

# Vulnerabilities to the Resilience of Daesh in Syria and Iraq

## From “Remaining and Expanding” to Retreating and Declining

Michael Jonsson

**After its lightning offensive in the spring of 2014, Daesh proved notably resilient, initially losing only limited territory despite facing sizable and motivated opponents on several fronts simultaneously. However, since early 2016, the terrorist group has entered a trajectory of steady decline and now seems likely to lose a majority of the territory it controls in Iraq, and possibly also in Syria. This briefing explores the sources of Daesh’s military resilience and potential vulnerabilities over time, arguing that it will continue to lose territorial control as a consequence of strategic over-reach.**

In his classic work *On War*, Clausewitz formulated the idea of *centre of gravity* (*Schwerpunkt*), taken to mean “the central feature of the enemy’s power”. While far from an uncontroversial concept, since it can be interpreted in countless ways, it is nonetheless tempting to look for that one centre of gravity when trying to explain the resilience of Daesh. In this vein, analysts argue for instance that “control of terrain to serve as a physical caliphate is now the principal center of gravity of [Daesh]”, since this provides religious legitimacy, military capacity, a globally resonant message and access to recruits and economic resources.

It is however debatable whether a single centre of gravity can be identified, since pre-existing military capacity, effective recruitment and ample funding enabled Daesh to initially establish control over its “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq. That said, it is clear that depriving the group of its haven in Syria and Iraq is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for ultimately defeating Daesh.

This briefing analyzes the resilience of Daesh as an insurgent organisation in Iraq and Syria. Its central argument is that, after the conflict in Syria offered Daesh a new lease of life, the group has addressed many of its internal, operational weaknesses. In an internal analysis by Al Qaeda in Iraq/Islamic State of Iraq (AQI/ISI, the precursor of Daesh) of its set-backs in 2006-2008, several causes were identified, including failure to understand the local context, weak command-and-control, tensions between local and foreign fighters, poor strategic coordination between armed and non-armed insurgent actions, and deficient distribution of resources.

By contrast, recent reports attribute the apparent resilience of Daesh to factors such as improved command-and-control, indirect state support, an effective propaganda

and recruitment machinery, and a well-functioning financing network. But all of this was nullified by a single strategic mistake - inciting a sectarian, multi-front conflict that Daesh would never be able to win militarily.

Simply put, fighting sustained battles against multiple enemies over a territory at one point estimated to be over 90 000 square kilometres while facing some of the world’s most lethal air power is unsustainable. This stretches supply-lines, limits Daesh’s ability to mass forces and manoeuvre quickly and exposes its fighters to extreme attrition rates. Ironically, such strategic over-reach was the core internal cause of the decline of AQI/ISI in 2006-2008, but was seemingly never recognised and is now at the heart of the Daesh’s renewed disarray. As long as the military pressure can be maintained, Daesh will in all likelihood continue to lose territorial control in Iraq and Syria, which would impact upon but not neutralize the terrorist threat it poses, nor end its “provinces” in other countries.

### Leadership and Strategic Decision-Making

In a sense, the strategic decision-making of Daesh simultaneously represents the organisation’s greatest strength and its greatest weakness. Strength in that the group is very well-organised and adept at learning from past mistakes, and weakness in that its strategic aims are wildly unrealistic – in one reading to “maintain the physical caliphate; expand the caliphate to include all of ‘Dar al-Islam’, or historically Muslim lands; assert unchallenged authority as a caliphate; and win an apocalyptic war with the West”. Pursuing these aims has led the organisation into conflict with Shia and Sunni majority states and Western powers, as well as Shia, Kurdish and fellow Sunni non-state armed groups, simultaneously. Simply put, as



long as this multi-front fighting continues, Daesh is not viable as an insurgent force controlling territory in Iraq, and probably not in Syria either. This outcome should have been predictable early in the conflict, something which is probably causing internal discontent, even if this is not very visible from the outside.

