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### Reframing Islamic State

Trends and themes in contemporary messaging

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# REFRAMING ISLAMIC STATE

Trends and themes in contemporary messaging



This report is written by Telli Betül Karacan, research assistant, DIIS, and published by DIIS.

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## ABSTRACT

This report uses content analysis to identify and compare trends in Islamic State's contemporary messaging, their main internal debates and their priorities over a six-month period between October 2019 and April 2020. The study explores the nuances and dynamics of the organisation's world view and the extent to which external and internal setbacks have affected its cohesiveness and structure. It shows that the Islamic State movement has successfully mobilised itself after the military pushback against it and finds that the organisation perceives itself as undefeated. The analysis reveals a geographical shift in the attention of the Islamic State movement, prioritising activities in the West outside its core territory in Syria and Iraq. To explore one of their new geographical focus points, the report also focuses on South Asia. Finally, the organisation has increased and intensified its attacks, thus expanding its footprints and regaining lost territory. In sum, the organisation is in a phase of resurgence, as it is still a potent force with global tentacles, and there are no indications that it is being disrupted.

## INTRODUCTION

The early months of 2019 were challenging for Islamic State, as it lost its last territory, namely Baghouz in eastern Syria. Islamic State fought for this, their last bastion from the beginning of February 2019, eventually being defeated by Kurdish-led forces at the end of March 2019. A short time after it had lost its territory, its then leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared on a video with a message to the jihadist movement's followers to state that Islamic State had not yet been defeated. His message was that the setback should be understood as a test from God:

‘ By God's grace, the sons of the Caliphate continue to prove that they are a firm and solid rock on which the alliance of infidels will break ... They will retreat...in disgrace and shame. ’

-Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (quoted in Zelin, 2019).

Throughout Islamic State's most active years, the organisation has experienced several military defeats, but these have never been perceived as defeats by the movement itself. For instance, in May 2016 Islamic State's then spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, held a speech in which he stressed that a loss of territory does not equal defeat; rather, true defeat is the loss of willpower and the desire to fight.

On 26 October 2019 it was announced that the self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had blown himself up during a US military raid on his hideout in rebel-controlled Barisha. Baghdadi's death was followed by that of Islamic State's then spokesman, Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, who was killed in another operation. The deaths of these two prominent figures in Islamic State were also framed as a 'test from God'.

Shortly after Baghdadi's death, the American president, Donald Trump, declared that Islamic State had now been defeated (CNN, 2019). However, the organisation remains active, as there have been no observable large-scale disruptions in its activities since Baghdadi's death and the transition to a new leader. In fact, under its new leadership Islamic State has reported an increase in its military activities both in its core territory across the Middle East and in West and Central Africa and South Asia. Whether online or on the ground, Islamic State has used propaganda to magnify the effects of its battlefield successes, recruit new members and increase awareness of its ideology and ultimate goals (Milton, 2016). Earlier historical experiences have shown whenever a leader within Islamic State has been killed a new one is announced, and the organisation re-mobilises (Milton, 2016).

This report deals with the overall question of how Islamic State now perceives itself under the leadership of Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi. The report will uncover contemporary trends in communications under the new leadership and address the main themes that the Islamic State is currently prioritising and debating. By analysing Islamic State's communications from Baghdadi's death on 29 October 2019 until April 2020, the aim is to understand the movement's current strategic direction. The report asks how Islamic State perceives itself and frames its losses and military defeats in its own words, through its propaganda. In particular, the focus of the report is on analysing the organisation's arguments concerning its remobilisation, how it frames its defeat and its geographical focus. Previous research on Islamic State communications has conducted thematic explorations of its narrative (Winter, 2017; Zelin, 2015; Milton, 2016) and offered detailed explanations regarding how it wants to be understood. Other research has deciphered its specific propaganda genres, motifs and media output (Ingram, 2016; 2017; 2018; Ingram et al., 2020; Lakomy, 2019; Welch, 2018; Pelletier et. al., 2016; Wignell et al, 2017; Winkler et al. 2019) through content analysis and offered explorations for how Islamic State is positioning itself globally. Yet other researchers,

like Mahloully and Winter (2018) and Winter (2018), have contributed to the academic literature with local, theatre-level analyses providing an understanding of how Islamic State communicates to different people depending on whether the latter are perceived to be its friends or enemies, whether within or outside the territories it claims to control (Mahloully & Winter, 2018). This report combines theatre-level analysis by using as its primary sources the magazine al-Naba', which shapes the main empirical ground, and a new English-language medium focused on the Indian subcontinent called Sawt al-Hind, to zoom in further on the Indian context, with content analysis to decipher Islamic State's focus and strategy under its new leadership. The research uses qualitative content analysis to focus on the characteristics of language as communication with a specific concentration on content or contextual meaning (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Tesch, 1990). This report will specifically focus on Islamic State's response to and perception of defeat, its arguments regarding its re-mobilisation and its geographical focus, together offering a unique window into the movement's contemporary mind-set.

## SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

In this report, content analysis is used to help identify Islamic State's priorities under its new leadership over a six-month period from the end of October 2019 to April 2020. This particular timeframe was chosen because it allows us to capture Islamic State's strategic communication priorities and its perceptions of defeat after the loss of the late Caliph Abu Bakr-Baghdadi at a time when the movement is experiencing profound organisational changes.

The analysis was carried out by coding Islamic State propaganda based on different categories, namely:

- The framing of military defeat
- Arguments regarding re-mobilisation
- The new geographical focus

Additionally, these main categories were divided into subcategories using keywords to identify themes during the coding process. The main categories were defined before the data analysis, the subcategories derived during it. This method follows a similar trajectory to 'Directed Content Analysis' (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1281). For example, prior to the analysis, 'framing of military defeat' was formulated as a code, but during the process subcategories were needed to investigate specifically to what extent Islamic State perceived and framed its military losses and defeats and how it responded to these through surahs, hadiths and Koranic verses. Therefore, after a framing of military defeat was identified, codes such as 'justification via hadiths' and 'justification via Surahs' were used. As will be shown later, the

analysis reveals that whenever Islamic State loses battles or territories, its use of Islamic arguments and teachings increases. This observation corresponds with earlier propaganda-focused research scrutinising the movement's argumentative techniques and justifications in its propaganda magazines Dabiq and Rumiya (Welch, 2018; Pelletier et al., 2016). While Islamic State's geographical focus has been examined within a transnational framework, the specific countries or regions it mentions in its propaganda that mainly lie outside its core territory across the Middle East have also been looked at, in order to discover and locate the movement's new geographical focuses and priorities. The code 'geographical focus' has been subdivided into 'new vs. old territory' in order to map out the differences more explicitly. During this process, it was evident that there is a wide geographical focus in Islamic State's propaganda. To explore one of its new focus points, the report zooms in on its English-language magazine Sawt al-Hind, though the main analysis was carried out using al-Naba' as the empirical basis. Throughout the whole coding process, some overlapping themes undeniably occurred. These have been coded and analysed separately in their respective categories, as some themes and messages feature various facets that overlap.

Systematically coding articles into overall main themes allows the complex collection of messages in the material to be sorted and deciphered. This also provides insights into which themes are dominant in Islamic State's propaganda (Basit, 2003). These overall themes help uncover the consistencies and inconsistencies in trends in their propaganda. During the coding process, the method helped create an overview and was also used as an organising tool, which is an important part of the outcome (Tesch, 1990). The creation of these categories also constructs a conceptual scheme that fits the data, which helps the researcher ask the relevant questions and make comparisons across the data (Seidel & Kelle, 1995).

### **AL-NABA' AND SAWT AL-HIND**

The sample used in this report consists of Islamic State propaganda produced and published between Baghdadi's death in October 2019 and April 2020. It consists of 27 issues of Islamic State's weekly Arabic-language newsletter al-Naba' from issue 205<sup>th</sup> to 232<sup>nd</sup>, and the three first issues of Islamic State's newly launched English-language magazine, Sawt al-Hind. al-Naba' is Islamic State's official newsletter and a part of the organisation's regular media outputs, which

include photos, infographics and lengthy speeches by its top leaders. Additionally, the sample also includes audio messages from the al-Furqan Media Foundation created by Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, a pro-Islamic State media production house responsible for major media releases from high-profile leaders, such as the Caliph or spokespersons, although the main focus is on al-Naba. All materials were acquired through SITE Intelligence and already translated from Arabic into English, besides Sawt al-Hind as this magazine was originally published in English.

