ISIS Goes Global

Fight the Islamic State by Targeting Its Affiliates

Daniel Byman

The downing of a Russian passenger plane over Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula last October, for which the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) claimed responsibility, may ultimately prove more consequential than the horrific attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, that followed. Western security officials had long worried that their countries’ own citizens would conduct attacks after returning home from Iraq or Syria or strike out as “lone wolf” terrorists. But the Russian plane crash, which killed 224 people, was caused by a different beast: neither lone wolves nor ISIS itself but an ISIS affiliate that had pledged its loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS’ self-declared caliph. ISIS calls these groups wilayat, Arabic for “provinces.” (The term is borrowed from the seventh century, when the armies of Islam burst out of the Arabian Peninsula and established regional governors who ruled in the name of the caliph; ISIS also uses wilayat to refer to administrative divisions within Iraq and Syria.) If, as recent events suggest, ISIS’ far-flung provinces have begun closely aligning their actions with those of the group’s core leadership in Iraq and Syria, then ISIS’ geographic scope has expanded vastly.

Although alarming, such expansion is not unprecedented. After 9/11, several of al Qaeda’s affiliates eclipsed that group’s central command in both size and importance. One of them, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has repeatedly tried to down U.S. airplanes and remains a deadly threat today. AQAP claimed responsibility for the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, and last May, Michael Morell, a former Director of Central Intelligence, warned in a speech to the National Security Forum that AQAP had “our attention.”

So how should the United States target ISIS affiliates? Since their attacks ultimately flow from the group’s core in Iraq and Syria, the best strategy is to target that core. Western officials should press for an influx of international troops in Iraq and Syria so that the ranks of the Islamic State’s core leadership can be whittled down. As long as the Islamic State remains a cohesive group with a functioning leadership structure, its far-flung provinces will continue to conduct attacks that demonstrate its cohesion and capabilities.

For many years, the Islamic State’s leaders have been fighting a battle on two fronts: attacking Western targets and building power in the Middle East. They prefer the former because it is easier and more rewarding. But for now, the Islamic State must try to do both. Thus, to tackle the group’s global reach, the United States must target both of its fronts. The Islamic State is dangerous, but it is not omnipotent. It is vulnerable, and the United States has the means to attack its heart in Syria and Iraq while simultaneously attacking its legs in the Islamic world and beyond.
deputy director of the CIA, said that AQAP retained “the ability to bring down an airliner in the United States of America tomorrow.”

ISIS itself also began as an al Qaeda franchise. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi emerged as a leader of jihadist forces in Iraq. In 2004, he pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and changed his organization’s name from the Organization of Monotheism and Jihad to al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). After Zarqawi’s death, in 2006, the group took on other names, including the Islamic State of Iraq. When Baghdadi took over in 2010, the organization was on its last legs. Local Sunnis had turned against it, undermining its operations. When U.S. forces pulled out of the country in 2011, the Iraqi government they left behind seemed ascendant.

But Baghdadi’s group rose from the ashes, exploiting the marginalization of Iraqi Sunnis and the Syrian civil war. In 2013, Baghdadi changed his group’s name yet again, to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. In 2014, after his fighters captured the Iraqi city of Mosul, his ambitions grew further: he declared a caliphate over the Muslim world, shortening the group’s name to the Islamic State. Now, ISIS has eclipsed al Qaeda in size and strength; it has also outpaced its former master in spawning affiliates, establishing ever-larger numbers of franchises and supporters throughout the Muslim world.

The provinces pose a serious threat to Western interests: they enable ISIS to expand its reach and make local groups more deadly in their regional conflicts. Hotbeds of jihad that have not yet exported terrorism to the West may do so in the future if local groups strengthen their ties to ISIS.

Yet the United States and its allies are only just beginning to factor the provinces into their counterterrorism strategy. In his last major address on ISIS, in December, U.S. President Barack Obama focused on the terrorist threat that the group’s core in Iraq and Syria posed to the United States, without even mentioning the group’s provinces.

The Pentagon has been taking the danger more seriously and has considered establishing additional military bases in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East partly in response. But the United States and its allies must go further, developing a comprehensive strategy to weaken ISIS’ various franchises. They should start by taking advantage of the tensions that will probably arise between ISIS’ leadership in Iraq and Syria and its more remote branches. Al Qaeda’s affiliates eventually became a burden for its core, demanding resources, ignoring its directives, and
tarring its name by conducting unpopular attacks. ISIS will likely encounter similar problems. To ensure that it does, the United States should aim to disrupt communication between the main group and its provinces and work with allies new and old to target the latter directly. If the West is ever to defeat ISIS, it will have to work against the group as a whole, not just against its most visible part.

GOING BIG
As is well known, the heart of ISIS lies in the Sunni-populated parts of Iraq and Syria, and the organization’s core splits its headquarters between Mosul and Raqqa. Yet ISIS claims to be the legitimate ruler of all Muslims, and it operates throughout the Muslim world. It has already declared wilayat in parts of Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Caucasus. Terrorists or fighters operating in ISIS’ name have also conducted attacks in Bangladesh and Kuwait.

So far, the most worrisome provinces are those in Egypt and Libya. The Egyptian affiliate, Sinai Province, which used to call itself Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, pledged loyalty to Baghdadi in 2014. At first, this oath seemed to mean little, and the group’s fighters continued to focus their attacks on Egypt’s military and police. But they soon began to raise their ambitions, going after UN targets, beheading a Croatian expatriate (supposedly in revenge for Croatia’s participation in the international anti-ISIS coalition), and attacking the Italian consulate in Cairo. And then they downed the Russian airliner.

