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PROFILE

ISIS in Mosul and Sirte: Differences and similarities

Andrea Beccaro

European Neighbourhood Policy Chair, European Interdisciplinary Studies Department, College of Europe, Warsaw, Poland

ABSTRACT

Today, ISIS is a serious security threats in the Mediterranean area; it is active or controls areas in the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey) and in North Africa (Libya, Tunisia and Sinai). Media reports and several research papers seem to refer to ISIS as a group that operates indiscriminately in these areas and regions using the same political, military, social, and economic pattern. However, looking closely at some of the theatres of war the situations appears different. Taking into account two case studies, Iraq and Libya, it is possible to see how different social, economic, and political conditions have influenced the ability of ISIS to fight and to rule, and consequently its ability to "remaining and expanding". The comparison between the longer and more linked to social fabric operations in Iraq and the shorter and more alien to social fabric operations in Libya will shed light on weaknesses and strength of ISIS, its future developments, and potentially on operations of other militias.

ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is present both in the Middle East (i.e., Syria, Iraq) and in North Africa (i.e., Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria). Along with similar jihadist militias, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Uqbah Ibn Nafi, Ansar al-Sharia and al-Nusra Front, it represents a considerable threat for the entire Mediterranean region in terms of security and stability. The relevance of focusing on ISIS as a case study stems from the fact that it allows for the comparison of its military operations in two different political and military contexts that have influenced both ISIS' capabilities and achievements.

Although ISIS is currently in retreat in each theatre of operation, analysing its military operations in different contexts can shed some light on the links between the local environment in which ISIS operates and its ability to achieve their political goals. While, the frequently emphasized supra-regional and global aspects of jihadism are crucial elements in order to understand movements such as ISIS, taking into account the local and security situation is a key aspect for broadening our knowledge of the nature of modern jihadist militias and many of today's conflicts.

CONTACT Andrea Beccaro andrea.beccaro@coleurope.eu

ISIS can be defined as a 'hybrid' militia as it uses a combination of both old and relatively advanced weapons and because it blurs terrorist-rooted fighting methods with more conventional infantry tactics. The choice of one specific political/military approach is not only a result of the strategic situation, which encompasses a militia's respective strategy, its regional links and political goals, but also of the local military/political situation which ISIS may be confronted with. This profile article focuses on the latter, namely on how ISIS has fought and ruled in Iraq – mainly in the city of Mosul from 2004 to 2016 – and Libya, mainly in the city of Sirte from 2015 to 2016. In Mosul, ISIS has been operating since 2004, establishing a vast and complex network linked to former regime officers and the local population; accordingly the city has come to serve as an important propaganda tool, and it represents the core of ISIS' proto-state. In contrast, Sirte has been selected because it was the first major city that ISIS conquered and ruled outside Iraq and Syria and where it could not rely entirely on the local population. The following sections move on to explain how these two different security contexts have influenced ISIS' strategy to 'remain and expand'.

Iraq and Mosul: 2004–2016

Although, over the years, ISIS has changed its name several times, its strategy has remained consistent as it has continuously resorted to terrorist practices. Its relatively long-standing presence in Iraq demonstrates probably the most obvious difference between ISIS in Iraq and ISIS in Libya, where in fact it has emerged only in recent years. In Iraq, ISIS has been expanding since 2003, due to the political and security vacuum left by the US-led operation *Iraqi Freedom* and due to its links to al-Qaeda. Actually, ISIS was founded by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who moved to Afghanistan in 1999, where, under the aegis of al-Qaeda, he built a training camp and formed his own militia (Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, JTWJ). In the summer of 2003, JTWJ carried out its first attacks, thereby demonstrating both its combat capabilities and the strategy it wanted to pursue, that is, attacking Shia Iraqis and inciting a civil war between them and the Sunni population of Iraq. The presence of both Sunni and Shia Muslims marks another key difference between ISIS' operations in Iraq and in Libya: in Iraq ISIS adopted a strategy that leveraged the fault line between those two groups of Islam in order to conquer and rule territory, whereas in Libya this strategy has been impossible, given that such a fault line does not exist. It should also be noted that the strategy of using that fault line has always reflected a distinction between ISIS and al-Qaeda, generating conflicts between the two movements that are both still present in Libya. As a matter of fact, al-Qaeda never completely supported the extreme violence related to ISI' (the Islamic State in Iraq, the new name of the movement) mass suicide attacks that targeted Shias. However, the use of mass suicide attacks backfired on ISI when several al-Anbar tribes coalesced, creating in 2006, the so-called 'Awakening' movement that gradually started