**The primary readership is its local audience, making al-Naba' one of the very few publicly available sources that provides insights into Islamic State's offline messaging strategy.**

The Arabic-language al-Naba' newsletter has been published consistently on a weekly basis since 2015, giving details of and insights into the organisation's worldwide operations. Besides documenting its operations, it also contains religious essays, summaries of world news and infographics. The newsletter is used as a tool to update the organisation's affiliates on its global jihadist campaign and to offer inspiration to consistent information sharing, that are otherwise dispersed. The primary readership is its local audience, making al-Naba' one of the very few publicly available sources that provides insights into Islamic State's offline messaging strategy. Another of al-Naba's aims appears to be to provide tactical commentary of matters concerning Islamic State's present-day existence (Mahlouly & Winter, 2018).

Al-Naba' has existed in various forms since 2010. Initially it had a loose structure with a loose collection of statements and news items published irregularly. By 2013, when Islamic State (ISI branch) had rebranded itself as Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), it expanded al-Naba' to include operational information on Syria as well as Iraq. In 2014 it appeared every second week and since 2015 has come out consistently on a weekly basis in its current newspaper format, containing infographics, military updates, essays and announcements (ibid). Prior to 2015, the newsletter was disseminated offline in print and handed out to citizens every Saturday. Now the newsletter exists both in print and electronically and reaches a wider and more global audience compared to its initial years, when it was aimed at the local in-theatre audience (CSIS, 2016).

Sawt al-Hind, or in English The Voice of Hind, is a glossy propaganda magazine similar to Dabiq and Rumiyaḥ, online magazines used by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) for propaganda and recruitment purposes. Sawt al-Hind only consists of ten to fifteen pages per issue, whereas Dabiq and Rumiyaḥ were lengthier, at approximately forty to eighty pages. This English-language magazine is produced by the pro-Islamic State al-Qitaal Media Centre, established by the jihadist group Jundul Khilafah, which is based in Indian-administered Kashmir (BBC Monitoring, 2020). No other language editions of Sawt al-Hind are presently evident (Bunker and Bunker, 2020) indicating the existence of a targeted audience outside India. The magazine is published monthly, its inaugural issue coming out in February 2020. The timing of its publication seems to respond well to the organisation's attempt to rebrand itself after the massive losses it experienced from October 2019. In this report the magazine is used solely to focus on the situation on the Indian subcontinent, which is where it places its special focus; it is therefore not part of the main empirical analyses in al-Naba'. The magazine does not reveal whether Islamic State is prioritising the region more or less compared to other regions, but its content illustrates how the movement is exploring new regional focal points, as well as detailing their views on the Indian context. Additionally, Sawt al-Hind makes a significant contribution to the sample as it is the first pro-Islamic State English-language magazine to be launched since March 2019. Moreover, having been released in February 2020, the magazine falls within the period from October 2019 to April 2020 that this report is focusing on.

In general, the content of Sawt al-Hind is more elaborate than al-Naba' and is visually and editorially more sophisticated, appearance-wise being completely in line with Dabiq and Rumiyaḥ. The next section will elaborate more on Islamic State's earlier propaganda productions prior to the analysis section, where its reframing of its defeat will be discussed.

## THE REFRAMING OF DEFEAT



This section deals with how Islamic State has perceived and reframed its defeats both historically and at the present day. Islamic State is well-known for its successful communication strategies, which have been consistent and stable since the organisation's online emergence (Kuznar, 2017). It has successfully incorporated English-language magazines as a recruitment and mobilisation tool into its propaganda strategy, targeting particularly Muslims living in the West (Ingram, 2018). Before analysing and tracing Islamic State's own perceptions, mobilisation and geographical focus, its earlier communication materials deserve attention in order to understand the context of its organisation and its reframing of its defeat. It is crucial to understand Islamic State's earlier production of propaganda if its messaging, themes and continuity in al-Naba' and Sawt al-Hind are to be grasped.

### ISLAMIC STATE'S EARLIER COMMUNICATIONS

Both Dabiq and Rumiyah, when produced, offered a clear indication of where Islamic State's priorities are. Previous research on Islamic State's communications analysing Dabiq (published 2014-2016) and Rumiyah (published 2016-2017) has found that the earlier propaganda material was mainly focused on state-building, recruitment and the promotion of hijrah (emigration), whereas later communications have focused on calling the umma together to wage a global jihad against the infidels, especially through individual jihadist and lone-wolf terrorist attacks (Lakomy, 2019; Welch, 2018). The titles of the magazines alone both hint at their overall thematic framework and content, as well as revealing Islamic State's strategic directions (Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017). The titles Dabiq and Rumiyah ('Rome' in Arabic) both derive from a hadith related to an 'End of Time' Islamic eschatology. According to the relevant hadith, the 'Last Hour' will come when the Romans (the West) land in the Syrian town of Dabiq and an 'army consisting of the best (soldiers) of the people of the earth' will fight them (Book 54, Hadith 44). Islamic State therefore saw the Syrian war as an indication of the beginning of the Islamic eschatology. By making a link with the 'Last Hour', the organisation attempted to signal its cosmic purpose and demonstrate how it and the new caliph are connected to the great Armageddon (Ryan, 2014). Looking beyond this, the content also reveals Islamic State's strategic direction.

Dabiq, for instance, used a very apocalyptic narrative, and the focus in both magazines was primarily on the establishment of and justification for Islamic State's and the caliphate's existence (Dabiq, 16). As already mentioned, the initial years were focused on state-building, establishing a society by encouraging hijrah and thus calling on all Muslim men and women of different educational backgrounds and from across the world to join the Caliphate and the single umma. In the inaugural issue of Dabiq in 2014, Baghdadi emphasised the importance of hijrah 'to the land of Islam' and as obligatory for all Muslims (Dabiq, 1:10-11).

When Islamic State lost significant parts of its territory in 2016, it launched Rumiyah as a continuation of its glossy propaganda production but offering a slightly different strategic direction. The main themes in Rumiyah, as in Dabiq, also revolved around urging hijrah by aiming to recruit mujahideen (jihadists), but more importantly the new magazine offered a more transnational and global view on urging jihad, hence the references to Rome (i.e. the West). The shift towards the West makes reference to the idea of creating alternative battlespaces outside the borders of Syria and Iraq (Azman, 2016). The transnational outlook of jihad and the shift in perspective to other territories is especially clear in this quote:

‘ So if the schemes of the tawaghit (false idol) have prevented you from performing hijrah to Iraq and Sham, then know that the doors of hijrah will remain open until the Hour is established. So whoever is unable to perform hijrah to Iraq and Sham, then he should perform hijrah to Libya, Khorosan, Yemen, Sinai, West Africa, or any of the other wilayat and outposts of the Khilafah in the East and the West. ’

(Rumiyah 4, 2016: 2-3).

One possible reason why Islamic State makes this thematic shift from utopia to warfare in its magazines (see Winter, 2018) is that it is a response to the great loss of territory and of key figures driving the Islamic State propaganda machine. In 2016 alone Islamic State lost three key figures who were believed to be central to the organisation's media apparatus: Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani and Abu al-Harith al-Lami (Winter, 2018: 117).

Since late October 2019, the production of sophisticated propaganda and visuals seems to have declined somewhat compared to Islamic State's peak years. Compared to the six months prior to Baghdadi's death, there seems to have been very little disruption. Such disruption as there was a response to the gradual loss of resources after March 2019, when Islamic State lost Baghouz, and it also indicates a decrease in its capabilities. As this was also a tendency before the new leadership was established in October 2019, it is therefore not a direct consequence of Baghdadi's death because the focus on propaganda has generally declined. Hence, the consequences of the decline can be traced way before the timeframe of this report.

The Islamic State brand has long been heavily reliant on visuals (Winter, 2018). With this decline, the organisation is currently recasting itself, as the focus has shifted to existential issues and its survival after its severe losses. In addition, this results in possible difficulties in maintaining its members' loyalty, which may explain why the organisation is now engaged in damage control and spending a lot of efforts in remobilising itself since it lost first its territory and then, six months later, its self-proclaimed former Caliph Baghdadi.

Al-Naba' ties all these arguments together, including urging hijrah and carrying out more global jihadist operations, but al-Naba's main aim is to report the organisation's activities. al-Naba' was previously the source for the propaganda produced in Dabiq and Rumiyah, and as researchers like Ingram (2018) have suggested, there is a general pattern of Islamic State translating and recycling the messaging and articles in Rumiyah and Dabiq from the al-Naba' publications in order to target their English-speaking audiences, thus underpinning the importance of al-Naba'. The same is evident in Sawt al-Hind, as will be shown later.

The following section will demonstrate the reframing of the defeat, will show how Islamic State is responding to its losses and will ask whether it perceives itself as defeated or unconquered.

