



What to Expect Following a Military Defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq?

by Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci and Ahmet S. Yayla



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Abstract

In the struggle against ISIS and the so-called Islamic State, the United States and its allies continue to achieve significant military victories, as evidenced by the ongoing efforts to liberate the city of Mosul in Iraq. What happens next with the returning or migrating foreign fighters and with whatever remains of ISIS' influence in the digital battle space where up to this point it has been winning? Evidence of the group inspiring, remotely recruiting and directing attacks in Europe and elsewhere, and its continued ability to attract foreign fighters to the actual battlefield, makes it clear that ISIS may be losing the ground war in Syria and Iraq but winning in the other areas, especially in the digital battle space. The authors highlight the importance of creating compelling counter-narratives and products that compete with the prolific ISIS online campaigns.

Keywords: ISIS; Syria; Iraq; Caliphate; Counterterrorism; Foreign Fighters.

Introduction

It is estimated that the so-called Islamic State has lost about 45 percent of its territory in Iraq and 10 percent in Syria (Chia & Xeuling, 2016). Such major gains in military campaigns, in particular, are instrumental in diminishing ISIS' ability to exercise full control over its membership base and its ability to freely finance itself through the sale of oil, antiquities, slaves, and through taxing and extorting monetary payments from its civilian population (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016a). Recently, U.S. officials have reported a significant drop in the monthly number of foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria from 2000 to 500, and some estimates are even down to 200 (Gibbons-Neff, 2016; "Are Airstrikes Successfully Weakening ISIS?" 2016).

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, Islamic State's spokesperson and the person believed to be responsible for plotting and directing the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, Istanbul, and Paris, as well as laying the ground work for future attacks (through the *Emni*—the ISIS' external operations), was recently killed in Aleppo, Syria (Lister, 2016; Speckhard & Yayla, 2016b). This was on the heels of the July 2016 killing of Abu Omar al-Shishani, a top Islamic State commander and a veteran of the Chechen jihadi war, south of Mosul, Iraq (Worley, 2016). The killings of these two battle-hardened and charismatic leaders also represents a significant blow to Islamic State's core leadership, especially important given the string of recent military setbacks that the group continues to experience in Iraq and Syria.

The available data suggest gradual, but likely, victory against ISIS on the military battlefield, although locals in Iraq have been expressing concerns over Shia militias already and potentially enacting revenge in liberated areas (An international aid worker in Iraq working in liberated areas, Speckhard personal communication, October 30, 2016). Despite the significant setbacks in the battlefield, ISIS continues to attract followers



because its online narratives remain alluring. Evidence of the group inspiring, remotely recruiting and directing attacks in Europe and elsewhere, and its continued ability to attract foreign fighters to the actual battlefield make it clear that ISIS may be losing the ground war in Syria and Iraq but winning in the other areas, especially in the digital battle space.

The recent case of three French women arrested in France for their role in a failed, ISIS-guided terrorist attack near Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris; the recent case of a 16-year-old teenager charged with supporting ISIS and plotting to carry out a terrorist attack in France; the case of Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi who opened fire at a Garland, Texas, event and shot a security guard; and the case of the Bastille Day terrorist, Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, who killed 84 and injured more than 300 all serve as testament to the growing threat and the ability of ISIS to both inspire and direct attacks in the West (Connelly, 2016; Moore, 2016; Shoichet & Pearson, 2015; Verdier, Visser & Haddad, 2016). With the military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters are likely to migrate elsewhere, and many of them will choose to return home. These will be profoundly ideologically-indoctrinated, weapons-trained, battle-hardened, and possibly explosives-skilled cadres moving home—some above, and others below the radar of government and safety and security services. Law enforcement officials in Kosovo, for instance, shared that some ISIS cadres are having themselves falsely declared killed on social media and then returned, illegally crossing the borders to bypass security. Whether all returnees from ISIS constitute a danger to their homelands remains to be seen, although those who left ISIS but still believe in building a utopian Islamic “Caliphate” are more easily manipulated to attack at home or to return to service.

Methodology

Over the past year, in their *ISIS Defector Interview Project*, the authors have been interviewing ISIS defectors (n=40) and the family members of those who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq (n=10). The authors had the opportunity to also interview law enforcement, intelligence, and representatives from non-governmental and civil society institutions in the countries they leave from, specifically in Jordan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Western Europe. The main goal was to learn first-hand how they were recruited, what motivations and vulnerabilities led to their joining, what they experienced, what caused them to defect, and how they kept in touch with affected family members left behind. More importantly, interviews were conducted to capture their stories on video to be used to denounce ISIS’ online recruiting efforts.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow defectors and/or family members to voice stories in their own words. The authors videotaped most of the interviews and gained permission to use them for their project of fighting ISIS’ online recruiting. The defector sample included 35 males and five females. Four of the defectors were minors at the time of joining ISIS. The youngest was only thirteen. The ages ranged from thirteen up to forty-five. Most of the defectors in the sample were Syrians interviewed in southern Turkey (32), with four interviews taking place in the Balkans, two in Kyrgyzstan, and two in Western Europe [1].

