Social Impact in Decline: Anticipating the Weakening of ISIS's Ideology

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Abstract

This article undertakes an intrinsic case study of ISIS's social impact on the citizens of Mosul, Iraq directly after its occupation thereof. It does so, moreover, within the framework of ISIS's Takfiri ideology - as rooted in its history - so as to provide a basis for anticipating the fate of that ideology in the post-ISIS period. This issue is particularly important in light of contemporary debates regarding the essentiality of territory to ISIS's ideological survival. Adding to the importance of this debate is the fact that Mosul was declared ISIS-free in July 2017. Thus, by outlining the social impact of ISIS's ideology at a time in which ISIS had free reign within territory that it once predominantly occupied, this article provides a basis for anticipating the decline of ISIS's ideology.

Keywords: Social impact, ideology, ISIS, Mosul, caliphate

1. Introduction

While many scholars use the phrase social impact to insinuate positive change within a particular community – for example, as progressive change – or as a significant solution to a common problem, this article uses a more non-value oriented definition to include the overall impact that a particular organization has on the effected members of its community. Accordingly, when applied to terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), this definition takes on a novel meaning to encompass the plethora of negative societal effects such organizations can have within the territories that they occupy. Within this framework, this article will examine the social impact that ISIS had on the citizens of Mosul immediately after its occupation thereof. Particularly, it will do so by undertaking a systematic review of ISIS's recorded actions during this same time so as to directly illustrate their social impact. Examining these actions, and their resultant impact, is particularly essential in light of the fact that Mosul was declared ISIS-free in July 2017. This is even more so the case given the debate regarding the essentiality of territory to ISIS's ideology – namely, whether territory is necessary for ISIS's ideology to thrive, or if even with the loss of such territory, ISIS's ideology can survive within a type of virtual caliphate. Before systematically reviewing the negative social impact ISIS's ideology had on the citizens of Mosul immediately after the occupation of ISIS, it is first necessary to provide a concise summary of that ideology as rooted in the history of the organization.

2. Methodology

This article is an intrinsic case study of ISIS's social impact on the citizens of Mosul directly after its occupation thereof. This article is solely concerned with ISIS's social impact in Iraq because Iraq has historically been the nucleus for ISIS's expansion and, although ISIS controls a vast amount of territory in Syria and less significant and established amounts of territory elsewhere – for example, in Libya – the production of the literature on ISIS's social impact in these areas has been both incomprehensive and discontinuous at best (Morajea and Cunningham, 2015). Therefore, given the lack of reliable resources on ISIS's social impact outside of Iraq, it is only possible to do justice in contextualizing ISIS's social impact by using Iraq as a model. An intrinsic case study is undertaken because one wants better understanding of this particular case.

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It is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest…The purpose is not to come to understand some abstract construct or generic phenomenon…The purpose is not theory building… (Stake, 1994, p. 237) Accordingly, intrinsic case study differs from instrumental case study, which uses a particular case as a window into a wider phenomenon (Stake, 1994, p. 237). This is not to say that the intrinsic approach is devoid of generalizability. Rather, it is to say that its only concern is to cover an atypical case that it sees as providing the greatest "opportunity to learn." In this sense, formal generalizations are left to readers (Stake, 1994, p. 244). For our purposes, this means that although an intrinsic case study of ISIS's social impact on the citizens of Mosul directly after its occupation thereof could be used either as a window into subsequent manifestations of this phenomenon or as a window into the connections between other terrorist organizations' occupation of territory and their social impact, such generalizations would fall outside of its scope.

3. Literature Review

ISIS is an extreme jihadi Salafist terrorist group (Olidort, 2015). Accordingly, although the terms jihad and salafism in actuality expand to encompass greater meanings than those upon which ISIS has built its ideology, ISIS's particular application of these terms enable its fanaticism. For example, the meaning of the work jihad actually encompasses communal struggle against oppressive behavior, in addition to personal battles against sin. ISIS, however, adapts these meanings to include violence against oppressive behavior (Armborst, 2011). Similarly, in considering itself to be Salafi, ISIS misconstrues a nineteenth-century term that was used to promote positive social change into a dogmatic basis that further fuels its ideology (Salafism, n.d.).