## ISLAMIC STATE'S NEW PHASE

A few months prior to Baghdadi's death, things went downhill for Islamic State organisationally, as it lost Baghouz in eastern Syria and subsequently had to fight to gain its followers' support and maintain their motivation. Operationally its military activity remained the same. In fact, ten days after Baghdadi's death, the organisation claimed to have carried out sixty attacks, mainly on a small scale, in Iraq and Syria, as well as high-profile assaults on a military base in Mali (BBC monitoring). The organisation has a history of justifying defeats as God's will and framing the physical, territorial aspect of jihad as secondary by stating that 'the caliphate is more a cause than a territory'. In doing this, Islamic State can mobilise the ideological basis for its case, as was also true in the wake of this event. Its then spokesperson, Abu al Hasan al Muhaji, said: 'Victory comes with patience, comfort comes with suffering... With patience comes certainty in the promise' (quoted in Zelin, 2019). Baghdadi even prepared his followers by advising:

Know that if some of your leaders are killed, then God will replace them with those who are equal or better than them. God will not neglect you, so do not be disheartened. Truly God is with us.

- Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (quoted in Zelin, 2019).

Earlier studies argue that, whenever Islamic State loses battles or territories, its use of Islamic arguments and teachings increases (Welch, 2018; Pelletier et al., 2016). For instance, when Islamic State had significant territorial losses in 2016, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, its then spokesman, addressed these defeats by citing the Al-Anfal sura (8:42) from the Koran along with his message. The sura describes the conduct of war, military operations and tactics. The context of the sura is the Battle of Badr, a key moment in Muhammed's struggle against the pagan tribes in Mecca in 624 (CE). In fact, al Adnani draws parallels with the Prophet's struggles and the Battle of Badr in order to mobilise and encourage Islamic State's members and followers not to lose hope and willpower in their battles in the name of Islam. A common feature of Islamic State propaganda is the drawing of implicit and explicit analogies and connections between the Prophet Muhammad and Islamic State's

own actions (Ingram et al., 2020). Moreover, the use of theology and the drawing of parallels with the Koran are effective persuasion tactics for Islamic State, as it legitimises its actions by invoking religion itself as a tool. Islamic references are an effective catalyst for advancing its political agenda, achieving its strategic objectives (Pelletier et al., 2016) and recruiting and radicalising its fighters. This 'God's will' narrative and framing of setbacks are common tactics used by the movement whenever they face difficulties. The same patterns are being seen under the new leadership as well, both leaders and spokespersons having used the same discourse in this context.

**The use of theology and the drawing of parallels with the Koran are effective persuasion tactics for Islamic State, as it legitimises its actions by invoking religion itself as a tool.**

In the propaganda Islamic State produces, its use of arguments and its spinning of defeats as stories about heroism, martyrdom and tests from God are distinctive. Baghdadi's death has been justified with reference to the Koranic sura An-Nisa 4:74, which is widely cited by Islamiyyun (Islamists) when justifying so-called 'martyrdom operations' (Cook, 2002). The sura describes how fighting for Allah will be rewarded. Patterns of martyrdom and heroic narrative can also be seen in issue 206 of al-Naba', where an excerpt from an audio message issued by the Al-Furqan Foundation confirms the deaths of Baghdadi and the group's then spokesman, Abu al Hassan al-Muhajir. In the piece, Baghdadi is hailed as the one who 'gathered under his banner the scattered groups of mujahidin from all around the world, and with them, he carried out jihad against kuffar (disbelievers) and murtaddin (person who abandons Islam) from the people belonging to all false sects' (al-Naba' 206). Baghdadi was undoubtedly a key figure in Islamic State's organisation and the face of its brand for a long time. For its members he is a hero for managing to wage global jihad and bring together Muslims from around the world. In al-Naba' 207, Islamic State pays special homage to Baghdadi, describing his achievements and most importantly announcing a new phase for Islamic State itself. Baghdadi is granted the status of a martyr and is praised for refusing to surrender and choosing to sacrifice himself, rather than being taken prisoner by or dying in the hands of the United States. This is also a hint and advice to the movement's supporters that surrender is not an option in Islamic State, and that Baghdadi set the best possible

example by sacrificing himself. Despite the United States' and Donald Trump's perceptions of Baghdadi's death as a defeat, Islamic State's followers and members see the battle as continuing, though now transformed into a new phase:

The life of the Caliph of the Muslims has ended, but his State and the jihad of his soldiers has not, by the grace of Allah. Indeed, it is lasting and continuing. The polytheists became desperate today to end its existence. Their greatest hope is to contain its expansion and limit its danger for them as much as they can, for they are certain that it will be empowered on the ground more than before – Allah permitting – and it will establish the Shariah of Allah in other lands, and its ranks will be joined with mujahideen from other people and tribes, so that the polytheists will be enraged and the Muslims will be joyous, and He is the All-Capable.

(al-Naba' 207).

This quote clearly indicates how the organisation perceives itself as far from defeated and as planning to continue global jihad, expressed in expansionist language in terms of territory, that will determine a new phase for the movement. The whole of al-Naba' 207's editorial focuses on assuring and promising continuity of the group despite the setbacks. This message is directed at its followers, as the nature of al-Naba' is to communicate and update local followers and the people of the Caliphate. Generally, there is a clear pattern of expansionistic language in terms of extending the territory that occurs in all the produced propaganda right after Baghdadi's death and the declaration of the new Caliph. The issue of the movement's territorial expansion will be elaborated in the geographical section.

**A NEW LEADER**

Parallel with its celebration of Baghdadi, the movement announced a new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi, a week after Baghdadi's death, on 31 October (al-Naba' 206, 2019). The aim of this announcement was to send another warning to the West and declare that Islamic State has not yet been defeated but will persist in waging global jihad. Several scholars have pointed out the temporary management and balancing task that terrorist organisations face immediately after losing their

leaders or key figures, which affects their operational capacity (Jordan, 2009, 2014; Milton and Price, 2020). Terrorists are faced with the challenge of balancing the need to influence their target audiences while also carrying out effective operations without being destroyed by counterterrorism efforts (Milton & Price, 2020). Hence, the loss of a leader can be devastating in terms of the efficiency of the organisation, as well as its members' overall motivation. The immediate announcement of a new leader by Islamic State was therefore a demonstration that the movement had introduced a new command structure and was continuing the battle. Furthermore, Islamic State's leaders had been approved by a shura (a governing council), while Abu Ibrahim's official approval also implied that the movement's organisational bureaucracy was still functioning (Cronin, 2020):

‘ In accordance with the tradition of the good Companions, (...) we made haste to declare the imam, out of concern for the Muslims and the regularity of their affairs. Therefore, the Shura Council of the Islamic State, (...) agreed, after consulting with their brothers and following the advice of Amirul-Mumin (Commander of the Faithful), to pledge bay’ah (allegiance) to (...) Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurayshi. He is appointed as Amirul-Muminin and khalifah (leader) of Muslims. We ask Allah to grant him success and wisdom. We also ask Allah to help him accomplish what his previous brothers have started, to grant him the good followers, and enable conquest by his hands over lands and win the hearts of people. ’

(al-Naba' 206).

A photograph of a war-torn street. The buildings are heavily damaged, with many windows missing and walls crumbling. In the foreground, a rusted, damaged truck is parked on the left. A motorcycle with two riders is moving away from the camera on the right. The word "REMOBILISATION" is overlaid in white text on a red background in the center-right of the image.

## REMOBILISATION

By looking more closer at Islamic State's remobilisation under the new leadership, it becomes evident that the organisation returned to its activities immediately after the change in leadership. Immediately after the announcement of Abu Ibrahim's leadership, and to win the hearts of people, a 'pledge of allegiance' campaign was launched. The practice of *ba'ya*, or 'pledge of allegiance', is seen as mandatory on all Muslims. As pledges are leader-specific and not group-specific, they need to be renewed with each succession (Nazeer Ka Ka Khel, 1981; Zelin, 2014: 3). The practice of receiving and renewing pledges of allegiance was how Islamic State initially went transnational after its creation of the Caliphate in 2014, as the pledges from around the globe allowed the organisation to establish transnational provinces (Ingram et al., 2020: 177). Furthermore the practice of *ba'ya* was also incorporated into Islamic State's visions and thoughts on increasing its territorial expansion. In an audio message released through the al-Furqan Foundation entitled 'And Whosoever Fulfils What He has covenanted with Allah, He will Bestow on Him a Great Reward', Islamic State's new spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi justifies and urges giving *ba'ya* to Al-Hashemi by citing the Koranic sura Fath 48:10, which concerns the willingness to pledge one's time, money and life for the benefit of Islam:

Verily, those who give pledge to you, they are giving pledge to Allah. The Hand of Allah is over their hands. Then whosoever breaks his pledge, breaks it only to his own harm; and whosoever fulfils what he has covenanted with Allah, He will bestow on him a great reward.

