Resurgence of Islamic State in Iraq & Syria and Its Propaganda

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Abstract – A terrorist organization with a strong ideological presence is not totally vanquished just by the death of its members and the group's dormancy. According to multiple works of literature, ISIS is considered an inspiration by many other extremist groups and is blamed for the resurgence and rebirth of various terrorist groups around the world, in various forms and factions. Despite the loss of territorial presence in 2017, ISIS began to re-emerge in 2018. Notwithstanding efficient and successful counter-ISIS measures by regional and international actors, the terrorist group is still actively reconstructing Iraq and Syria using its most sophisticated propaganda which is challenging to counter. The goal of this research is to shed light on ISIS as a whole and the propaganda used by the group that led to it becoming the world's most destructive terrorist organization. This is qualitative research based on secondary sources with an analytical approach to the research problem. Drawing on the group's history, actions, and subsequent global reactions, an attempt is made to map the potential problems they pose to the battle against terrorism by using a sophisticated mode of propaganda. This article seeks to track the resurgence of ISIS despite being gradually weakened over the years due to its strong propaganda campaign through modern and advanced methods.

Keywords: ISIS, Propaganda, Terrorism, Iraq, and Syria

I.   BACKGROUND

The Islamic State or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State of Iraq and Levant which is commonly known as the ISIS, is a Salafi–Jihadist militant group which basically operates in Iraq and Syria with the primary goal to establish an Islamic Caliphate. The initial formation of the Islamic State occurred in 1999 pioneered by Abu Musab al Zarqawi and it was named the Jama'at al-Tawhid Wa'l Jihad which later became Al Qaeda in Iraq and then the Islamic State. With various up and downs within the period, the Islamic State became prominent globally in 2014 and, eventually in 2017 the IS declined due to Operation Inherent Resolve and the responses of the coalition forces against it.

Despite the collapse of the caliphate and territory of the IS in 2017, it has revealed significant resilience. Its members seemingly continued to engage in operating offensives because its remnants were held in a small territorial area in Iraq and Syria such as the Abu Kamal district. Moreover, the organization pursues the most sophisticated and intense propaganda for its growth. Further, despite the loss of territorial control, IS was in possession of extensive wealth with strong media coverage which laid the foundation for the group to operate straightforwardly.

Within 2018, IS began to revert to more traditional terrorist strategies. For instance, engaging in guerilla attacks in Iraq and Syria and developing a network of sleeper cells. As for the records, from the middle of 2018 to 2019, the IS group conducted nearly 250 strikes against civilians. In 2020, the IS was able to upsurge launching its attacks in those rural areas as a result of the drawdown of the US forces in Iraq and the outbreak of COVID–19. By 2020, nearly more than 100 attacks for a month were reported in Iraq and approximately more than 120 attacks were recorded in Syria by August. Moreover, the UN demonstrated the IS as an "entrenched insurgency" which is far from overcome. Besides in 2023, the US Security Council restated that the group continue developing modern technologies which has "become more sophisticated and prolific". On the other hand, the improvements in the civil war in Syria recently and the political disorder in Iraq laid an interruption to the counter-terrorism measures against ISIS.

Notwithstanding its defeat in 2017, ISIS has launched multiple attacks since January 2018 in various places in Iraq Syria and other places in the world, resulting in numerous casualties and damage. Most notably, suicide attacks in Manjib, Baghdad, and bomb attacks in Hasakah in 2019,2021 and 2022, respectively. It demonstrates that ISIS is really going through a process of resurgence ever since its defeat.

The implementation of a successful response to ISIS propaganda faces a number of difficulties. First, social media's inadequate control and lack of regulation. Although specific Twitter accounts linked to terrorist groups can be blocked, they sometimes resurface hours later with a slightly changed

account name. 20,000 ISIS-related Twitter profiles were suspended, according to the hacker group Anonymous, but these users simply created new ones. Second, ISIS receives support from the media's airing of "newsworthy" propaganda. Instead of being shared by ISIS agents, the violent execution video of American journalist James Foley was spread by CNN and the BBC. ISIS has thousands of social networking accounts and media professionals who have created a more effective recruitment campaign, despite the fact that many organizations are dedicated to counter ISIS Propaganda.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Basically, this research is qualitative research with an analytical approach to the research question. Primary data for the research were collected with reference to the secondary sources including books and journal articles which have been focused on the facts of the research problem.

