

Terror and territory: Somali lessons for the IS decline

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As the so-called Islamic State (IS) loses territory under its control in its core areas in Syria and Iraq, it becomes seemingly more dangerous, especially from the European perspective. To understand one aspect helping the increase of number of IS's attacks in Europe, as well as its increased activity in regions from Libya (Chivvis 2016), across Afghanistan (Azami 2016), to the South-East Asia, it is useful to look at the lessons we can learn from the similar decline that occurred in East Africa. Between 2008 and 2011, Al-Shabaab (AS) constituted not only the most important political actor in the southern Somalia but also territorially the most successful branch of Al-Qaeda (Hansen 2013, Solomon 2014)¹.

AS since the Kenyan invasion in 2011 came through rapid decline in its territorial control and also through important shift in its strategy. The AS's decline under the pressure from the international coalition led primarily by the African Union (AU) forces (mainly Kenyan, Ethiopian, Ugandan, and Burundi) resembles in many factors the similar territorial loss of IS following the pressure from the international coalition led by the US. Despite the fact that we can find important distinctions between IS and AS such as local focus of the former, or certain ideological distinctiveness given the continuing AS's loyalty to Al-Qaeda, there are several lessons that the decline in the territorial control of AS can teach us about the possible trajectory of the weakened IS.

Lesson 1: focus on suicide attacks

The control of territory requires any actor to establish at least semi-regular armed forces that defend such an area. Once the group is unable to compete with its opponents in direct clashes it turns to asymmetric attacks. As the result, many of the groups use, previously alien, tactics of suicide attacks. As evident from the numbers presented by Mueller (2016, 12-13), the number of suicide attacks in the years since 2011 when the group was under heavy pressure from the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) rose exponentially. The attacks are, furthermore, aimed primarily on the soft targets outside of the primary geographic region of AS operations (mainly Kenya) (e.g. Westgate Mall, Garissa University College) with the

¹ AS leader Ahmed Godane pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2010 and the group was official endorsed by Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2012.

ultimate goal of decreasing the popularity of the foreign intervention among the Kenyan population and alienation of Somalis in the country that are usually targeted by the Kenyan security services in response to the AS attacks (Williams 2014, 908).

As a result of the loss of territory, we can expect similar development in case of the IS. With its powerful social media strategy, IS can inspire different uncoordinated attacks that will in effect aim to disrupt not only the willingness of the out-of-region countries to support the anti-IS coalition but will also try to establish a scapegoat culture that will leave the affected communities with more alienated potential recruits for IS operations. The attacks are also primarily aiming out of the territories under original control of IS (Europe, Afghanistan, etc.). Also, many attacks directly unconnected to the IS are claimed by the group as a part of their media strategy. As the vision of IS is the one of apocalyptic battle, the vision of the ultimate “war” between believers and infidels is playing into its cards. If we are to follow the first lesson from Somalia, the increase in the number of (sometimes spectacular) suicidal attacks on soft targets primarily out of the original territory under the group’s control should not be met with ostracising of the whole segment of population as this scapegoating will only bring more recruits to the IS embrace.

Lesson 2: move towards guerrilla warfare

If between 2008 and 2011 AS stood as the strongest armed actor in the southern Somalia able to successfully engage regular Somali troops, the post-2012 surge forced them into the use of guerrilla strategy. This strategy is focused on the control of few remote places such as certain regions along the Kenyan border or so-called Sharqistaan (Bryden 2014, 11) and hit-and-run attacks on the AU outposts. AS is quite successful in its attacks and is also able to control part of the illegal trade with charcoal that generates important revenue for the group. De-territorialisation thus led AS to the introduction of the asymmetric military strategy and the loss of the important economic centres like Kismayo forced the group to the acceptance of more of a foreign funding with the ability to generate limited revenue from the local sources.

Similar trends can be increasingly observable in the case of IS as well. As the military power of the group decreases, we can observe growing importance of use of asymmetric warfare with the ability to conduct regular warfare largely diminishing (compare the siege of Kobani and the defence of Fallujah). It is to be expected that the IS will continue to descend into the guerrilla warfare as it loses important centres like Mosul and large numbers of its

fighters and experienced military leaders. This will also reflect in its financing. If currently IS gains the most of its funding from oil smuggling (Byman 2015, 173, Hashim 2014, 75), it will be still harder for the group to sustain this kind of self-financing as it loses the important oil centres and access to oil flows. On contrary, the funding from sources like fake charities, single contributions, or ransoms is to become increasingly important.

Lesson 3: no military only victory possible

Despite the fact, that AS ruled with a strict hand often acting more like a gang than an administrator (e.g. (Fergusson 2013)), for many ordinary Somalis its strict rule meant an improvement over the previous years of anarchy (Garnstein-Ross 2009, 35-36). Furthermore, even though the AU troops and especially KDF struck hard on the AS on the battlefield, the group learned how to survive in a different manner and adapted to the new environment (Anderson 2016) feeding on the local grievances of disenfranchised Somalis. It is clear that to destroy the group the issues of marginalization, proper administration and governance, and security must be addressed.

The same will become true of the IS. Despite the fact that the current strategy rightly aims at the destruction of the military and economic capabilities of the group, the IS will remain an important actor as long as the issues similar to the Somalian case are addressed. The marginalized groups of mainly Sunni Muslims must feel safe and included, state institutions must become more effective, and people must not feel threatened by the state forces (e.g. the unwise introduction of Shia militias on Sunni territories). As long as these issues remain unresolved, the military operations diminishing territorial reach of the IS will remain void.

Conclusion:

It would be naïve to expect the IS to magically disappear once it loses control of the territories it currently holds. As the experience from places like Somalia tells us, the change of the nature of the violent non-state actors from territorial to non-territorial does not diminish the potential of the terrorist groups to do harm and conduct large-scale attacks. As long as the large number of population feels threatened and left out, the IS or some follower organization will find a breeding ground with enough recruits to remain potent guerrilla force operating in the hardly accessible areas with the potential to conduct massive casualty attacks around the wider region. The only way to diminish this potential is to focus on a development and good

governance strategies following the military operation. Only when all the parts of the population feel reasonably safe and satisfied with their lives can be the IS marginalized to the point of irrelevance. AS presents an example of the other scenario, scenario filled with destabilization, violence, and uncertainty.

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