet appeared to lead the battle. Or the required 80-nation coalition had not rolled into town ... The "great battle" will come to pass because God has promised it would; but this isn't that battle because all the other preceding prophecies haven't come to pass.'¹⁴⁷

One phenomenon frequently observed in Doomsday cults following a disconfirming event is increased recruitment. Psychologically speaking, this will alleviate cognitive dissonance because the group sharing the belief is larger. IS has been no different in this regard, doubling down on recruitment efforts¹⁴⁸. Even the death of al-Baghdadi did not lead to the disintegration of its affiliate network: within six weeks of the announcement of his successor, 24 IS outlets had publicly pledged support¹⁴⁹.

By subtly changing the weight of signposts and by adding new ones, IS managed to keep its future script intact.

THE FUTURE OF IS'S FUTURE

Since IS lost its territory it has adapted its future script according to its circumstances. Following the loss of territorial control of Dabiq, its namesake magazine was swiftly renamed *Rumiyah* – the Arabic word for Rome. This is another reference to a prophecy stating that the conquest of Rome is a signpost of the coming apocalypse. However, even after it had lost most of its territory, its then spokesperson al-Adnani moved the future goalposts by adding new events that had not yet taken place, thereby extending the future's shelf life: 'The Hour will not be established until the Muslims fight the Jews. The Muslims will continue killing them until the Jews hide behind stones and trees. Then the stone or the tree will say, "O Muslim, O slave of Allah, there is a Jew hiding behind me, so come and kill him"'.¹²⁰

Al-Adnani also narrated that the Prophet said 'The Hour will not be established until the Romans descend upon A'maq. Then an army from the city, from among the best people of the earth on that day, will head out to them ... One third of them will retreat and Allah will never forgive them, one third of them will be killed and they will be the best of shuhada (*Arabic for martyrs*) and one third of them will never face any trials and will then reach Constantinople and conquer it ... We do not wage jihad to defend a land or to liberate or control it. We do not fight for authority or transient, shabby positions, nor for the rubble of a lowly, vanishing world ... True defeat is the loss of willpower and the desire to fight.'¹²¹

The strategic setback was explained by then IS leader al-Baghdadi as a normal part of the journey towards the future, as 'the established way of Allah of testing and trying the *mujahidin* ... And so here before us are the deceptive years, as the dark night of tribulation, hardship and suffering has increased in severity and engulfed the Muslims with its sorrow.'¹²² After the previous emphasis on the caliphate as being the most important signpost, the new spokesperson, Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, now shrugged the loss of territory off by stating that 'if the Islamic State loses some towns and cities in some of its *Wilayat*, Allah grants it conquest in other *Wilayat*.' (*Arabic for province*.)¹²³ This statement seizes the ambiguity of the *hadith* on the location of a future caliphate preceding the end of time. As al-Baghdadi said in his last statement, 'They (the Americans) need to know that jihad is continuing until the Day of Resurrection and that Allah ordered us to wage jihad and did not order us to achieve victory.'¹²⁴ This last part moves the emphasis of the end state to the end of times rather than to any type of military success. By subtly changing the weight of signposts and by adding

new ones, IS managed to keep its future script intact. One such new signpost being the Covid-19 pandemic. One *hadith* states that two plagues will be signs of Doomsday ⁽²⁵⁾. (This disregards the fact that Covid-19 is not a plague or that the world has seen other pandemics since the prophet's time ⁽²⁶⁾.)

In practice, this will mean that supporters of IS are called upon to '... launch one raid after another and beware of luxury and comfort. Make every effort to unify your ranks and prepare battalions that will charge headlong towards death ... select your targets and carry out a strike that will tear out their hearts and make them lose their minds, for a piercing bullet, a stab deep in the intestines or the detonation of an explosive device in your lands is akin to a thousand operations here with us.' ⁽²⁷⁾ (Al-Baghdadi left similar instructions for his supporters elsewhere: 'the smallest act you do in their lands is more beloved to us than the biggest act done here; it is more effective for us and more harmful to them.')

This call has been heeded already. With the help of its \$300 million hidden in Iraq and Syria and its 10 000 fighters, IS managed to stage spectacular attacks in both states and to increase the number and lethality of these attacks in 2020. In 2021, it staged an attack killing 34 people in Baghdad, the first such lethal attack in a long time. In 2020 in central Syria, it significantly increased capabilities, staging 94 attacks over the whole year, killing 432 regime fighters, including 24 senior officials such as the Russian Major General Vyacheslav Gladkikh and an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps general ⁽²⁸⁾. This trend is likely to continue throughout 2021. In Europe, IS affiliates staged attacks in Austria, France, Germany and the United Kingdom in 2020. Its proclivity for attacks during Ramadan means that spring 2021 could witness more attacks, although the absence of crowds due to the lockdown might mean that these are delayed until the summer.

Where IS is innovating now is in its approach to an even younger generation. Although it always had a strong youth component in line with its future narrative, it now seizes two strategic openings. The first is the 27 000 children of IS supporters still held in camps in Syria, 600 of which are European citizens. Although the vast majority are minors (i.e. under 18 years old), this does not mean that they are automatically innocent. Depending on the state, the age of criminal responsibility can be as low as 12 in France or 14 in most other European countries. However, even if IS children have not committed any crime, the question is whether they will. For most, life with IS indoctrination – even after losing territory – has been the norm ⁽²⁹⁾. During its territorial heyday, IS used children as spies, soldiers, suicide attackers and executioners and provided them with military training. Unaddressed trauma from living in a war zone is likely to incite further violent behaviour.

In addition to this pool of potential future supporters, IS also increasingly targets teenagers who have never lived on its territory, both in Europe and abroad. In Indonesia, its affiliate Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) staged two terrorist attacks perpetrated by children in 2018 ⁽³⁰⁾. In Europe, IS is expanding among Generation Z as well. In 2019, British police arrested 12 children under 18 on charges related to terrorism, some even as young as 14. The pandemic has made this even easier for IS: two thirds of children between 14 and 17 (up from one third) and every second child between 5 and 13 now spend more than 4 hours a day online. Their time spent on social media exposes them to the IS mindset and to brutal graphic images and videos – but, more importantly, it is their fragile mental state that makes them vulnerable to IS recruitment ⁽³¹⁾. As one survey has shown, 43 % of young adults currently suffer from mental health issues or even have clinical-level risk of mental disorders, making them the age group experiencing the greatest mental health impact from the pandemic ⁽³²⁾.

For European law enforcement, this means that IS is in the process of taking an entirely new and more challenging shape. While terrorist attacks might have become less lethal, they might very well become more frequent due to the profile of those who will execute them. Neither deradicalisation programmes nor legal or preventive measures are designed with children in mind.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The terrorist threat posed by IS will continue to remain a problem for decision-makers in the Middle East and Africa, but also in Europe. Albeit not in the first line of fire, Europe will have to brace itself for more attacks ⁽³³⁾. The following considerations should be borne in mind by policymakers as a way to manage this.

- › Accept that the survival of IS is not contingent on its status as a proto-state and develop a long-term strategy aimed at undercutting its recruitment efforts in Europe.
- › Develop capacities to detect, monitor and manage the early radicalisation of juveniles.
- › Prioritise youth unemployment in post-Covid-19 recovery efforts.
- › Swiftly implement the new EU legislation allowing for the removal of online terrorist content.
- › Prepare for attacks on 'softer' targets such as railways and motorways.

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