Having said that, operationally Daesh is a highly effective fighting force by the standards of most other insurgent groups. Led by Abu Bakr al Bagdadi, the self-anointed “Caliph of all Muslims”, the organisation has a unified leadership, a hierarchical organisational structure and a bureaucratic division of labour. One advantage of this is that the group can act cohesively and strategically – channelling resources from calmer regions to contested areas, for instance.

Another is that there are clear lines of succession. Hence, if leaders are killed they can be quickly replaced, a fact which is reinforced by delegating much authority to local mid-level commanders. This structure has been designed to withstand the loss of senior members, based on the experiences of e.g. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Daesh also maintains strict operational secrecy and avoids electronic communications about operations between commanders.

Even so, the multi-front fighting which Daesh intentionally provoked has inevitably begun taking its toll. As intelligence collection has improved, numerous Daesh commanders and operatives have fallen prey to airstrikes, including senior figures within its external operations wing, financiers, military commanders, skilled hackers, infamous executioners and spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, while Baghdadi himself may have been seriously injured. This loss of commanders, combined with limited use of electronic communications, will most likely affect command and control, and hence strategic coherence.

While Daesh remains a potent fighting force, its strategy of “remaining and expanding” – announced in its propaganda magazine *Dabiq* in November 2014 – has inexorably turned into retreating and declining, as the limits to Daesh’s military prowess have gradually been exposed. After expanding in Syria in 2013 and Iraq in 2014, in 2015 Daesh began losing significant portions of the territory it controlled, including Tikrit and the Baiji oilfields in Iraq and the Tal Abyad border crossing in Syria. During the first half of 2016, Daesh further lost control of Palmyra and Manbij in Syria and Fallujah and Ramadi in Iraq. In total, the organization has lost an estimated 30% of the territory it

once controlled in Syria, and 45% in Iraq. As the battle for Mosul inches closer, while its experienced cadres dwindle, Daesh is clearly under strain.

### **Fighting Force**

Estimates of the number of Daesh fighters vary wildly, presumably due to variations in sources used and definitions of who constitutes a combatant. Hence, comparing estimates from a single source at various points in time presumably offers the most reliable description of the trajectory of Daesh, even if the exact numbers should be treated with caution. For example, the CIA estimated in September 2014 that Daesh had approximately 20,000-31,000 fighters, compared with earlier assessments of 10,000. A year later, the estimates remained largely unchanged, while by June 2016 the CIA assessed that the number of Daesh combatants had declined to 18,000-22,000. Other analysts have estimated the size of Daesh to be significantly larger, ranging from 50,000 up to 200,000.

Foreign fighters have played a central role in maintaining Daesh’s fighting force even as the group has faced extremely high attrition rates over the past two years. For instance, the Soufan Group estimated in June 2014 that 12,000 fighters from 81 countries had gone to Syria since 2011, mainly to Daesh, Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham. Eighteen months later, they found that the number had more than doubled, reaching an estimated 27,000-31,000 fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq. These numbers align closely with a US intelligence estimate from September 2015, which assessed that 31,000 fighters had arrived from over 100 countries. Analysts attribute this increase in foreign fighters – which greatly benefited Daesh – to the allure of the “caliphate”, but also to its gruesome, but efficient, propaganda machinery.

In spite of the difficulties involved in estimating the number of Daesh fighters, evidence increasingly suggests that the group has experienced very large battlefield losses, is no longer expanding its cadres and may be struggling to replace experienced combatants. Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, who oversees Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve coalition operations against Daesh, claims that some 45,000 Daesh fighters have been killed over the past two years. These numbers are very difficult to square with the initial CIA estimates of the size of the group – as this would imply that Daesh has disappeared twice and reappeared a third time – but they illustrate the extremely high attrition rates facing the organization’s



combatants. As a result, Daesh is increasingly being forced to rely on inexperienced fighters. Recruitment into Daesh has reportedly dropped precipitously, leading it to engage in coerced recruitment of youths, executing would-be defectors and using children as suicide bombers. Given its harsh treatment of members, it is possible that defections will increase in number as the group's social control is further weakened, as has happened with other declining insurgent groups.