(Al-Fath: 10).

This practice is mentioned in various religious texts, from Koranic suras to the hadiths of the Prophet, which Islamic State frames as mandatory and as the responsibility for all Muslims to undertake:

Whoever dies without a pledge of allegiance dies a death of *jāhiliyyah* (ignorance).

(Dabiq, 10: 23).

This statement claims that it is only by joining Islamic State that Muslims can maintain the unity of the *umma*.

In addition to enforcing this mandatory practice, the pledge of allegiance campaign was also aimed at promoting the new phase and transition that the group was undergoing. It also had the potential to weed out those members of Islamic State who do not recognise Abu Ibrahim's rule as the new caliph (Zelin, 2019), as well as being an opportunity for the movement's global network to demonstrate that it still exists and supports the organisation. By doing this, as already mentioned, the movement asserts its continuity, proclaims its re-mobilisation and is able to continue carrying out effective operations.

During this campaign, supporters in Afghanistan (Khorasan Province), Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Dem. Rep. of the Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen pledged their allegiance and showed their support for the new leadership (al-Naba' 207). In addition to the media pledge of allegiance campaign, supporters from South Asia made individual vows of allegiance to the new leader, thereby helping re-mobilise the movement's support. However, this campaign has not yet led to the successful recruitment of a new wave of foreign fighters from Western countries, probably due to improvements in monitoring by security agencies, counterterrorism incentives and stronger preventive work.

## RENEWED REVENGE

Another distinctive remobilisation strategy was seen when Islamic State launched its military 'Revenge Invasion' military campaign on 22 December 2019 in memory of al-Baghdadi and Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir. This campaign was framed as a 'global campaign', but in fact all operations were carried out within the space Islamic State already claims, using their capabilities to the maximum. During this revenge operation, after the first week the organisation reported sixty attacks in Syria, 51 in Iraq, 18 in West Africa, 5 in Sinai, 3 in Somalia and 2 in Yemen. (al-Naba' 215). Besides framing these attacks as revenge, Islamic State's new spokesperson Abu Hamza also encouraged its followers to 'have a share in revenge' and to be steadfast in religion and jihad, and he stressed the importance of taking 'vengeance for the *umma* and their brothers against the disbelievers and the apostates' (ibid.). Indeed, since this first week the organisation has been consistent in increasing its violence

and its military attacks. In a voice message released by Al-Furqan Media, Abu Hamza urged the movement's followers to intensify the number and frequency of attacks during this revenge campaign:

‘ We recommend you double your work and intensify the strikes. So draw up the targets and put together the plans, booby-trap the roads, secure the devices, deploy the snipers, and use the silencers to silence breathes. Turn the joy of the disbelievers into funerals. Lie in wait for them behind each and every ambush, and wage attack after attack. Strike hard, demoralise them, and make their lives miserable. Turn their day into darkness and their night into destruction. Raid them as they sleep. There is no goodness in a life ruled by those hostile apostates. Rub their noses in the dirt. Enter unto them with your operations and attacks through a thousand doors and draw closer to Allah through their blood and body parts. Burn their hearts as they burned the houses of the Muslims over their heads. ’

-Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi (Al-Furqan, 2020).

These types of campaigns are routine for Islamic State, as they do not need any special motivations to carry out attacks or commit violence. What matters for the organisation is that it uses its capabilities to the maximum within the space it lays claim to (International Crisis Group, 2016). The movement continues its violence to prove that it is still mobilising and still poses a threat to its enemies, despite its losses.

**Islamic State advised its affiliates worldwide to exploit the chaos the pandemic has caused by taking maximum advantage of the security vacuum and using this as an opportunity to attack pandemic-weakened states, as these states are currently paralysed and their security environment has been weakened.**

The instruction to increase attacks and intensify them has also been clear during the lockdown of several countries because of COVID-19. The same narrative of vengeance is used in al-Naba' 226 and the second issue of Sawt al-Hind, which see in the pandemic Allah's revenge. Furthermore, Islamic State advised its affiliates

worldwide to exploit the chaos the pandemic has caused by taking maximum advantage of the security vacuum and using this as an opportunity to attack pandemic-weakened states, as these states are currently paralysed and their security environment has been weakened (al-Naba' 226). In the article 'Worst Nightmares of the Crusaders', members are advised to spread more chaos and escalate their military operations against 'the West's apostate helpers in Muslim countries', because the military is now working less on joint operations due to COVID-19 (ibid.). The group also claims that the Egyptian army has been weakened due to COVID-19, as it is not getting enough support from its Western allies because the pandemic is the first priority worldwide (al-Naba' 231). This adds to Islamic State's strategy of using violence and exploiting disorder wherever it can, without requiring any special motivation (International Crisis Group, 2016). Sawt al-Hind used the same messaging:

‘ Allah has made this disease a source of chaos amongst the nations of disbelief, and their militaries and police have been deployed in their streets and alleys, thus making them an easy target. So, use this opportunity to strike them with a sword or a knife, or even a rope is enough to stop their breath, fill the streets with their blood. Indeed, this is the punishment and wrath of Allah upon the disbelievers, so make it worse for them. ’

(Sawt al-Hind, 2020b: 7).

By means of all these operations under its new leadership, Islamic State continues to portray itself as persistent, strong and undefeated. In addition, the organisation is looking forward in terms of its losses and defeats and is quickly reshaping itself. The reshaping can be explained as successful due to the organisation being highly networked, which compensates for its massive loss of capabilities, even though its suffering from its great losses is not portrayed in its propaganda. The new leadership is trying to prove to its supporters that it remains powerful and is a winning force, using this as a motivating factor. Furthermore, the new leadership shows clear aims in respect of its 'expansive' notions and priorities. This ideational expansionist narrative states that the Caliphate is more a cause than a location and that Islamic State is continuing to use its propaganda instrumentally to support its jihad and grow the movement (Winter, 2020).

## INDIVIDUAL JIHAD

Another remobilisation tactic consistently urged to by Islamic State is individual jihad in Western countries. This strategy is often used to mobilise members when organisations have restricted resources and reduced operational capabilities. It therefore indicates that the organisation does not have the capabilities to orchestrate attacks in the West, which is why it is trying to radicalise individuals living in the West and to urge them to wage jihad in their own countries. The movement therefore provides its members with instructions and advise them on how to carry out individual attacks. For instance, easy attacks can be carried out in bathrooms, on highways etc. These locations are ones of choice, as surveillance of them is limited, and you do not necessarily need previous experience to carry out such attacks. This can be both an indication of an inability to orchestrate operations from their central base, which why they are activating members across the West. One recent example of this was the London Bridge attacker, who 'carried out the attack in response to calls to target citizens of the coalition countries' (al-Naba' 211; al-Naba' 221) on 30 November 2019. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, which it reported in al-Naba'. Furthermore, the organisation has consistently continued to urge individual jihad in the wakening of this event, as well as during the COVID-19 lockdown, as just noted.

**The organisation does not have the capabilities to orchestrate attacks in the West, which is why it is trying to radicalise individuals living in the West and to urge them to wage jihad in their own countries.**

This urging is not restricted to Western countries, as the encouragement to commit individual jihad was also made in the second and third issues of Sawt al-Hind, where the authors urge lone wolves in India to make use of kitchen knives, axes and hammers to stab victims, vehicles to run them over, petrol bombs to 'wreak havoc' and bare hands to throw heavy objects from rooftops. 'Defeat by annihilation' has been mentioned several times and is a dominant message in Sawt al-Hind. Individual jihad is not new, but in fact was one of the movement's most widely used tactics during its peak years in 2014-2015. Its use may be the organisation's response to the military pressure it experienced in Iraq and Syria in 2016, preventing it from planning and carrying out sophisticated attacks in foreign countries (Micheron, 2020: 239). The same stress on individual jihad as seen in Sawt al-Hind was also

present in Rumiya. The caliphate and the cause were both romanticised, and the magazine presented highly emotive examples of, among others, Western states committing atrocities against Muslims in order either to gain supporters in the 'host' countries or to radicalise foreign fighters from the West, as well as from around the world, to join the caliphate and to carry out individual attacks. This strategy proved useful, as 40,000 foreign fighters joined the caliphate (UN, 2020) from all around the world, 5,000 of them European (EU, 2018). This is also due to Islamic State being able to tap into existing feelings of political indignation and grievances among Muslims living among non-Muslim majorities, causing them to feel stigmatised, humiliated and discriminated against by society. The main determinant of radicalisation is discrimination, such as islamophobia, collective humiliation (for instance, through blasphemous depictions of one's religious beliefs, as in the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed) (Kruglanski, et al., 2014). Previous research by Sheikh (2016) has shown that the movement's success with Danish foreign fighters was particularly due to Islamic State not just offering supporters a place where they could die as martyrs, but also one where they could live as heroes (Sheikh, 2016). The same argumentation is used to mobilise supporters in both the West and in India.