III. NATURE OF ISIS PROPAGANDA

ISIS's Propaganda campaign is more sophisticated, has different content, and uses different dissemination methods than earlier terrorist groups. "ISIS uses centralized propaganda to prey on a target's weak sense of identity and social networks to disseminate their message" (Gerstel, 2016). Basically, ISIS is gaining unprecedented dominance on the Internet and social media when it comes to its propaganda.

Al-Hayat Media and Al-Furqan Foundation are ISIS's most significant and key media organizations. "The media people are more important than the soldiers and their monthly income is higher," (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015). Many former IT and journalism employees who are skilled in video editing and graphic design are now part of this bureaucracy. While Abu Amr al-Shami, a 36-year-old Syrian, is the head of the media, there are a number of Westerners towards the top of the hierarchy. Several articles mention an American in charge of editing.

a. Al-Furqan Foundation

Al-Furqan Foundation is an Iraqi-based media organization which is considered to be the primary media outlet of ISIS. Reportedly it has created nearly 160 publications including audio and video content which contain the speeches delivered by its leaders and also a number of documentaries. Additionally, it has released multi-part film series as well. However, the videos and films that are produced by this foundation have used high-quality and advanced techniques. Through these contents, they try to seek appeal from the audience together with a demonstration of the consequences for those who are against the organization.

b. Al-Hayat Media

Basically focused on a Western Audience and almost all contents of Al-Hayat Media are based on English language and Arabic translations of. Primarily the productions of this Media swing between intimidating the audience by portraying extreme violence and the general life routine in the areas under control of the organization.

Apart from these two media organizations, there are several other media organizations in terms of disseminating the IS propaganda campaign including Al-Ajnad Media Center and magazines such as Dubiq which is the most significant ISIS magazine. However, the group does not usually use platforms like YouTube to publish their content directly in order to avoid getting reported and deleted. When it comes to the use of social media by the group, it is remarkable in spreading psychological warfare.

ISIS' inventive propaganda poses a number of policy difficulties that will necessitate the modernization of Western counterterrorism organizations. The ease of access to social media is the main barrier to good policy. Twitter is the major social media platform that is been used by ISIS though they are using other platforms such as Facebook. One needs to create a new Twitter account to continue using it once it has been suspended. Manually banning and filtering profiles is a time-consuming task with little to show for it. According to the reports in 2014, ISIS seemed to have nearly 46000 Twitter accounts at that time.

When it comes to other social media platforms other than Twitter, trailing the Facebook accounts based on the group is much harder than on Twitter. Basically, the group is using "ghost accounts" without direct connection to the group or portraying extremist tendencies. Moreover, it has been found that ISIS uses Facebook to track people those who have homosexual inclinations to impose penalties on them.

ISIS has a reputation for using the media to effectively attract new fighters, win over sympathizers, and create fear. The development and distribution of quality publications, videos, and social media material are all part of its media strategy. ISIS's physical caliphate was mainly knocked down, but it continued to be active online on websites, via encrypted message applications, and on social media. By doing so, the organization was able to radicalize people from afar and reach a large audience.

In addition to its own media organizations and social media platforms, ISIS possesses a number of other media organizations that are supporting the propaganda campaign. Among them, Al-Battar Foundation, Al-Minbar al-I'lami al-Jihadi, Ghuraba' Foundation and Isdarat al-Khilafah play eminent roles in disseminating the IS propaganda.

When it comes to recruiting propaganda, the Western targets of the groups are individuals mainly between 16 to 25 old who are isolated and who do not have a clear purpose in

their community. ISIS is able to convince those people that their actions would result in a victory as they are fighting for a legitimate Muslim state and they are usually convinced that they would have a meaningful life once they join the caliphate. Through this propaganda, ISIS is able to easily hallucinate those individuals.