Results and Discussion

During our interviews with those who had served in ISIS-controlled territories in Syria and Iraq, we found the dream of the “Caliphate” to be a compelling and powerful one, and while many understood that ISIS would never be able to deliver, it nevertheless remained as a hoped-for ideal (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016c).



We also found that a vast majority of those interviewed were true defectors and no longer support or ever intend to go back to the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or to serve them at home. However, we also found that a minority, particularly those in Europe and the Balkans, were more accurately viewed as Islamic State returnees, but not defectors, having only temporarily disengaged from the battlefield—sometimes even being allowed to temporarily return home by the group, or more chillingly, sent home to recruit, or otherwise serve the group's goals in the West (Speckhard, Yayla & Shajkovci, 2017). Recent evidence also suggests that ISIS has long been preparing to attract, further indoctrinate, and weapons train European and Western cadres who could train quickly inside ISIS and then return to the West undetected to attack in the future (Callimachi, 2016; Gude & Wiedmann-Schmidt, 2015). These directed attacks were plotted by the ISIS *Emni* (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016d). Additionally, defectors are not always psychologically stable and may return their previous allegiance to the group.

Arguably, many of the thousands of foreign fighters ISIS has managed to attract to Syria and Iraq will return home. Some will return truly disaffected and as actual defectors from the group, while others will only be disillusioned but still longing to build an “Islamic Caliphate.” Others will be sent back to recruit and attack at home. Already Western consulates in Turkey reported instances of their citizens appearing at consulates to report “lost passports” and wishing to return home (Abi-Habib, 2016). Likewise, Huthaifa Azzam, a Jordan-based Palestinian and son of Osama bin Laden's mentor in Afghanistan, Abdullah Azzam, told the authors in Jordan of the Free Syrian Army's base in Syria where over one hundred ISIS defectors from all over the world have been gathered, as they were caught fleeing the group (Huthaifa Azzam, Speckhard & Shajkovci interview, Jordan, November 2016). Some security experts predict that as ISIS continues to lose its territory in Iraq and Syria, it will grow its presence in other territories, such as Southeast Asia (Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia), Libya, and possibly even the Balkans (Chia & Xeuling, 2016; Mayr, 2016; “Why is ISIS Heading to Libya?” 2016).

Many ISIS defectors shared that in the event of losing their territory in Syria and Iraq, ISIS cadres plan to shave their beards and blend into normal society in Syria and elsewhere to mount guerilla warfare attacks (Speckhard & Yayla, 2016c; Speckhard, Yayla & Shajkovci, 2017). Given the open and generous support of Turkey to Syrians fleeing the war, and illicit Turkish support of ISIS, Turkey in its present state may be one of the places many of them settle. As President Erdogan of Turkey continues to consolidate state powers to himself, he has also long been giving ISIS hidden and open support to keep the Kurds at bay, and may continue to find that to his advantage to remain in power and to keep the Kurds in Syria at bay (Yayla & Speckhard, 2016a, 2016b & 2016c). However, with recent ISIS attacks inside Turkey, this may be likened to dining with “cannibals,” as the authors recently wrote in an assessment of this policy (Yayla & Speckhard, 2016d) [2]. Despite assurances to actively pursue ISIS, no major sweeps or arrests of the countless ISIS terror cells and cadres inside Turkey have yet occurred.

As mentioned above, in the Balkans, law enforcement representatives shared that there were instances where ISIS fighters had falsely declared themselves killed in action over social media but were in fact alive and had returned home crossing borders illegally to live under the radar of government and security services (Law enforcement and intelligence officials, Speckhard & Shajkovci personal communication, October 2016). In Belgium, a security professional shared that a claimed defector came to the consulate asking to return home repentant. On further investigation, however, he was found to be plotting an ISIS attack with contacts back home (Speckhard personal communication, March 2016). There are many foreign fighters married or who have taken their wives, and even children, with them to Syria and Iraq. Females and wives of foreign fighters who did not play violent roles in ISIS may avoid prison sentences upon their return home while their



spouses are imprisoned or dead, and thus may be vulnerable to being manipulated by the group, or even worse remain powerful radicalizing forces once back home. In the Balkans and Western Europe, the authors found a number of them who regularly keep in touch with cadres still active in ISIS. Children of ISIS cadres returning home will also have to be rehabilitated after witnessing violence, and many may not even know local languages.