### **Financial Resources and Logistical Support Network**

As it entered into Syria in 2012-13, Daesh benefited greatly from an efficient financing and logistics support network. Relying on a well-established network inherited from AQI allowed Daesh to procure effective weaponry, offer humanitarian support to civilians and provide fighters with training and logistical support. This financing network, which was forged during a decade of conflict in Iraq, is hierarchical and bureaucratic, involves close monitoring of incomes and is able to collect money in stable areas and channel it to militarily contested regions. This allowed Daesh to rapidly subordinate, incorporate or co-opt smaller insurgent factions in Syria, pulling substantial numbers of fighters away from the Free Syrian Army.

Once it became a dominant actor, Daesh swiftly proceeded to establish one of the most extensive terrorist financing ventures in existence to date, using its military might to control important revenue streams such as oil wells, border crossings and coerced taxation. Lesser income sources included donations from foreign sponsors, ransom for hostages and sales of looted antiquities. These revenue streams were mainly generated locally, often in cash or valuable goods, and were only dependent to a limited extent on the formal financial system, limiting the possibility to restrict the funding of Daesh through financial sanctions. Consequently, in 2015 Daesh was seen as one of the richest terrorist groups in the world, with estimated annual revenue ranging between \$500 million and up to \$2 billion.

However, through its attempts to create a pseudo-state in Syria and Iraq, Daesh also took on sizable financing requirements such as an extensive military, security and propaganda apparatus and a bare-bones social welfare system. Meanwhile, several of its initial sources of revenue – bank robberies, looting and forced “taxation”, for instance – were either one-time revenue sources or prone to be depleted over time. Consequently, once a coordinated strategy to target Daesh financing came into full effect, the

impact was dramatic. After initial hesitation, over the past year coalition airstrikes have reduced Daesh oil revenue by 50% and airstrikes have struck 25 cash depots, destroying at least half a billion dollars, while wage payments to state employees in Mosul have ended. Consequently, wages to Daesh members have been cut by half, while other perks of fighters have also been reduced. While not a fatal problem, decreasing funding further constrains the operational ability of Daesh.

### **Messaging, Recruitment and Popular Support**

The Daesh propaganda machine is extensive and sophisticated, including its multilingual media arm Al Hayat Media Center, the magazine Dabiq and a dense network of Twitter, Telescope and other social media users. A comparison between Al Qaeda and Daesh propaganda found that the former focuses more on attrition (wearing down the enemy's will to fight), whereas Daesh prioritises intimidation and especially outbidding (demonstrating greater commitment to fight an enemy). Others argue that Daesh uses military successes to attract new recruits, particularly foreign fighters, and that the offensives against Palmyra and Ramadi in 2015 were driven by a need to “keep up the momentum of victory”. In its notoriously grotesque propaganda videos, Daesh uses brutality not only as a means of recruiting foreign fighters, but also to “weaken their enemies' fighting power”.

However, others claim that amplifying the internal dissent within competing jihadist groups might be a useful way of creating a counter-narrative, and a growing body of literature argues that broadcasting the voices of defectors is the best way to undermine the glorified self-image Daesh promotes. Likewise, encouraging defections through amnesties in exchange for intelligence cooperation, witness protection and psychological support may be used to undermine cohesion inside Daesh, as has been illustrated in other conflicts.

In fact, as it is being militarily over-powered, there are signs of discontent within Daesh, reportedly resulting in executions of its own and even in-fighting between different factions. In a bid to prevent negative news emanating from and reaching into territory it controls, Daesh has gradually forbidden private internet access and satellite television in areas it controls. As its “caliphate” is now visibly under strain, Daesh is losing its magnetic appeal and is attempting to engage in damage control. In July 2016, its then spokesman al-Adnani claimed that even if



the group lost control of Mosul, Raqqa and Sirte (in Libya), it would not be defeated. This was interpreted as a way to limit the damage losing the “caliphate” would inevitably inflict on the group.