IV. ONGOING IS THREAT IN IRAQ AND SYRIA 2018 ONWARDS.

Despite the official declaration of the defeat of ISIS by 2017, it appeared to reemerge since 2018 and reportedly the group has carried out a number of attacks not only limited to Iraq and Syria but also other parts of the world. Further, Baghdadi appeared in a video published in April 2019 addressing the recent defeat of the caliphate and through that speech, he mentioned that the defeat is temporary and the caliphate will be returned once again. (Anon., 2021)

Syria.

Today, ISIS officials appear to be more concerned with delivering broad advice via online messages than with exerting day-to-day leadership over all of the group's members and sympathizers in Syria. The group now appears to function on two levels: a core of militants carrying out intricate operations on the leadership's orders, while a second, broader set of decentralized cells carries out smaller, more regular raids, intimidates the public, and manages the money. In this way, ISIS has established entrenched communication and transit networks linking the country's many areas, giving particular tasks to its cells in each location and perceiving its efforts in each as complementing those in others. ISIS is preparing to reclaim overt territorial control if and when the conditions permit.

ISIS employs a separate strategy in each of Syria's four zones of control. It also trains the majority of its new recruits at Badia, the rear base for its operations in Syria and Iraq. It accumulates cash and caches supplies in the northeast while staging assaults against security personnel, technocrats, and tribal notables to undermine public trust in the local authority. It maintains hideouts for mid-level and senior commanders in the north and northwest, where they may remain anonymous amid the hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians living in temporary communities. The insurgencies of ISIS in central and northern Syria are particularly connected. The organization shifts soldiers and material between regime- and SDF-controlled territories according to shifting objectives, logistical demands, and the weaknesses of its adversaries in each location. These movements appear to be coordinated by commanders at the central, regional, and sub-regional levels.

Syria's front lines were frozen in 2020, allowing Damascus and its external supporters to redeploy forces to combat ISIS in the centre and east. This campaign resulted in a decrease in ISIS strikes against regime targets during 2021. To evade interdiction, some ISIS members retreated to even more distant portions of central Syria, while many more fled to Iraq or north-eastern Syria. This second group of fighters appears to have bolstered the cells in the latter areas, allowing ISIS to carry out more operations, such as the spectacular January 2022 assault on the SDF-run Hasakeh prison, which held ISIS fighters and adolescent boys from Syria, Iraq, and third countries.

Iraq

Despite a drop in the total number of Islamic State assaults in Iraq from 2017 to 2018, attacks on government targets rose from 2017 to 2018. From 2017 to 2018, attacks in Kirkuk province more than quadrupled.

] The Iraqi government has failed to address risk factors that lead to instability, such as the expense of rebuilding, economic stagnation, corruption, and ungoverned spaces in disputed areas around the country.

] Shia militias supported by Iran continue to increase Shia-Sunni tensions in Iraq, and their ties to Iran make them a helpful recruiting tool for the sectarian-fueled Islamic State insurgency.

While many US policymakers and Iraqi politicians have declared victory over the Islamic State, there are multiple evidence that the Islamic State is still a threat and is concentrating its tactics and assaults on government targets. While the Islamic State's territorial control has been reduced to tiny enclaves in rural Iraq, the organization nevertheless conducted an average of seventy-five assaults per month in 2018, including a year-over-year increase in attacks in Kirkuk province. Much like the predecessors of the Islamic State, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), Islamic State militants are exploiting local grievances and operating from cell structures to conduct hit-and-run attacks, kidnappings for ransom, targeted assassinations, and bombings with improvised explosive devices.

While the Islamic State has suffered a huge setback in terms of geographical control, it remains an appealing outlet for individuals who have no other options. Many risk factors, including rampant corruption and political turmoil, tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), abundant unpatrolled and ungoverned space, the backlash against the Iranian-backed Hash'd al Shaabi—also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and legitimate economic and humanitarian grievances in areas recently liberated from Islamic State, have allowed the Islamic State narrative to survive in Iraq.

Because there is no official military presence in ungoverned areas and contested territory in Kirkuk and Salah ad-Dine provinces, Islamic State terrorists may operate freely. This is due, in part, to the security vacuum created by the forced retreat of Kurdish Peshmerga from these areas in the aftermath of the Kurdish referendum.

