

The Caliphate may be gone but is Daesh?

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At its peak in 2015 the armed group self-identifying as the Islamic State controlled the territory of the size of Great Britain, ruled over an estimated [10million](#) people and was branded the [world's richest terrorist organisation](#). Contrary to what the title claims, this element has always been no more than a terrorist organisation, albeit a powerful one, which is why in what follows I shall refer to it as Daesh – an acronym so fervently despised by the organisation's ideologues. After five years of fighting and countless lives lost it was announced on March 23, 2019 that the American backed Kurdish and Arab militia had expelled Daesh from its last stronghold in Syrian village of Baghuz. Some rejoiced whilst others warned cautiously against premature joy and rushed decisions.

Fawaz Gerges opened his New York Times [article](#) with an important statement about how the organisation's "territorial rule has ended". Here lies the critical aspect that we need to comprehend. Whilst the termination of the territorial rule is an achievement one needs to proceed with caution when assessing the extent to which Daesh has been defeated. The true power of this organisation was never in its territorial possession as much as what it had become beyond it.

What's in the territory?

The territory was definitely an advantage that Daesh had over other jihadist groups – it seemed to have achieved what others had failed at. It thus inspired respect and esteem. This emboldened **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** to proclaim himself the *Caliph* – chief religious and civilian ruler believed to be the descendant of Mohammad. This self-proclamation arguably made him the leader of all jihadist organisations. The territory also came with people which is imperative for one who seeks power. Territorial possessions also provide the means to generate income for a sustainable existence.

What has been defeated and what remains?

First and foremost, we need to distinguish between Daesh as a quasi-political unit and Daesh as an ideology. On the one hand Daesh was an entity that strived and arguably temporarily became a state-like unit controlling territory, possessing an army and military capabilities, collecting taxes and imposing its own code of conduct for all who forcibly or otherwise lived under what was presented as an Islamic state. On the other hand, Daesh created and perpetuated a meaning system that has become normalised and engrained in the minds of so many. An ideology, which successfully manages to frame a problem and present itself as the sole possessor of truth and thus a saviour. In the long run, the latter is where true danger lies for the belief system that this organisation created transcends its territorial rule. Much like radiation the ideology based on manipulation has spread and infiltrated numerous minds – partly due to their

impressionability but mostly due to how skilfully it was crafted and delivered to targeted audiences. Again, much like radiation this ideology is here to stay and requires extremely careful dealing.

Although removing the material/political symbol of this ideology will be a massive blow to the organisation it will be far from eliminating it completely. First, without its physical centre of gravity it might be harder to contain but one thing Daesh has effectively proven to be is resilient. So, what we are now calling a defeat is likely a temporary degradation. Reports suggest that Daesh still [generates income](#) from previous investments, criminal activities and foreign donations, others refer to [large amounts of money smuggled](#) into safe havens to be used to re-group and re-arm. Second, one does not necessarily need a territorial unit to spread ideas and penetrate the hearts and minds of potential supporters. Modern times offer other means and platforms for such purposes, but we shall get to it. The ideology is here to stay, and numerous factors will contribute to its advancement.

The drive

Symbols have always been important to Daesh. Symbolism was present in everything they said and did. To name just a few, Al-Baghdadi's speech from the al-Nouri mosque in Mosul, choosing *Dabiq* as the title of their online magazine were all actions loaded with symbolism. This means that as long as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is presumed alive there remains a symbol of greatness – the symbol of not just any man who fought for Daesh but THE man who made it what we witness it become. Being persecuted will add to his

allure potentially drawing support from many. How the international community manages to deal with him will be very important and much like in case of Osama bin Laden avoiding creating the perception of his martyrdom shall be crucial.

What is to come?

In more practical terms, Daesh is a terrorist organisation with capabilities that at times outweighed those of certain states. So, what is to be expected in those terms?

First. Daesh will continue to exploit sectarian divisions plaguing the region and will make use of any shortcoming of governance they come across. This is particularly important as it is crucial to remember that the political and economic realities that allowed the ascent of Daesh still exist leaving enough room for the same violent extremism to catch a breath and come back swinging. These enabling factors must be dealt with primarily by local actors.

Second. having lost its territory and whatever approximated it to a state Daesh is now even closer to an insurgency than at any point since 2013. On the ground in Syria and Iraq we should expect it to return to guerrilla tactics and surprise attacks activating its numerous sleeper cells. Three days after the declaration of its defeat, [Daesh claimed an attack on Kurdish forces in Manjib taking seven lives](#). In Iraq Daesh has been operating as a covert network in rural and areas of rough terrain such as the Anbar and Nineveh provinces. The Syrian branch is expected to mimic the Iraqi experience as assessed by the [eighth report of the Secretary General of the UN on the threat posed by Daesh](#). Earlier, in February 2019 the office of the Inspector

General of the Department of Defense of the USA issued a statement claiming that Daesh [“is still able to coordinate offensives and counter-offensives, as well as operate as a decentralized insurgency”](#).

Third. Syrian and Iraqi authorities currently have hundreds of Daesh fighters in custody who represent a challenge to local governments at least for two reasons: 1. Fighters, both local and foreign are individuals who, at the very least, have accepted violence as a tool for achieving political goals and at most are active war criminals. They can contribute to further radicalisation of sympathisers; 2. How custodians deal with those individuals will likely raise questions concerning human rights abuses potentially undermining the stability of their governance.

Fourth. Daesh has effectively branched out to other parts of the region as well as elsewhere in the world presenting a considerable security challenge in the Philippines, Burkina Faso, Libya and Afghanistan. In the [Philippines](#) Daesh had its first recruitment wave in 2016. Currently, in spite of president Duterte’s claim of victory its militants are said to be dislocated on Mindanao island where dense wilderness and weak policing allow them to exist and recruit. In [Libya](#) Daesh makes use of the fragmentation of power and stages deadly attacks against civilians. In Afghanistan ISIS Khorasan (IK) has been vehemently fighting against the Afghan military, the Taliban and al Qaeda. Some have duly noted that [current peace negotiations may play into the hands of Daesh](#) as those who are disillusioned by Taliban’s apparent engagement in the talks might switch

allegiance and flock to IK. Other fighters are scattered elsewhere in the world and there is always the temptation to re-establish the caliphate in a different location – a location perhaps void of the historic symbolism of the Middle East but enough to serve as the Platzdarm to wage a future war.

Fifth. Daesh has continuously demonstrated its ability to adapt to battlefield necessities. It has already changed its tactics to incorporate more [women as fighters](#) – an issue which remains a [blind spot for security policies](#) of most countries. In mainstream Daesh ideology, women used to be seen as the carriers and carers of future fighters. In life just as much as in war they were merely there to support the men and raise their children. Traditionally women had no rights and no place in the battlefield. However, Daesh, notorious for its brutal gender norms has successfully identified a shortcoming in security policies of its adversaries and in 2017 it called upon women to [actively engage in terrorist activities](#). Since then Daesh [has used female combatants](#) on multiple occasions and in various positions. This strategic change is likely to be utilised more often in the future.

Sixth. going back to a point made earlier, we need to remember that Daesh has always made use of the social media and encrypted messaging services. This medium is expected to be actively used to communicate with the loyal base, generate support beyond the areas where the group engages militarily and coordinate future activities.

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