to fight against ISI. As a result, and partly due to the US-American counter-insurgency doctrine adopted in 2007, ISI started to lose territory and its grasp on the local Sunni population, mainly in the al-Anbar province. Therefore, the pace of ISI attacks in Iraq between 2008 and 2011 decreased substantially, as did the number of civilian casualties, notably from approx. 6400 in 2008 to approx. 1500 in 2011. At that time, the organization was degraded to such an extent that only a fraction of its leaders, functional cells, and fighting capabilities survived, and they were concentrated in Mosul, where from 2004 onwards the movement has managed to maintain a firm grip on the local population.

ISIS started to establish roots in the Mosul area in late 2004, when, after the battles of Falluja, several members were forced to relocate to Mosul. There, they established a vast and complex network linked to criminal activities that from 2007 onwards has represented ISI's strongest revenue generator. Consequently, ISI has attempted to govern the Mosul area since 2007, developing a shadow government that became a kind of proto-state and regulating social life, co-opting local political elites, expanding its recruitment base and using media for its purposes.

The fact that in the Mosul area the 'Awakening' movement has never developed as it did in al-Anbar explains both the strong links between the militias and local population who has always been, at least partially, supportive of ISIS, and why ISIS conducted just four targeted killings there against 'Awakening' members (while between 2012 and 2013 ISI killed 767 of them throughout Iraq – a number that does not take into account those who were wounded or fled the country). According to Whiteside, evidence has confirmed that this discrepancy is the combined result of ISIS' deep entrenchment in Mosul and the lack of desire of the local Sunni population to rally with the government instead (Whiteside, 2016).

When ISIS eventually succeeded to conquer the city of Mosul in June 2014, it simply relied on this strong local network to gain territory. Another key element was the fact that, although ISI attacks against the 'Awakening' movement in Mosul were irrelevant compared to the average number in other Iraqi provinces, the attack rate against Iraqi security forces in Mosul and in the entire Nineveh Province were the highest in all of Iraq. This rate allowed ISI to push the Iraqi national government to loosen its grip on the area, while it gained support itself and continued to grow.

With American troops no longer on the ground, with Iraqi forces increasingly disconnected from the local population as a result of ISI's targeted killings, and with new and supposedly 'promising' opportunities in Syria to extend its area of operations – as it actually did in summer 2011, forming the local ISI-linked Jabhat al-Nusra – ISI rebuilt its fighting ability. As a consequence, in the summer of 2012, it launched its year-long campaign *Breaking the Walls*. This campaign consisted of a series of 24 waves of vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks and eight prison breaks, along with the use of mortars, suicide bombers

and small-arms fire (Lewis, 2013). While, VBIED attacks occurred throughout Iraq, Mosul was targeted during that campaign in at least 12 waves. Over the spring of 2013, VBIEDS targeted Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and it reflected ISI's intention to deter Sunni Arab voter turnout in Iraqi province elections. VBIED attacks in Mosul began to increase significantly at the beginning of June 2013, signalling the political vulnerability of leading Arab Sunni politicians, as demonstrated by the killing of Sheikh Younis al-Rammah on 19 June. These attacks allowed ISI both to weaken the ability of Iraqi security forces to control the territory and to strengthen ISI links with the local population.

As of that moment, the movement became more structured and more militarily active. Since the spring of 2013, ISI controlled parts of Syria (Raqqa), and, for this reason, changed its name to ISIS. Between December 2013 and January 2014, it conquered Falluja and in June 2014 it conquered Mosul, Tikrit and vast parts of northern Iraq; in 2015, it took Ramadi.

Another explanatory factor of ISIS' success in Iraq that does not apply to Libya is related to the role played by veterans of Saddam's military and intelligence services. In fact, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi deliberately designed the strategy of recruiting former Baathist officers. As a consequence, several ISIS members, such as Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Abu Ayman al-Iraqi and Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, were proficient and skilled former military officers able not only to organize the movement more efficiently, but also to develop and plan more effective strategies. Moreover, those high-ranking officials had mobilized their own tribes and local relationships to forge ISIS' social and political links.