**The movement's success with Danish foreign fighters was particularly due to Islamic State not just offering supporters a place where they could die as martyrs, but also one where they could live as heroes.**

The idea of 'individual terrorism' was formulated by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, who wrote a 'Guide to jihad', where he presented operational doctrines and argued that individual terrorism by lone wolves or self-sustained independent cells is possible (Lia, 2009). This has been widely used by Islamic State, which admits no excuse not to be a mujahid or to wage jihad in one's own country. This allows supporters to fight alone, even without contacts to any jihadist groups or figures, as was the case with the London stabbing by Muhaydin Mire in 2015. Although researchers like Nesser, Sternersen and Oftedal (2016) examines 42 well-documented plots in 2014-2016, where only six cases seemed based on inspiration only without any contact with IS's networks (Nesser, et al. 2016).

**GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS**



There is a clear pattern and continuity in Islamic State's territorial expansionist language and vision in the propaganda material produced under the new leadership. The organisation is not only attempting to remobilise and regain its lost territory in Iraq and Syria, but also to expand its footprint and re-establish a more international presence for itself. This is clear from the audio message mentioned previously that urged members to make ba'ya to Abu Ibrahim. The movement's new spokesman, Abu Hamza, stated that Islamic State is continuing its expansion:

So do not be happy, O America, for the death of Sheikh al-Baghdadi and do not forget the cups of death at his hands, may Allah accept him. Do you not realize, O America, that the Islamic State today stands at the threshold of Europe and Central Africa? It is expanding and remaining, with permission from Allah, from the east to the west.

-Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi (audio message al-Furqan Media).

The message explicitly mentions Central Africa, which, together with West Africa and Mozambique, are the focus of attention in the movement's propaganda when it comes to its global operations and priorities. This is in line with the organisation committing a notable rise in attacks outside Iraq and Syria, namely in West and Central Africa, Mozambique and South and East Asia. A dominant trend is Islamic State's strategic priority to increase attacks, especially in its lost core territory, and to regain its self-sufficiency in materiel and weaponry. The geographical section will mainly focus on the transcontinental territory that is the focus of Islamic State's propaganda. Despite this special geographical focus on territory outside Islamic State's core areas in Iraq and Syria, this is unavoidable in order to detect the ongoing trends in and remobilisation of their central organisation.

### REMOBILISATION IN ISLAMIC STATE'S CORE TERRITORY

Generally, Islamic State is making an effort to claim back the lost territories in both Iraq and Syria, as their activities and operations are becoming more sophisticated, more deadly and more frequent, especially since the beginning of 2020. In all al-Naba' newsletters between October 2019 and April 2020, Iraq is mentioned 301 times and Syria 207 times.<sup>1</sup> The organisation claimed over 10,600 casualties in 3,196 attacks over the past two and a half years in Iraq since its 'War of Attrition' (al-Naba' 221). It has become more direct and aggressive in its attacks on the

Map 1. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria



- ▨ ISIS controlled areas, early 2015
- ▨ Areas with concentrated ISIS operations, 2020
- Cities where ISIS pays particular attention to rural surroundings

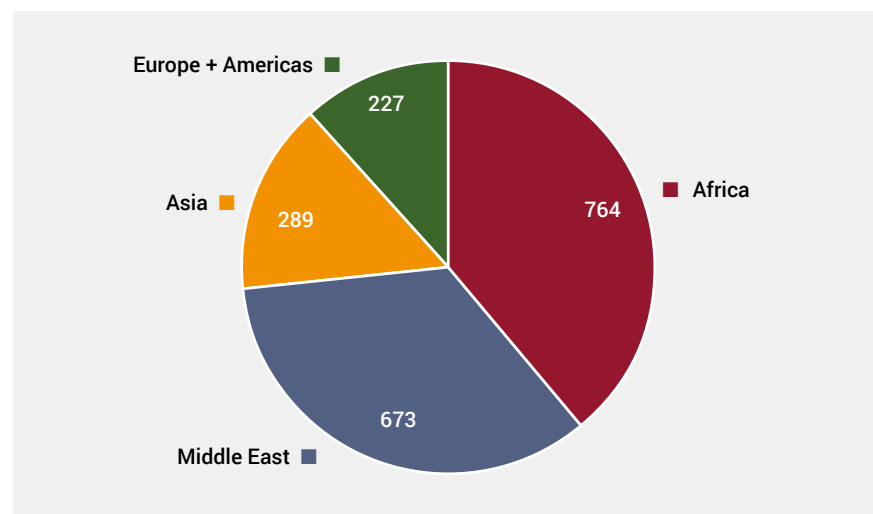
Source: IHS Conflict Monitor

Islamic State has been able to take advantage of the security vacuums in both Iraq and Syria, and has become more active in the early months of 2020. It operates in areas it formerly controlled in 2015 and is now becoming visible again in large areas of Iraq.

Iraqi security forces, but among these casualties civilians are also targeted. The organisation shows its ability to exploit the political security structure or the lack of it, having started to benefit from the chaos of the US withdrawal from Syria and the Turkish invasion of parts of northern Syria. At the same time the mass protests and unrest in Iraq, as well as provoking sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shiite communities, have all paved the way for Islamic State's revival (Hassan, 2020).

Furthermore, Islamic State is currently focusing on settling in deserted villages across the northern and central parts of Iraq, where the terrain will be in its favour, as these mountainous and rural areas complicate conventional military operations against them. Elevation and the roughness of the ground have long been considered advantageous to insurgents (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004), as

**Figure 1. Number of times different regions have been mentioned in al-Naba', October 2019-April 2020**



**Europe and Americas:** United States of America, Germany, France, United Kingdom (London)  
**Asia:** Sri Lanka, Phillipines, Pakistan, Maldives, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran  
**Africa:** Sahel, Togo, Tunisia, Tanzania, Sudan, Somalia, Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, Mozambique, Mauritania, Mali, Libya, Ghana, Ethiopia, Egypt, Dem. Rep. of the Congo, Chad, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Algeria  
**Middle East:** Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey

geography plays a key role in favouring their success, the mountainous terrain making it easier for them to hide from the government (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Overall, Islamic State's actions in Iraq and Syria between October 2019 and April 2020 have demonstrated its resilience and ability to remobilise in order to stage high-scale and intensified attrition attacks. In fact, as Islamic State has continuously emphasised in all its communications, it is highlighting its strategy of attrition in order to carry out as many attacks as possible, no matter how large or small the operations and attacks might be. This is to keep the government's forces constantly on the alert in order eventually to exhaust and demoralise them, the organisation being aware that the government's forces do not have the capabilities to continue being on their guard indefinitely and cannot afford to do so. The organisation has shown itself more dynamic in 2020, with its improved capabilities and its ability to affect the security situation in both Syria and Iraq, compared to the end of 2019.

Despite its global and transnational jihad, Islamic State is continuing to threaten all its enemies, namely Western powers, secular 'apostate' Muslim governments, Shiites and Kurds, the latter being mentioned 569 times in all al-Naba' newsletters, that is, they are mentioned the most, and they continue to be a battle priority for Islamic State in Syria.

**Islamic State is continuing to threaten all its enemies, namely Western powers, secular 'apostate' Muslim governments, Shiites and Kurds, the latter continuing to be a battle priority for Islamic State in Syria.**

### MOZAMBIQUE

Shifting now to consider the case of Mozambique, only a few weeks after the new Caliph Abu Ibrahim's inauguration the organisation mobilised its focus, launched attacks on the army and later conducted blatant raids against villages, some which it reportedly briefly seized (al-Naba' 208-209; al-Naba' 212-213; al-Naba' 218; al-Naba' 223; al-Naba' 225; al-Naba' 227; al-Naba' 229-230). Especially in Cabo Delgado, in northern Mozambique, which is mentioned 62 times in al-Naba', Islamic State has been behind the growing wave of violence and warfare. According to local reports, the organisation uses soldiers' uniforms and has guns and vehicles, making it easier for its fighters to move around and attack more widely, and making the local people confused and afraid (BBC, 2020). In video footage aired by the Amaq News Agency, Islamic State's Central Africa Province (ISCAP) claimed responsibility for temporarily seizing Mocimboa da Praia, a strategically important port in Mozambique, and the town of Quissanga (both in Cabo Delgado province in the north). In addition, in al-Naba' 231 the organisation included a picture of the wreckage of a Mozambican military helicopter in Quissanga, marking the eighth attack it claimed in the country in 2020 (al-Naba' 231). These two large-scale and sophisticated military attacks indicate a radical shift in Islamic State's strategy. ISCAP has previously not given any clear indications of its motives, leadership or demands, and previous attacks have typically been focused on remote villages and ambushing army patrols on isolated roads.