The Islamic State continues to use the digital caliphate to reinforce its narrative, in addition to operating from Iraq's ungoverned and contested territories. The Islamic State's internet propaganda stream is the most crucial avenue for the Islamic State to extensively disseminate messages advancing its anti-Western narrative.

V.   COUNTERING ISIS AND ITS PROPAGANDA

Although they have had very little success, governments and independent organizations have put in place a number of programs to fight ISIS propaganda. In fact, a key reason for the failure of counter-terrorism, and military strategies of the United States is its incapability to challenge the ISIS propaganda efficiently. Several of them concentrate on delegitimizing ISIS and offering an alternate perspective. The American policy on ISIS is centred on 'degrading' rather than 'destroying' the organization. In practice, this implies that ISIS is being confined, which, incidentally, Iranian forces in Iraq and al-Assad in Syria are pleased with. A significant side consequence of 'mere confinement' is that it aids in the breakdown of the movement's shine. However, it is possible that the battle will not stop until all sides are tired. This might pave the way for "an agreement among major regional and international powers on a formula to curtail fighting and rebuild some governance." The prolonged fighting over Aleppo, Mosul, and Raqqa, as well as the importance placed by outside powers on a specific outcome of this conflict, demonstrate that, at this time, it is not exhaustion but rather an outright victory by one side or another that will decide the outcome of this conflict, and, most likely, determine the parameters for ISIS's future.

To lessen the effectiveness of ISIS propaganda and stop the flow of recruits from Western nations, counterterrorism organizations can collaborate with motivated private stakeholders and third parties. Three main goals should be the focus of these initiatives:

1. Restrict the modes of communication.

ISIS has a stronghold on social media platforms, making it simple for them to interact with potential recruits. Without social network community policing, no social media counteroffensive will be successful. Tech companies should be pushed to more forcefully suspend these users, and citizens should be urged to report accounts associated with ISIS. The goal of this endeavour should be to establish a grassroots movement that can compete with the thousands of online ISIS supporters. Governmental organizations will be able to concentrate on harder targets, including blocking ISIS-created apps and accounts, by doing this.

2. Delegitimize the propaganda's key message of ISIS Propaganda.

ISIS media depicts a perfect society where recruits can discover their purpose. Counter-messaging should put a strong emphasis on telling the truth about the situation and telling the tales of those who have defected to or fled the Islamic State.

3. Supporting young people who are in danger and could become targets.

Similar types of social seclusion are practised by many Western recruits. Giving these people more individualized outreach is one way to provide them with an option to jihad.

VI.   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the resurgence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, along with its propaganda campaigns, continues to be a challenging and dynamic issue. Despite its large territorial losses, ISIS has evolved as a potent insurgency by capitalizing on local instability and utilizing guerrilla warfare techniques. By radicalizing people and inspiring attacks around the world, its propaganda mechanism, which is characterized by sophisticated media campaigns and a widespread online presence, continues to pose a threat. Efforts to counter ISIS involve a combination of military operations, intelligence-sharing, and counter-propaganda initiatives. With the extensive use of social media and the internet, ISIS indicates decentralized propaganda.

When it comes to propaganda the first stage in creating a compelling counter-narrative is to comprehend the innovations and attraction of ISIS propaganda. ISIS has effectively communicated its message via social media and other modern technology, unlike earlier extremist groups like Al-Qaeda. Potential recruits' lack of purpose and companionship at home is highlighted in this propaganda. ISIS has created an unmatched messaging system by utilizing social media and exploiting recruits' loss of identity. Successful replies to this propaganda should discredit ISIS claims, denounce the Caliphate's utopian promises, and expand outreach to vulnerable people in industrialized nations.

Therefore, when looking at the activities of the group, it is obvious that ISIS demonstrates a resurgence in the

region and it is apparent that the internet and social media play a prominent role in disseminating the propaganda campaign of the group. The struggle against ISIS underscores the ongoing need for global collaboration and proactive measures to address the complex challenges posed by extremist ideologies and insurgent groups in the 21st century.

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