Finally, ISIS conquered Mosul in June 2014, while the operation to liberate the city, led by the Iraqi government and its allies (the United States and Kurdish Peshmerga), began on 16 October 2016, after preparatory operations had started in January 2016. Consequently, ISIS had more than two years to turn Mosul into a deadly urban battlefield building up defensive positions, such as tunnel networks, sniper posts and trenches, all of which are currently slowing down the advance of Iraqi security forces. In contrast, in Sirte ISIS had less than one year to build up a defensive system which, however, proved to be less effective than the one in Mosul.

Libya and Sirte: 2015–2016

ISIS' trajectory in Libya is substantially different from that in Iraq, mainly due to the movement's rather different relationship with the local population and due to the differing domestic political situation. As far as the support of the local population is concerned, the most noticeable difference is that, while in Iraq ISIS could leverage the fault line between the Sunni and Shia factions of society, thus, portraying itself as the defender of Sunni minorities which were supposedly oppressed by a Shia-led central government, in Libya such a fault line simply does not exist, given that the Libyan ethno-religious composition

is almost completely Sunni. Also, in Iraq ISIS benefited from a robust and vast underground structure linked to criminal activity that supported its activities and offered secure bases, all of which were the result of its relatively long operative presence.

In Libya, three different generations of jihadists have followed one another over the last three decades. The first generation of jihadists gained its war experience during the Afghan war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s and formed the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in 1995, which was active mainly in the cities of Bengasi and Derna and which Gaddafi's security forces managed to fully suppress around 1998 (though some of its members still played a political role in the 2011 revolt). The second generation emerged after the US-led 'war on terror' and funnelled Libyan recruits into Iraq; it was not a coincidence that during the Iraq insurgency a significant number of suicide attackers were Libyans mainly from Derna. Finally, the third generation of Libyan jihadists gained their combat experience during the 2011 uprising against the Gaddafi regime or simply joined newly emerging jihadist groups after the fall of the regime as of late 2011.

Despite the long-standing existence of Libyan groups related to jihadism, ISIS made its first appearance in Libya only in 2014, that is, three years after the revolt against Gaddafi. As a result, and while, it had been one of the main actors in the insurgency in Iraq since its beginnings, in Libya ISIS found a more complex and hostile environment with a multitude of conflicting militias and tribes. It was a sort of latecomer, a more recent phenomenon with more tenuous links to the local population. While, in Iraq ISIS throughout the years expanded its links to the local population, using mainly terrorist tactics and targeted killings in order to eliminate enemies and government affiliates, in Libya it did not have the time to establish itself in the same way. Although ISIS in Sirte has benefited from a situation that was similar to the one in Mosul, where it could draw on the support of some dissatisfied and ostracized former members of the Qaddafi regime, it has been always perceived by locals as an alien movement and as a competitor. Consequently, in 2015, when ISIS attempted to expel other militias or force them to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi (for example, by killing tribal leaders), it motivated those local militias to turn against it.

The disconnection between ISIS and the local population is also demonstrated by the role of foreign fighters. Several foreign fighters, who reached Iraq as well as Syria, were used as suicide bombers and 'foot soldiers'; however, ISIS' leadership has always been composed of people from the respective local populations. While, in Libya foreign fighters have carried out the same tasks, that is suicide bombers and foot soldiers, they also represented ISIS's leadership and fulfilled political and organizing roles simultaneously. For example, ISIS current leader is Abd al-Qadir al-Najdi, whose name suggests Saudi origins, and his predecessor, Abu Nabil al-Anbari, was an Iraqi killed by the US airstrike in eastern Libya in November 2015.

The first stronghold ISIS established in Libya was in the city of Derna (2014), though it was soon driven out. Subsequently, in 2015, ISIS started to build its presence in the Sirte area, using an approach based on different phases: gathering intelligence; military operations; governance. In Sirte, ISIS tried to secure the support of a number of local leaders, and benefited from defections of fighters hitherto loyal to Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL). This was a major development, given ASL' ties to the local population, and it helped ISIS to reach out to ex-Gaddafi regime elements improving both its political and military capabilities. In this way, ISIS built up tenuous links even with tribal elements and was able to develop an intelligence network, hence its first, albeit weak, presence in the Sirte area in January 2015. This first phase was primarily focused on gathering information and on creating a local network of militants. This was followed by a military phase, during which ISIS targeted the outskirts of Sirte, local radio and television stations and government buildings. Only in June 2015, was ISIS able to claim full control of the city.