**Map 2. Islamic State in Africa 2019-2020**



Source: Center for Global Policy

Islamic State has intensified its attacks in the African region and also became more visible in the region between October 2019 and April 2020. Among their most significant provinces are the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Mali; the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in the Dem. Rep. of the Congo and Mozambique; and the Islamic State in Sinai Province in Egypt and Libya.

This has caused a rapid rise in the displacement of Mozambique's civilian population, and there are now more than 200,000 internally displaced persons among the population since the insurgency began in 2017 (BBC, 2020). Now the motives behind the atrocities and high-intensity attacks are justified by a victimhood narrative (see, for example, Winter, 2018) that criticises Mozambique's unfair and unjust government: 'We occupy the towns to show that the government of the day is unfair. It humiliates the poor and gives the profit to the bosses.' (BBC, 2020).

The victimhood narrative serves as a strategic legitimiser for Islamic State, facilitating its ideology. Islamic State portrays itself as an alternative to the 'apostate governments' in a manner seen before. This is a characteristic strategy whereby it exploits instability and incorporates a practical form of social governance, which has proved effective in unstable environments (Lister, 2014). The regional conditions in Cabo Delgado province share similarities with those in other African countries where Islamic State is operating, characterised by the presence of marginalised groups, which makes it easier for it to tap into already existing local grievances, whether these grievances are ethnic or religious (Krause, 2020). When local government is scaled down, the presence of jihadists in rural areas is increased, as they step in to fill the security vacuum (Crone, 2017). In fact, Islamic State achieves success because of its ability to offer an alternative path and social governance for unemployed youth who are frustrated by a neglectful state, as such governments are able to provide neither social services like justice and education, nor security (ibid.). The same patterns are seen across various countries in West and Central Africa (e.g. Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali). In some cases, these patterns have been linked to regional spillover effects, as events in one country have immediate impacts in the neighbouring countries. An example of this is the jihadist insurgency in Burkina Faso, which started with an influx of fighters from neighbouring Mali (International Crisis Group, 2017).

**Islamic State achieves success because of its ability to offer an alternative path and social governance for unemployed youth who are frustrated by a neglectful state, as such governments are able to provide neither social services like justice and education, nor security (ibid.).**

## THE SAHEL REGION

The organisation has increased its communication materials reporting on the Sahel and its operations in Sahelian countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria). In January 2020 al-Naba' dedicated the front page of three of its issues to the Sahel attacks, Nigeria in al-Naba' 218, Burkina Faso in al-Naba' 216 and Niger in al-Naba' 217. A month prior to the intensified January attacks in the Sahel, one of the deadliest attacks in several years was carried out in Niger, where 71 soldiers were killed in an attack on a military base (al-Naba' 213). The situation in Niger is already quite complicated, which Islamic State benefits from; groups affiliated to

Islamic State and al-Qaeda are operating in the northern part of Niger, which borders on Mali and Libya, while Boko Haram is active in the south-eastern parts of Niger that border on Nigeria, where a spillover effect could be observed similar to the situation in Burkina Faso, as mentioned previously.

Another development that it is important to highlight in light of Islamic State's attempts to remobilise in geographical terms came after the French president Emmanuel Macron announced on January 15 that the counter-insurgency priority was Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In response Islamic State escalated its attacks and carried out devastating raids on a fairly continuous basis against the French and local military forces. Despite the African coalition's attempt to mobilise its armies with the intention of eliminating Islamic State's presence, the mujahideen expanded the areas under their control and intensified their attacks in the towns near north-eastern Nigeria and south-eastern Niger.

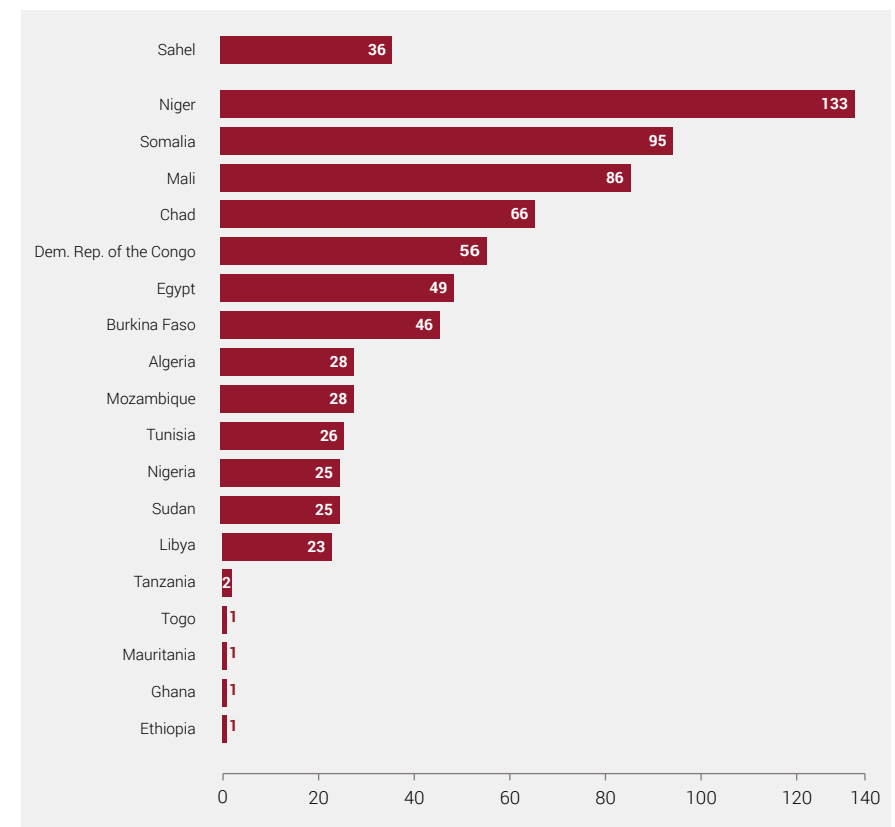
**The insurgencies are escalating alarmingly in the Sahel, especially in Niger, where the Nigerien army is struggling to contain the spread of these armed groups, giving Islamic State further opportunities to win footholds.**

Overall, the insurgencies are escalating alarmingly in the Sahel, especially in Niger, where the Nigerien army is struggling to contain the spread of these armed groups, giving Islamic State further opportunities to win footholds. Documenting these operations and claiming attacks in these countries are a dominant feature of the movement's propaganda. But although reported prominently, this may not entirely reflect reality, as these claimed attacks are planned or orchestrated by the central Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

To give an idea of the dominance of the different countries in Islamic State's communications material see Table 1 below, which calculates how many times African countries, including those in the Sahel region, have been mentioned in al-Naba' from October 2019 to April 2020. One reason why Nigeria has been mentioned less in this respect is the existence of its own Hausa-language propaganda outlet:

This content analysis has shown that there is a wide geographical focus in Islamic State's new propaganda and that the organisation is successfully remobilising both territorially and militarily. To explore one of the movement's rather new regional focus points, the next section of this report zooms in on its new English-language magazine Sawt al-Hind, published by a pro-Islamic State media unit, Junud Khilafah Hind, which illustrates how Islamic State is exploring new territories within India.

**Table 1. Number of times African countries and territories have been mentioned in al-Naba', October 2019-April 2020**



Note: ATLAS.ti software was used to count the countries.

## THE RECASTING OF DEFEAT IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Islamic State's exploitation of local grievances and its efforts to step into the security vacuum when a country enters a period of political turmoil that eventually leads to a reconfiguration of its security structures is not only seen in the context of Africa. The launch of the magazine *Sawt al-Hind* under the new leadership explains that Islamic State is still aiming to establish itself in territories in the South Asian region. Furthermore, Islamic State is signalling its greater presence in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as its relatively new branch in India. However, only Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh pledged allegiance to Abu Ibrahim when the ba'yah were renewed after Baghdadi's death.

