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ISIS Will Fail, but What About the Idea of ISIS?

Despite claiming responsibility for attacks like the one in London, the group is dying. It will retain the ability to inspire.



Iraqi forces enter Mosul airport for the first time since the Islamic State group overran the region in 2014.

Ahmad Al-Rubaye / AFP / Getty Images

SIMON COTTEE

MAR 23, 2017

GLOBAL

The Islamic State is claiming responsibility for the London attack that left three people and the attacker dead on Wednesday. “It is believed that this attacker acted alone,” Prime Minister Theresa May [said](#), adding that the British-born man, already known to authorities, was inspired by “Islamist terrorism.” For its part, ISIS called the attacker its “soldier” in a report published by its Amaq news agency in both Arabic and English. The caliphate, it seemed, was eager to signal to a broad audience that it was as busy and effective as ever. The facts, however, tell a different story.

Back in 2014, God was on the side of ISIS—or so it appeared, and so ISIS claimed, with some plausibility. The speed and scope of its ascent was extraordinary. In mid-June it seized Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, and in the

following months it annexed a [Britain](#)-sized swath of territory crossing Syria and Iraq. In his historic June 29 [statement](#), in which he declared the restoration of the caliphate and announced Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader or caliph, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani [said](#):

It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every *mujahid* [one who does jihad] and *muwahhid* [monotheist]. ... It is the caliphate—the abandoned obligation of the era. ... The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared. ... Now the caliphate has returned. ... Now the dream has become a reality.

Al-Adnani also warned ISIS fighters that they would face “tests and quakes,” and the next few months proved him right about that. But he couldn’t have been more wrong about the “triumph” part.

Since August 2014, when it was at the height of its powers, ISIS has lost about [45 percent of its territory in Syria and 20 percent in Iraq](#)—and with it a vast source of wealth generation. According to [research](#) conducted by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), ISIS’s “annual revenue has more than halved: from up to \$1.9b in 2014 to a maximum of \$870m in 2016.” At the same time, the flow of foreign fighters to the caliphate has [plummeted](#), from a peak of 2,000 crossing the Turkey-Syria border each month in late 2014 to as few as 50 each month nowadays. The U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition has reportedly killed more than [10,000 ISIS fighters](#), including [al-Adnani](#), who was targeted in a U.S. drone strike last August, and other notable leadership figures. And last month Iraqi government forces took [complete control of Eastern Mosul](#).

More than two and a half years after al-Adnani’s statement, “the sun” of ISIS’s jihad would appear to be setting. Far from becoming an entrenched reality, ISIS’s self-declared caliphate is desperately hanging on for survival and will in all probability return to the dreamscape from which it came. God, it turns out, has

switched sides and deserted ISIS—or so it seems, and so ISIS’s enemies can claim, with some plausibility.

It’s far too early to be writing ISIS’s obituary, but it seems likely that the group will lose its hold on Mosul and its de-facto capital of Raqqa in northern Syria by the end of the year, although much will depend on what role the United States takes on in coalition efforts to defeat the group.

What will happen to ISIS—both as a physical entity and as an idea—once it is removed from its territorial bases in Iraq and Syria?

The expert consensus seems to be that ISIS as a physical entity will [retreat into the desert](#), where it will regroup in some form or other, just as it did after the U.S.-led [surge in Iraq](#) in 2007. Whether such a retreat will spell the end of ISIS in the long term will depend crucially on the political situation in Iraq. If nothing is done to change the power balance between Sunnis and Shia, and if Sunni civilians are massacred out of [misplaced revenge for ISIS atrocities](#), there is every possibility that ISIS will again return and resume a footing among Sunni communities. As Hassan Hassan [put it](#) in *The New York Times*, if there is no Sunni group in Iraq that can “fill the void left by the Islamic State,” then ISIS “will once again emerge from the desert.”

A return to the desert will almost certainly make it harder for ISIS to mount large-scale attacks on Western targets, although it may intensify the desire to mount such attacks as a way of signaling continuing relevance and resilience to the wider jihadist community. And although surviving foreign fighters may seek to return to their countries of origin to launch attacks there, incidents of [remotely guided](#) lone wolf attacks in the West may actually decline, given the diminishing symbolic rewards a degraded ISIS is able to provide distant would-be-martyrs.

Loss of territory will also, as Georgetown’s Bruce Hoffman recently [observed](#), greatly reduce ISIS’s global appeal, making it difficult to recruit and retain supporters. Indeed, it may even, as political scientist Mara Revkin [suggested](#) in *The New York Times*, “trigger a credibility crisis from which the group may never fully recover,” given that ISIS’s self-avowed status as the world’s preeminent

jihadist actor is based almost entirely on its control of territory and ability to govern.