During these two phases, ISIS conducted other operations linked mainly to propaganda and indoctrination: *dawa* activities destined to spread its message to the local population using billboards, leaflets and similar tools, as well as *hisba* activities, which are related to a more strict interpretation of sharia. These activities were important because they were aimed at overcoming ISIS' lack of links to the existing and rather complex social fabric in Libya (Zelin, 2016). However, contrary to the Iraqi city of Mosul, ISIS in Sirte did not control the internet, and, therefore, was unable to control all means of propaganda. Though ISIS did introduce so-called media points in Sirte, due to the limited territory it controlled – it was never able to expand much beyond Sirte's hinterland – in fact it failed to multiply them as it did in Iraq.

Another difference between ISIS actions in Mosul and Sirte is related to the governance of both cities. Although ISIS put up black flags, symbolizing its rule, in several corners of Sirte and installed its own police force and Sharia court, it was not able to carry out more than two public works: it allegedly did some renovation work at the Ibn Sina Hospital and another in which it cleaned, landscaped and decorated some of the city's streets. Thus, ISIS failed to present itself as a 'government' force able to render services to the local population. While, to a certain extent ISIS succeeded in state-building in Iraq, here understood as eliminating its rivals inside its territory and establishing some governance structures, in Libya it failed to do so or to generate at least some degree of legitimacy. This was also a consequence of the local political situation. Whereas, in Iraq, ISIS successfully fought against the Iraqi security forces initially present in Mosul, it was not able to replicate this strategy in Sirte, where pre-existing local militias were perceived as legitimate actors thanks to the role they played during the revolution against Qaddafi.

The differences between ISIS in Iraq and ISIS in Libya are also related to the weaponry it uses. It is a well-established fact that in Iraq ISIS has developed

its own weapons, transformed cars, trucks and bulldozers into highly well-armoured IED vehicles, and manufactured 'new' weapons, such as drones and teleoperated sniper rifles used in urban environments. A recent study by Bunker and Keshavarz (2016) has counted at least four such rifles sequestrated by security forces and militias in Iraq; there are probably even more because such arms could have been destroyed during battles or, alternatively, ISIS could have simply taken them with it during withdrawals from areas it had to give up. In contrast, in Libya only the use of one teleoperated rifle has been reported.

Moreover, in Libya ISIS could not rely on the use of heavy weapons and combat vehicles, such as main battle tanks or armored vehicles, whereas in Iraq it was able to capture them in the context of the conquest of Mosul. This deeply affected its warfare, which in Libya has always remained more similar to the practices used by guerrilla fighting groups as opposed to Iraq, where ISIS deployed more conventional tactics. Also, it should be noted that this has also influenced its ability to defend Sirte and, as a consequence, the fighting aimed at liberating the city was shorter than in Mosul, even though the attacking forces were less trained and had less support from the US-American special forces than in Iraq.

Conclusions

Taking into account how ISIS operated in Iraq and Libya in recent years reveals two different trajectories, which generated two different outcomes. Undoubtedly, ISIS was more 'successful' in Mosul, becoming a 'proto-State' able to control territory and conduct complex military operations. This was the result of years of engaging in terrorist activities and targeted killings of Iraqi politicians, members of the 'Awakening' council and of the Iraqi security forces. In this way, ISIS disrupted the links between the local population and the central government, whereas it established its own links and political control. In comparison, it has been less successful in Sirte, where it has been competing and fighting against several militias and where it has never been able to completely overcome their influence and power. Moreover, while in Mosul ISIS was able to co-opt former members of Saddam's regime who helped the movement to build up, in Sirte only a handful of former elements of Gaddafi's regime joined ISIS.

Despite these differences, ISIS could in the future implement the same strategy after the fall of Sirte and Mosul, that is, it could simply be 'disappearing' into the desert areas where its members could find open and unguarded space. There, they could use their mobility to evade reconnaissance and targeted killings, and they could conduct small raids and 'hit and run' attacks. Precedents in this regard exist as the case of Iraq between 2008 and 2011 exemplifies. Moreover, such an approach could also allow ISIS to survive military operations and regain its strength, thus, posing a potentially more serious security threat to the entire region at a certain stage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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