In terms of organizational structure, ISIS has only had its present structure since 2013, when it first extended its strategic influence into Syria from Iraq (Middle East Media Research Institute, 2013). Its history goes back, however, to Jamat al-Tawheed wal-Jihad, and has since then changed to al-Qaida in Iraq, in addition to becoming part of the Majlas Shora al-Mojahadeen before taking on its present structure (Zelin, 2014, p. 1).

As a result of ISIS's strong integration into other terrorist organizations, however, ISIS's history must be understood within the history of al-Qaeda. This is particularly the case given the contemporary competition that has in fact resulted between the two organizations in recent years (Zelin, 2014, p. 1). It is most appropriate, in doing this, to contrast their differing roots and purposes.

Jamat al-Tawheed wal-Jihad begain with the purpose of taking over the country of Jordan, and then the broader region of Sham (Douglas-Bowers and Corbett, 2014). Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, its leader (Worrall, 2015) – was a Jordanian fanatical jihadist from a socioeconomically disadvantaged upbringing who had previously engaged in various childhood crimes, resulting in short jail terms (Darwish, 2006). Thus - interestingly - his upbringing was completely different than that of al-Qaida's members, who hailed from wealthier, more educated upbringings (Zelin, 2014, p. 3). This is important for our purposes because it was precisely the rough background that Zarqawi had experienced that led him to adopt a Takfiri ideology, and it is this same Takfiri ideology which has perpetuated to underlie the ideology of ISIS even after his death in 2006 (Lister, 2014, p. 8). To clarify, Takfiri ideology promotes the indiscriminate killing of all those who are accused of apostasy (Zelin, 2014, pp. 1-2). Thus, it is Takfirism which underlies the negative social impact that ISIS has caused for those citizens living in the territories which it occupies. Accordingly, the following section will systematically review ISIS's actions to illustrate this impact, and thus contribute to the contemporary discourse of whether – without said territory – ISIS's ideology will exist.

4. Analysis

This section will systematically review the recorded actions that ISIS took upon the citizens of Mosul immediately after its occupation in June 2014. Doing so will provide a sound basis for analyzing the correlation between physical territory, on the one hand, and the social impact of ISIS's violence as a result of its ideology, on the other. To do so, this section will analyze UNAMI's Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Non International Armed Conflict in Iraq: 5 June – 5 July 2014.

On June 10, 2014 prisoners whom ISIS freed – and then armed – from Badush prison in Mosul carried out retaliatory attacks against those that they considered responsible for their imprisonment. They did so by first travelling to Tikrit, then abducting and later killing seven former prison guards. In carrying out these acts, these new ISIS members thus targeted them because of the nature of their former occupations. They also arbitrarily restrained them by using inappropriate restraint to cause them harm (Scottish Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