The other point of consensus is that the destruction of the caliphate will not spell the end of the [caliphate as an idea](#); it will live on not only in the minds of surviving ISIS members, but also as a free-floating ideological meme in contemporary global culture. ISIS analyst Charlie Winter, for example, [argued](#) that one way in which this meme will be preserved is through ISIS's massive digital propaganda archive. "The caliphate idea will exist long beyond its proto-state," Winter wrote.

No doubt there will be some ISIS foreign fighters for whom territorial defeat of the caliphate will spark a spiritual crisis, prompting disaffection from ISIS and disillusionment with its animating ideology.

Among a sample of 58 ISIS defectors, only a few had renounced their commitment to the jihadist ideology.

But for many others, especially those true believers whose core identity is intricately and indisociably bound up with ISIS, it will spark disaffection from neither the group nor its animating ideology. For these diehards, ISIS will remain the divinely ordained real deal whose setbacks are merely temporary and whose [ultimate triumph](#) is guaranteed. It's not that God has abandoned the *mujahids* in favor of the infidel; rather, it's that [trial and torment are inevitable](#) on the path of jihad, and must be endured. Even if territorial defeat does occur, it will not be a "true" defeat, as al-Adnani [explained](#) in his last recorded message in May 2016: "Whoever thinks that we fight to protect some land or some authority, or that victory is measured thereby, has strayed far from the truth. ... O America, would we be defeated and you be victorious if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa? ... Certainly not! We would be defeated and you victorious only if you were able to remove the Quran from Muslims' hearts."

For others still, territorial defeat of the caliphate may prompt defection from ISIS, but not from its worldview. In John Horgan's [research](#) on former terrorists, many belonged to this category: "disengaged" but not "de-radicalized."

“Often,” Horgan [wrote](#), “there can be physical disengagement from terrorist activity, but no concomitant change or reduction in ideological support.”

There is some evidence to suggest that many former ISIS members are disengaged but ideologically committed. “Many of the ISIS deserters I have met in Turkey,” Revkin [wrote](#), “still identify as jihadists who want to establish some form of shariah-based governance, but they became disillusioned with ISIS when they saw that the group was failing to follow its own strict rules.”

A [report](#) by the ICSR echoed this: Among a sample of 58 ISIS defectors, only a few had renounced their “commitment to the jihadist ideology,” whereas “for the majority, the critique of [ISIS] continued to be framed in jihadist and/or sectarian terms.” Terrorism researcher Amarnath Amarasingam [categorized](#) ex-ISIS foreign fighters as “disengaged returnees,” writing, “While they may rescind their allegiance to a particular militant group, they remain committed to the broader cause of jihadism.” According to [German authorities](#), 48 percent of [German fighters linked to ISIS and Al Qaeda](#) returning from Syria and Iraq (274 in total) were still devoted to the cause of jihad.

The history of Western supporters of Soviet communism testifies to a similar phenomenon: Although many renounced their membership in the Communist Party and acknowledged its failures, they did not renounce their commitment to the ideals of communism. In [The End of Commitment](#), the sociologist Paul Hollander called these unrepentant comrades “the unwavering,” those whose “deep attachment to ends and ideals persists in the face of disillusioning experiences.” By way of example, he cited the British social historian [E. P. Thompson](#), who, in a 100-page “[Open Letter](#)” to the Polish philosopher and ex-communist [Leszek Kołakowski](#), expressed his allegiance not to the Communist Party, “but to the Communist movement in its humanist potential.”

Hollander also discussed the case of British historian [Eric Hobsbawm](#), who, though he recognized the flaws inherent in existing communist societies, remained resolute in his commitment to the ends of communism. “The dream of the October Revolution,” Hobsbawm wrote in his 2002 autobiography [Interesting Times](#), “is still there somewhere inside me...”

For Hollander, such formidable intransigence, as exemplified by Thompson, Hobsbawm, and a host of other left-leaning intellectuals, is a testament to the power of utopian ideas—and their extraordinary capacity to inspire and retain allegiance even after history has decisively repudiated them.

This intransigence is also a testament to the need to believe—or rather, as the English writer [Stephen Spender](#) put it in his contribution to *The God that Failed* (a classic [volume of essays](#) by famous ex-communists), “the unwillingness of people to believe what they did not want to believe, to see what they do not want to see.”

History will assuredly repudiate ISIS, just as it has decisively repudiated the utopian experiment of Soviet communism. But the idea of the caliphate will remain, despite its tarnished association with ISIS. Just as unrepentant communists [said](#) of their utopian vision of a classless society, today’s caliphate supporters can say: The caliphate never failed—it was never tried.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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