### **Influence of Regional Powers**

In spite of alienating virtually all states in the region, Daesh is nonetheless dependent on transport corridors to receive recruits, arms, ammunition and other supplies and to export looted oil and antiquities. In this regard, Turkish territory has played a central role. While Turkey has never overtly supported Daesh, it is clear that sins of omission have occurred, including large numbers of foreign fighters transiting the country, initially lax policing of the Turkey-Syria border, failure to prevent recruitment amidst refugee camps in southern Anatolia and failure to effectively prevent smuggling of looted oil into Turkey. However, following several terrorist attacks in Turkey, including that against Atatürk airport in Istanbul, in late August 2016 Turkey intervened in Syria, taking over Jarablus. While this intervention is equally directed against Kurdish YPG forces, Daesh has gained yet another mortal enemy, with far-reaching strategic consequences.

Beyond this, while there have been reports of individuals and charities in the Gulf supporting Sunni extremists in Syria and more than 2000 Saudi recruits joining Daesh, the Saudi state has condemned the group in the strongest possible way. Iran, on the other hand, has actively supported military operations against the group, e.g. through Hezbollah operations in Syria and Shia militias in Iraq. In a supremely volatile region, the one aim on which all regional powers seem to agree on is their wish to see Daesh defeated. However, Daesh is not perceived as the primary security threat by these countries, which makes defeating the organization a more drawn-out process than it otherwise would have been.

### **Conclusions**

From this short analysis of Daesh, it is evident that the terrorist group is experiencing a trajectory of swift decline as an insurgent force in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, in Syria. The key cause of this is the glaring dissonance between the effective, well-organised and ruthless management of the organisation at a tactical and operational level and the millenarian and cult-like ideology the group espouses, including seemingly impossible strategic aims. It would be

tempting thus, to argue that Daesh will quickly crumble under the weight of its own bloodthirst and limitless ambitions. To date, however, the insurgency has shown remarkable resilience and its adversaries are riddled with conflicting interests and priorities and hampered by a limited willingness to deploy ground troops. To a certain extent, the resilience of Daesh to date has been a reflection of the weakness of the coalition opposing it. Now, at long last, Daesh is facing continuous set-backs and may be reaching a critical turning-point, as the group is being squeezed on all fronts simultaneously, geographical and functional alike.

Provided the military pressure can be maintained, Daesh will most likely lose control over Mosul and other major population centres in Iraq within the foreseeable future. Inside Syria the situation is more complex, but militarily, time is not on the side of Daesh there either. Losing Mosul and even Raqqa would not spell the end of Daesh, however. A thoughtful strategy must thus take a longer view, targeting how to deal with foreign fighters returning to Western Europe and elsewhere, stabilising Iraq and resolving the disastrous mayhem still ravaging Syria, with specific focus on guaranteeing the security of the long-suffering Sunni population.

Last but not least, a weakened Daesh will not spell the end of terrorist attacks in Iraq, Syria or abroad, nor is there any guarantee that the group will not be able to re-establish itself if it loses its territorial base. Hence, whereas the Daesh “caliphate” is shrinking and is seemingly on the road to eventual collapse, the ideology which underpins it, the state fragility and ethnic divisions which enabled its rise, and the nihilistic *modus operandi* through which it was brought into being will remain a challenge for a generation, if not more. In a 2009 analysis, Fishman concluded that AQI/ISI had “the power to tear society apart, but was not strong enough to pull it back together again in its own image”. The same could be said of its current, but much larger and even more brutal incarnation, Daesh. Hence, the main questions today are not *if* but *when* Daesh will ultimately lose control of Mosul and probably Raqqa, how much pain it will be able to inflict prior to this and what comes afterwards.

*Michael Jonsson*  
*Senior researcher*