Also on June 10, ISIS imposed its Takfiri version of shari'a in parts of the territory it controls in Mosul (Zelin, 2014, p. 2). In doing so, ISIS prevented Mosul's citizens from leaving ISIS-controlled territory and attempted to compel Mosul's citizens to obey their rules in a symbol of association. ISIS also threatened to target anyone who disagrees with their creed. Lastly, ISIS threatened to arbitrarily detain dissenters through force. ISIS also began establishing security checkpoints in the territory that it controls in Mosul and in Mosul's vicinity for the purpose of identifying and then executing former Iraqi Security Force members from the Jboury tribe (a tribe that ISIS considers to be closely aligned with the Iraqi government; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, p. 10). In doing so, ISIS prevented these individuals' free movement from one town to another. ISIS also targeted them because of both their tribal associations and the nature of their former occupations, and used arbitrary force in executing them. On June 11-12, ISIS captured and executed approximately 170 ISF members who had fled their military posts at Camp Speicher, Salah id-Din. Social media outlets subsequently revealed that the captured soldiers had been forced to lie face-down in trenches to be summarily killed. On June 12, ISIS imposed its Takfiri version of shari'a in al-Alam, Salah id-Din. More specifically, the ISIS-appointed mayor of Tikrit informed al-Alam's citizens of his establishment of shari'a courts, which would try those who refuse to live according to ISIS's rules or those ISIS considers to be apostates. Additionally, the ISIS-appointed mayor asked al-Alam's citizens to use the shari'a courts to bring forth any complaints about ISF-members so that ISIS could try and then execute them. In doing so, ISIS attempted to compel al-Alam's residents' to follow its rules and threatened to target them if they violate its creed. In announcing the establishment of religious courts, ISIS also threatened the sought-out ISF members' freedom from discrimination by targeting them because of the nature of their occupations. Also on June 12, ISIS killed the Grand Mosque of Mosul's imam (spiritual leader) – Sheikh Muhammad al-Mansuri – because he refused to join them. Furthermore, ISIS abducted and held hostage a freelance journalist who was injured while he was accompanying Peshmerga (Iraqi Kurdistan's military forces) as they battled ISIS fighters southwest of Kirkuk.

On June 13, ISIS released an official paper titled "Watheqat al Madina" ("The Document of Madina"), which established rules encompassing all aspects of the day-to-day lives of Ninewa's citizens. Most prominently, this paper aimed to regulate employment and food (and thus the quality of living standards). While regulation of such aspects is typical in unstable emergency contexts, this particular regulatory document is especially problematic in terms of social impact because any violation of its articles by Ninewah's citizens could result in their immediate execution. "The Document of Madina" did not only aim at regulating employment and food, however. It also sought to regulate movement and religious observance, and authorized the destruction of religious sites, thus preventing worshippers from visiting religious sites.

For example, on June 16, ISIS demolished Ibn al-Athir's tomb (also known as "the Girl's tomb") in Mosul because of its religious symbolism. It thus prevented citizens from participating in the cultural life of the community. On June 17, ISIS injured six civilians and killed a woman and child after attacking the village of Bashir, Kirkuk. On June 18, ISIS abducted and killed seventeen Shia civilians (fifteen men, one woman and one girl) from Pirwajli village near Salah id-Din. On June 19, forty-four expatriates of Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Turkmenistani and Turkish origin who had been kidnapped and held hostage by ISIS in al-Door, Tikrit, were handed over to Iraqi Security Forces in Kirkuk after being freed as a result of negotiations between Iraqi tribal leaders and ISIS. Around June 24, ISIS began searching for former ISF members and ISF civilian-contractors whose records, ages and names were present on an ISIS database of wanted persons. Abductees were then interrogated at the previous Presidential Palace for hours until ISIS released them after determining that they were, in fact, not the individuals listed on the database. On June 29, in its search for ISF officials in Salah id-Din, ISIS abducted an ISF colonel's brother and five of his other relatives and interrogated them as a means of aiding their search for the colonel. On July 4, ISIS invaded the home of a journalist and his son in Wadi Hajar, Mosul and abducted them. Lastly, in early July, ISIS abducted an Egyptian journalist and his son from an unknown location in Iraq, thus denying them their liberty and threatening their personal security.

5. Conclusion

By systematically reviewing the violent actions taken by ISIS immediately after its occupation of Mosul, Iraq, this article illustrates the negative social impact of ISIS's ideology upon the citizens of Mosul during that time. Moreover, it draws a strong correlation between the importance of territory to ideological implementation and perpetuation. More specifically, as noted above, many of the violent actions that ISIS took during this time were particularly relevant to geographical-based concepts such as freedom of movement.

Such actions also had a strong effect on the quality of life standards available to Mosul's citizens, demonstrated particularly through food and employment regulation. Tribal systems were also capitalized upon to uproot the cultural traditions of Mosul, and religious places of worship were deliberately destroyed in order to prevent citizen participation in communal life. Although this case study provides a good framework from within which to understand the importance of territory in relation to ideology, further research should be done to analyze ISIS's social impact as a result of its loss of territory.

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