As ISIS continues to lose most, or all, of its territory and fighters begin to return, it is important to note that the problems facing foreign fighters in their home countries, specifically factors that had influenced their decisions to join in the first place such as high unemployment, underemployment, discrimination, marginalization, difficulty living a conservative Salafi lifestyle in the West, disordered and unsatisfying family relationships, and so forth, will all likely still exist upon return, and may be even more frustrating to a traumatized returnee. The problems that initially motivated them to leave will also likely continue unabated, without new or satisfying solutions, having mystically rematerialized upon their return from the ISIS battlefield.

Moreover, many returned ISIS cadres, having lived in conflict zones and having witnessed and taken part in extreme brutality, are likely to suffer from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Their increased emotional arousal resulting from the battlefield experiences will not match the calm, bored ennui of being back home—without a clear purpose and cause. Having become accustomed to the adrenal rush of being in a conflict zone may cause some to once again seek that energized state of being. Most will not be able to procure good psychological treatment nor be able to safely admit to what they took part in, while some will be stressed by possible or actual prosecution and imprisonment. Thus, many returnees are likely to long again for the clarity of purpose and experiences of the battleground with the potential rewards of being a warrior and ultimate rewards of death by “martyrdom.” Likewise, frustrated returnee wives of those who are or end up imprisoned may become hopeless of living while having already accepted the “martyrdom” ideology, making them also at risk for returning to terrorism [3]. Prior research with cornered and nearly defeated terrorist groups teaches us the lesson that they often turn to women as suicide cadres at that point (Speckhard, 2008). A respondent from the Balkans shared about being treated in France for his posttraumatic responses to his time in ISIS and expressed gratitude for receiving care versus punishment after his time on the ISIS battlefield, although he remained cagey and less than honest about what he had actually participated in.

Despite the significant victories against ISIS and the Islamic State, defeating ISIS remains a daunting task. While face-to-face recruitment is still active in Europe, the Balkans, Turkey, and the Middle East, in the U.S. most recruitment occurs over the Internet. Even with face-to-face recruitment, the authors found that except among the Syrians, online ISIS materials played a significant role in terrorist recruitment around the world.

The use of social media tools and social media campaigns to mobilize individuals into an extremist cause is not limited to ISIS. Other terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, have long used the Internet to attract and recruit followers. What differentiates ISIS from other extremist groups, however, is its ability to utilize its online campaign to both attract and recruit potential followers and promote its brand as a serious, powerful, and ruthless organization. Unlike other jihadist terrorist organizations, its online campaign does not operate in the shadows; on the contrary, its content is outsourced and distributed to everyone willing to embrace it. Equally important, the group’s online propaganda has permeated almost every sphere of our digital space. A study conducted by the Brookings Institution revealed a total of 46,000 Twitter accounts created in support of ISIS, though not all active at once, between September and December 2014 (Walker, 2015). As the group



continues to lose its territory, it is highly likely that it will continue to strengthen its online propaganda to project the false sense of its continuing control of territories in Syria and Iraq. Such online campaigns will be crucial for groups like ISIS to not only attract followers, but to also showcase manifestations of its material power in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS has managed to master the use of social media unlike any other terrorist group. First, they are known to flood the Internet with slick recruitment and propaganda materials. Next, they watch to learn who is liking, retweeting, or otherwise endorsing their materials. Once communications are established, often by swarming in, ISIS recruits then do their best to find out about the needs of their potential recruits and meet them to seduce, ultimately taking over their lives, either by inviting them to the battlefield or to mount terrorist attacks at home (Speckhard, Shajkovci & Yayla, 2016). In this manner, ISIS, like no other terrorist group, has been able to personally contact and groom new recruits, often using the intimacy of communication and encryption provided by social media apps such as Skype, Telegram, and Whatsapp.

In the Balkans, ISIS defectors shared that they were attracted to groups like ISIS and were moved to help Assad's victims and their Syrian "brothers" simply because they could easily identify with the group and the conflict, specifically remembering the time when they had been the victims of the Serbian regime during the Kosovo conflict of 1999. Videos from Syria of Assad's atrocities, alongside videos instructing how to go to Syria, were instrumental in getting them involved, although recruitment networks also functioned to finance their travel, encourage them to go, and help them with the logistics of entering Syria. The same was true in Europe, Jordan, and Kyrgyzstan.

ISIS videos and propaganda materials have a profoundly moving effect in the recruitment process. Consider the answer of an ISIS defector when asked to elaborate on what had reinforced his decision to join the conflict in Syria:

"I started following the videos of Lavdrim Muhaxheri [notorious Albanian Islamic State leader and recruiter of ethnic Albanians in Syria] and the videos of Albanians in Syria saying that people of Syria need other Muslims to come and fulfill God's will. I became interested and started to look for the ways to go to Syria—how to join other Albanians in Syria against Bashar." (F.L, Speckhard interview, June 2016, Kosovo)

When asked to discuss the nature of social media sources (e.g. YouTube, web browsing, etc.) that attracted him, he added:

"[YouTube?] Initially it was YouTube that inspired me about the war in Syria. However, I then started browsing the Internet, and each time I would see something with an Arabic flag on Facebook, or anything with Arabic subtitles/names, I would immediately befriend them. Then I would follow them. They would post their videos on Facebook. I also got inspired from videos posted on Facebook. YouTube videos were often getting removed, but most people didn't know that you would get reposted on Facebook" (Ibid.).