The organisation's attempts to tap into considerable pre-existing conflict dynamics and exploit current sectarian conflicts are fully apparent in India. Prior to the publication of *Sawt al-Hind*, the issue of discrimination against Muslims in India was addressed in *al-Naba'* 221. The article includes a picture of the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, meeting Indian Muslims, and comments on the controversial citizenship act (CAA), which its critics see as a discriminatory law against Muslims and non-Hindu minorities generally (Taneja, 2020). Addressing India's oppression of Muslims is not new in itself, as this can be traced back to Dabiq, where Islamic State expresses its desire to 'liberate' India (Sheikh, 2017).



In a graphic published on 26 February 2020 a mob of men is shown beating an Indian Muslim man.  
Source: al-Qitaal Media Center

Islamic State is therefore taking advantage of the religious polarisation that is affecting Muslims in the country. In its propaganda it urges all supporters of Islamic State to 'crush the fascist government of Modi' and 'join the caravan of Islamic State, protect the deen (religion) and establish the Caliphate'. In a graphic published on 26 February 2020 a mob of men is shown beating an Indian Muslim man. The Koranic verse 22:39-40 quoted at the side says:

Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory. [They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right – only because they say, 'Our Lord is Allah.'

-Quran 22:39-40 (quoted in Site Intelligence, 2020).

This verse was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad shortly after his hijrah to Madina, which was then the first established Islamic community, though one living in fear of invasion by non-Muslims. This verse justifies armed struggle and jihad, both individually and collectively in Islam, solely with the purpose to defend the community against oppression or aggression against Muslims (Ismail, 2016: 46).

**The organisation incites rage against non-believers and the West. It takes advantage of negative feelings of humiliation, injustice and oppression by governments and offers an alternative, seemingly meaningful lifestyle, a community, and unity in fighting for a common cause.**

In the inaugural issue of *Sawt al-Hind*, published on 24 February 2020, all Muslims in India are urged to rise up and fight, as jihad is the only solution to the oppression of Muslims in India. The article condemns atrocities against Muslims in the Indian subcontinent and paints a picture of Modi as the face of the enemy of Muslims because of his oppression of Muslims, particularly through the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The CAA grants Indian citizenship to non-Muslim migrants who came to India before 2014 from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, but not Muslims, paving the way for Islamic State to use the social unrest that has resulted as an opportunity to gain momentum. Furthermore, the reports of oppression by India are framed as a 'trial from God' that speak the 'God's Will' narrative, and the

article draws parallels with the lessons of history by quoting Al-Baqarah 2:243 and 2:246-247 from the Koran. These particular verses are interpreted as calling for unity among Muslims to fight oppressors, as the title of the article also reveals: 'Where are you going? A call to all Muslims of Hind'. These particular verses are cited to urge readers to wage jihad, as 'Allah is aware of those who rejects jihad' (cf. al-Baqarah 2:247). In addition, arguments invoking stigmatisation and stating grievances recur in the magazine (Sawt al-Hind, 2020a:6). This tactic of persuasion is typically used to radicalise and mobilise fighters, a very distinctive tactic during Islamic State's peak years of 2014-2015, when they successfully radicalised members by, among other things, citing political grievances (see section on Individual jihad). The organisation incites rage against non-believers and the West. It takes advantage of negative feelings of humiliation, injustice and oppression by governments and offers an alternative, seemingly meaningful lifestyle, a community, and unity in fighting for a common cause (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011; 2008). In essence, the main messages in the whole ten-page inaugural issue are intended to provide a wake-up call for all Muslims in India, as they have been 'misguided' and poisoned by nationalism, in Islamic State's own words. Moreover, the authors argue that 'Allah has humiliated them' because they have endorsed nationalism and left the path of jihad:

'Democracy is not going to save you. Only Sharee'ah implemented in its purity in the shade of Khilafah can now save you.'

(Sawt al-Hind, 2020a: 7).

The entire magazine is heavy on pictures of demonstrations in India, pictures of Muslims celebrating Hindu traditions and pictures of the faces of Islam's enemies in India, according to Islamic State: India's prime minister Narendra Modi, its Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah, the Hindu nationalist monk and politician Yogi Adityanath and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.

Islamic State also criticises one of its rivals in the region, namely the Taliban. Sawt al-Hind includes an article on the Afghan Taliban entitled 'Taliban, from Jihad to Apostasy'. The article juxtaposes the Afghan Taliban under Mullah Omar and Haibatullah Akhundzada, where the former is described as the glorious old days when the leadership symbolised the umma and set a precedent in fighting for true jihadist principles. The leadership was able to successfully terrorise the 'apostate' nations and was supported, obeyed and honoured by other jihadist movements

because it established this precedent and symbolised the umma. However, 'Taliban 2.0' has changed its methods and adapted a more democratic and nationalist strategy, thereby abandoning 'true Islam and jihad for the sake of Allah' (Sawt al-Hind, 2020b: 9). Moreover, the editors are highly critical of the peace deal between America and the Taliban. They argue that the Taliban is now is focused on proving its loyalty to America, thereby neglecting the path of Islam and cooperating with America by, for example, implementing non-sharia laws in Afghanistan and eliminating Islamic State mujahideen:

'However, its Taliban 2.0 which has incurred the wrath of Allah upon themselves by changing its Manhaj (True Islamic method of application to the sacred texts, worship and everyday life) from Tawheed (Monotheism, the oneness of God) and al wala wal bara (loyalty to God and the Muslims) to Democracy and Nationalism, bowing down to America while abandoning the pinnacle of Islam i.e. jihad for the sake of Allah.'

(Sawt al-Hind, 2020b:10).

The editors quote al-Anfal, a much cited Koranic verse widely used by jihadists to justify jihad.<sup>2</sup> These articles speak directly to Islamic State's audience: in attempting to gain support, they portray themselves as the best alternative when it comes to inciting jihad and upholding Muslim duty.

The title of the Sawt al-Hind article recalls the cover of Dabiq's seventh issue featuring two French Muslims holding 'Je Suis Charlie' signs with the words 'From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: Extinction of the Grayzone'. This was published immediately after the attacks on the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris in 2014. The article in Dabiq features the same tale of misguidance and notions of what Islamic State claims to be two camps; the camp of disbelief, and the camp of Islam (Ingram et al., 2020). Here Sawt al-Hind is drawing parallels with the same narrative, perhaps with the intention of creating consistency and continuity by repeating the same framing of arguments.

Painting a picture of Hindus and Buddhists as the main oppressors and enemies of Islam is a recurring theme in Sawt al-Hind. Consequently, the same day as the magazine was published, Amaq news reported that a Sikh temple had been bombed in Kabul, Afghanistan, the perpetrator, identified as an Indian man, declaring the attack to be an 'act of revenge for the Kashmiri Muslims', who were allegedly facing

atrocities at the hands of the Indian government, which is biased towards Hindus. ISKP claimed responsibility immediately afterwards and published a communique explaining the search for justice for Muslims in Kashmir. The organisation also featured a picture of the perpetrator in al-Naba' 227. As mentioned in the case of African states, the strategy of stirring up polarisation among different ethnic or in this case religious groups is not a new one on the part of Islamic State. The attack also indicates that capitalising on religious polarisation has successfully radicalised individuals into carrying out attacks as a response to India's oppression of Muslims.

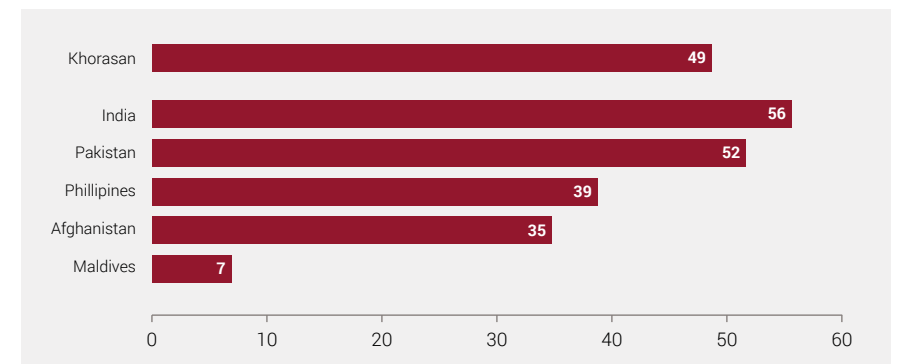
**A general trend in all territories is the incremental intensity and orchestration of attacks, which have been continuous and consistent since the new leadership took the helm.**

Furthermore, on the cover of the third issue of Sawt al-Hind the editors suggest multiple ways of mounting attacks in India and justified past attacks in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Specifically mentioning these countries, they make a call for their followers in India to focus more on the country and establish provinces that can operate in the country, the first article in the magazine being entitled 'Call Towards Tawheed and Jihad'. This is justified by the second article, which is entitled 'Preparation for Ghawza-e-Hind'. Ghawza-e-Hind means 'Battle of India', an apocalyptic reference to predictions of military expeditions during the Prophet Muhammad's time (Sheikh, 2017). In the relevant hadith the battle is predicted to span a large territory covering present-day Pakistan, Kashmir, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. This reference is a clear example of another justification and widely used tactic to draw the outside world's attention to parallels and analogies between Islamic State's actions and those of the Prophet Muhammad (Ingram et al., 2020; Welch, 2018).