Conclusion

The available data suggest likely victory against ISIS in the military battle space. The war, however, is not won simply because we have defeated ISIS on the battleground. Although groups like ISIS will continue to utilize technology to lure its recruits and followers and promote a medieval ideology that condones beheadings, rape, and enslavement, among others, efforts are needed to broach a counter-narrative to defeat the idea



of utopian “Caliphate” that can be brought into being through ruthless brutality and through terrorism extended over the globe. This is not to say that defeating ISIS narratives and propaganda on the Internet and social media will be easy. Such efforts are often complicated by the fact that governments lack adequate policy and legal frameworks on how to incorporate effectively the narratives of those who have disengaged from terrorist groups like ISIS into their counter-narrative messaging. Put differently, much emphasis is placed on criminalizing the efforts of such individuals as opposed to finding creative ways to incorporate both. Even when the voices of ISIS defectors are raised, issues can arise when they do not remain true to their message and flip back and forth. Equally problematic is the fact that government efforts are mostly focused on removing online propaganda and mounting counter messaging campaigns that are limited to rational and logical arguments while groups like ISIS use visuals and emotional arguments and material to attract followers (Speckhard, Shajkovci & Yayla, 2016).

The most credible voices to raise against ISIS are those of insiders—ISIS defectors—who have seen the cruel reality of life under the Islamic State and the ISIS-controlled territories [4]. In the *ISIS Defectors Interviews Project*, the authors have begun to use the voices of actual defectors telling their stories of time inside ISIS to denounce the group and its ideology. By capturing the voices of ISIS defectors as they denounce the group, and by creating from their stories compelling counter-narratives and products that compete with the prolific and persuasive ISIS online campaigns, we can begin to break the ISIS brand. There is yet the digital battleground to consider. This is just as important as defeating the ISIS narrative of building a utopian Caliphate, defeating its “martyrdom” ideology, and defeating its idea that Islam, Islamic lands, and Muslims themselves are under attack by the West, and that all Muslims have a duty to fight back.

Notes

[1] First and the second author also interviewed the family members of two foreign fighters, one killed in Syria and the other arrested on terrorism charges, in Jordan, November 12, 2016.

[2] Thanks to Arthur Kassebaum for this pithy saying applied to Erdogan.

[3] Similar scenario was carried out in Turkey as well. Turkish cadres who had fought “jihad” against the Russians in Afghanistan returned to Turkey and lived peacefully, although they spent their efforts spreading their Salafi- jihadi ideology. They remained peaceful, operating under the radar, for a period of ten years, after which they again reactivated and started carrying out terrorist attacks (Third author personal accounts when serving as the head of Counterterrorism for the Turkish National Police).

[4] For that reason, at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), we decided in our *ISIS Defectors Interviews Project* to video record all the defectors we interviewed (given permission to do so) in order to be able to create short video clips to load on the internet raising defectors voices against ISIS’ online recruitment. We have also sub-titled them in the 20+ languages ISIS recruits in. As we have collected our interviews, most of them captured on video, we have been producing short and powerful edited video clips and Internet memes (posters) to amplify these voices of disaffected ISIS defectors speaking out against the group with the goal of breaking the ISIS brand. See: <http://www.icsve.org/projects/> and <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCumpEsozixbl-PyKw12hmnw>

About the authors

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D. is Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University’s School of



Medicine and Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE). She is also the author of Talking to Terrorists, Bride of ISIS, and co-author of the newly released ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate, Undercover Jihadi, and Warrior Princess. Dr. Speckhard has interviewed nearly 500 terrorists, their family members, and supporters in various parts of the world including Gaza, West Bank, Russia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and many countries in Europe. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. For a complete list of publications for Anne Speckhard see: <https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhard> and www.icsve.org

Ardian Shajkovci, Ph.D., is Research Director/Senior Research Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE). See <http://www.icsve.org/staff-member/ardian-shajkovci-2/>

Ahmet S. Yayla, Ph.D. is co-author of the just released book, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. He is Senior Research Fellow at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) and is also Adjunct Professor of Criminology, Law and Society at George Mason University. He formerly served as Professor and the Chair of the Sociology Department at Harran University in Turkey and as the Chief of Counterterrorism and Operations Division for the Turkish National Police with a 20-year career interviewing terrorists.

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