It seems as if Islamic State is drawing attention to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, despite these territories not being entirely new on its radar, as the organisation has had a presence and been active there since 2017. However, it has recently intensified its focus in line with the social unrest in the region. Publishing a whole new magazine focused on India also has great value in signalling and providing a clear indication of Islamic State's shift towards its new geographical

priorities. This is the exact same strategy that it used to become a global threat, namely taking advantage of local conflicts and state failure in, for instance, Syria and later exporting the model both to Iraq and globally (International Crisis Group, 2016).

**Table 2. Number of times South(east) Asian countries and territories have been mentioned in al-Naba', October 2019-April 2020**



Note: Countries mentioned fewer than five times in al-Naba' have been omitted from Table (Sri Lanka (0), Bangladesh (1)).

Islamic State's Khorasan branch's main activity is in the border region of eastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, but its area of operations also include other parts such as Tajikistan and India, where individuals have pledged allegiance to it.

A general trend in all territories is the incremental intensity and orchestration of attacks, which have been continuous and consistent since the new leadership took the helm. No disruption seems to interfere with their activities; on the contrary, the number of attacks in all regions, including the core territory, has seen a general increase. The movement's expansionist goals are also evident, as the focus is still on expanding the territory it controls rather than sustaining it.

Although Islamic State has still not come close to posing as great a threat as it did in its peak years of 2014-2015 in Iraq and Syria, this does not exclude the possibility of the organisation's resurgence, as the situation in Africa is very alarming. Also, the communication materials are very unclear regarding the movement's capabilities, despite its plan and vision being to increase the number of attacks, this being one of its key messages.

## CONCLUSION

This report has analysed Islamic State's strategic trends and patterns under its new leadership. Despite Donald Trump reporting that the movement had been defeated after Baghdadi's death, the organisation perceives itself to be strong and still in existence. The report has provided a thick description of how Islamic State perceives itself today. Although the Western media have reported its heavy losses, Islamic State dismisses them as 'God's Will' and a 'Test from God'. The organisation quickly reshaped itself after Baghdadi's death and immediately announced a new leadership to demonstrate its ability to maintain a new command structure and continue the battle. This messaging is directed particularly at its supporters in order to start a round of ba'ya to the new leadership, but it is also addressed to the Western powers, who see Islamic State as defeated. On the contrary, the organisation shows resilience and no signs of disruption in its operations. During the period from October 2019 to April 2020 the movement's military operations and attacks have incrementally increased and intensified, becoming more sophisticated and being carried out on a relatively continuous basis. The focus is especially on Central and West Africa, areas outside the organisation's core territories in Iraq and Syria, this being part of its vision to extend its footsteps in the region and seize territories, especially in Mozambique, as is also clear from the rise of attacks illustrated on the map. Unfortunately, the region is prone to jihadists exploiting the security vacuum due to spillover effects in the Sahel, but also because of the region's unstable environment, where Islamic State is able to tap into already existing local grievances and introduce practical forms of social governance.

This exploitation of social unrest is also dominant in South Asia, where the organisation is also trying to mobilise support. The newly published magazine *Sawt al-Hind* also signals efforts in trying to win footholds in the region. Especially in India, and by speaking directly to the increase in tensions in India related to the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the organisation seem to have been successful in radicalising and mobilising its Indian followers, as the attacks against Sikhs and Hindus have increased under its new leadership. However, it remains unclear whether these attacks are being orchestrated by the central organisation in Iraq and Syria. Parallel to this, the organisation is also challenging the Taliban in Afghanistan and competing with al-Qaeda in the Sahel and the rebels in Syria, claiming them to be 'apostates' and portraying itself as the most legitimate jihadist group. These power struggles within jihadist groups have already erupted in the Sahel, where the territory is being used as a battlefield between Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

What is widely argued in all Islamic State's communications is the drawing of parallels with Islamic eschatological prophecies, because, like the Prophet Muhammad, the organisation is trying to justify its renewed and more aggressive strategies. The general pattern shows no great changes in their tactics, but rather a change in their strategy, as the new leadership is working to regain territory, seize new territory (cf. Africa), acquire legitimacy and extol Islamic State's glorious and peak years in 2014-2015. The organisation's operations and activities also point towards other specific strategic priorities, namely sealing internal leaks, protecting and legitimising the new leadership, increasing attacks to undermine stability and normalisation efforts in, according to themselves, liberated areas, and ensuring self-sufficiency (Al-Hashimi, 2020).

Lastly, Islamic State's communications increased significantly in quantity between the end of October 2019 and the beginning of April 2020, in line with the increased attacks these communications reported. By looking at the amount of propaganda the movement has produced alone, it is significant that Islamic State remains active and has successfully remobilised, preparing for a resurgence. Despite all the setbacks of the loss of its leaders and other high-profile members and its loss of territories, the movement does not seem to have lost its will and is continuing much as under the old leadership. In the past Islamic State has shown its ability to pursue

its agenda by using whatever resources it has at its disposal at the time depending on its circumstances, but its overall goal and rationale remains constant (Wignell et al, 2017). The organisation makes a mixture of emotional, theological and ideological appeals in its propaganda material, and the central message is one of never-ending jihad, regardless of its material losses (Ingram, 2016a). By means of successful mobilisation, increased attacks and the emphasis on continuing to expand and wage global jihad, Islamic State is still a potent force with global tentacles.

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## PRIMARY SOURCES

Three issues of Islamic State's e-magazine Sawt al-Hind and twenty-seven issues of al-Naba' form the main research base of this study. A few voice messages published by Al-Furqan media were also included. The al-Naba' newsletters were all acquired through Jihadology.net, and translated material was acquired through Site Intelligence.

Additionally, thirteen issues of Islamic State's flagship e-magazine Rumiya and fifteen issues of Dabiq were included when necessary for comparative purposes.

Sawt al-Hind, 2020a, issue 1  
Sawt al-Hind, 2020b, issue 2  
Sawt al-Hind, 2020c, issue 3

al-Naba' 205 (2019)  
al-Naba' 206 (2019)  
al-Naba' 207 (2019)  
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al-Naba' 225 (2020)  
al-Naba' 226 (2020)  
al-Naba' 227 (2020)  
al-Naba' 228 (2020)  
al-Naba' 229 (2020)

al-Naba' 230 (2020)  
al-Naba' 231 (2020)  
al-Naba' 232 (2020)

Al-Furqan voice message: 'Allah Destroyed Them Completely, and a Similar (Fate Awaits) the Disbelievers,' 27 January 2020.

Al-Furqan voice message: 'And Whosoever Fulfills What He has Covenanted with Allah, He will Bestow on Him a Great Reward,' 31 October 2019.

Dabiq 1, (2014)  
Dabiq 2, (2014)  
Dabiq 3, (2014)  
Dabiq 4, (2014)  
Dabiq 5, (2014)  
Dabiq 6, (2014)  
Dabiq 7, (2014)  
Dabiq 8, (2014)  
Dabiq 9, (2014)  
Dabiq 10, (2014)  
Dabiq 11, (2014)  
Dabiq 12, (2014)  
Dabiq 13, (2014)  
Dabiq 14, (2014)  
Dabiq 15, (2014)

Rumiya 1, (2016)  
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Rumiya 8, (2017)  
Rumiya 8, (2017)  
Rumiya 9, (2017)  
Rumiya 10, (2017)  
Rumiya 11, (2017)  
Rumiya 11, (2017)  
Rumiya 12, (2017)  
Rumiya 13, (2017)

# NOTES

- 1 These search results are based on 'Syria' in Arabic, 'Al-Sham' and 'Damascus'.
- 2 The al-Anfal Qur'anic verse is referenced 33 times, counting all issues of Dabiq, Rumiya and the first three issues of Sawt al-Hind.

## Photos

Cover: Sherif Aly Mohamed / Shutterstock

Page 14-15: Photo downloaded from ISIS' messaging network and provided to Crisis Group by researcher Aaron Zelin, shows what ISIS says in the distribution of its newsletter al-Naba' in al-Bayda, Yemen. Crisis Group cannot vouch for the accuracy of this.

Page 24-25: Tomas Davidov / Shutterstock

Page 32-33: Pedrosala / Shutterstock

Page 42: Danish Siddiqui / Ritzau Scanpix

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