The Libyan province emerged from the strife that followed the overthrow of the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011. Qaddafi had faced a jihadist threat for years, and as countrywide unrest turned to outright conflict, local jihadists became more powerful. As ISIS began to grab headlines, its brand became more compelling to local fighters; a courtship blossomed, and Libyan fighters pledged their loyalty to Baghdadi in 2014.

Today, the Libyan affiliate poses a particularly serious threat to Western interests because its fighters, unlike their counterparts in Egypt, do not face strong government opposition. The group has as many as 3,000 active members, and its fighters have beheaded Ethiopian Coptic workers and attacked the Moroccan and South Korean embassies. Although the group’s fighters have not yet mounted an international attack, they hold the Mediterranean city of Sirte and adjacent towns
along the Libyan coast, where they’ve created a mini-caliphate, dispensing brutal justice and enforcing social codes as the core organization does in its Iraqi and Syrian heartlands.

Figuring out where exactly ISIS has established a formal presence and where local fighters are merely emulating the group can be difficult. In Bangladesh, ISIS has claimed responsibility for bombings, stabbings, and shootings of Shiite and Western targets, but it is unclear if these attacks are directly linked to the core group. Nigeria’s Boko Haram has endorsed and sworn loyalty to ISIS, but the Nigerian extremist group has multiple commanders, and these claims have not been matched by any significant change in operations, suggesting that the relationship between the two groups remains more distant than it may seem.

In places where ISIS does have a more formal presence, foreign fighters play an important role creating and maintaining ties between the local group and the core. More than any other modern terrorist group, ISIS relies on volunteers from abroad: by the end of 2015, roughly 25,000 foreigners from Arab countries and 5,000 from Western states had fought with it in Iraq and Syria, and the ranks of outsiders keep growing. These fighters act as communication channels, bringing local concerns to ISIS and Baghdadi’s vision back to their countries of origin when they return. When the so-called Afghan Arabs, who had fought with the mujahideen against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, returned...
home, they spread their ideology to local groups, giving al Qaeda informal networks throughout the Muslim world. Today, ISIS is engaged in similar activity, but more rapidly and on a far more massive scale, even winning over groups formerly linked to al Qaeda. Many of these groups, particularly those in North Africa, worked frequently with ISIS when it was still an al Qaeda affiliate.

Accepting the ISIS label often leads local groups to shift their tactics and ideology. In addition to fighting local government forces and rival groups as they did before, many affiliates begin making sectarian attacks and targeting Westerners in the region. In a particularly brutal but effective form of violent propaganda, they often behead their victims and carefully choreograph and videotape the executions for broad dissemination. When possible, as in parts of Libya, provinces also adopt an ISIS-style governance structure, complete with police, courts, and taxes. Unlike some of al Qaeda’s affiliates, they do not try to form lasting alliances with other rebel groups, and they tend to have little respect for local authority figures, with tribal leaders an important exception. So far, however, no ISIS province has attacked targets in the West.

**YOU BELONG WITH ME**

Local groups are attracted to ISIS for many reasons. One of the most important is the most obvious: genuine conviction. As nauseating as ISIS is to most Muslims, it has tapped into the beliefs of an important subset of Sunni Muslims, particularly young men. ISIS trumpets sectarianism, portraying itself as the defender and avenger of Sunnis worldwide. Moreover, the group’s slick videos and social media campaigns attract even young Sunnis who lack real religious knowledge or conviction by playing into their desires for adventure and a sense of purpose. As General David Rodriguez, the commander of U.S. Africa Command, has noted, groups affiliate themselves with ISIS “to elevate their cause.”

Of course, some groups join ISIS for more practical purposes, such as access to financial or technical aid. According to The New York Times, in Afghanistan, ISIS offered Taliban fighters several hundred thousand dollars for their support to gain more territory and recruits. ISIS also helps local groups improve the quality of their propaganda: after strengthening ties with ISIS in 2014, for example, Boko Haram was able to elevate its outreach from grainy videos taken on hand-held cameras to more polished productions distributed via Twitter. ISIS offers its provinces access to experienced fighters and has sent hun-
dreds of its troops to Libya (some of whom originally hailed from there) to help its supporters. Finally, taking on the ISIS brand allows local commanders to split from al Qaeda or other existing groups without provoking a backlash from their followers. It allows aspiring leaders to mask their power grabs with claims of doctrinal purity.

The provinces offer benefits to the core, too. Adding new affiliates bolsters ISIS’ self-image by making the organization seem more powerful and attractive. Shortly after proclaiming a caliphate in 2014, Baghdadi declared all local jihadist groups and emirates subservient to ISIS. When new provinces sign up, they appear to fulfill that vision. They also give ISIS strategic reach, allowing it to tap into fighters and networks around the Middle East. Libya, for example, offers a base for striking nearby Egypt and Tunisia.

Charles Lister, a fellow at the Middle East Institute, has described the provinces as part of ISIS’ “ink spot” strategy. The provinces themselves are mini Islamic states that will expand through proselytizing and war. As the ink spots expand, the borders will meet up, forming a larger entity. And as more and more provinces pledge allegiance to ISIS, they may encourage other independent groups to do the same.

The affiliates also give the core group fallback options, creating potential refuges for its leaders in case ISIS is defeated or crippled in Iraq or Syria. In The New York Times, one U.S. Defense Department official called ISIS’ heavy involvement in Libya “contingency planning.”

After the death of bin Laden, local al Qaeda affiliates, especially in Yemen, offered al Qaeda a way to keep itself in the news even as the core organization found itself on the run; ISIS’ provinces may serve a similar function. Although ISIS today seems unstoppable to many Westerners, it has lost around 40 percent of its Iraqi territory since 2014, in addition to much of its oil infrastructure and heavy forces. One resident of Raqqa told The New York Times that ISIS’ popularity has diminished because it has “lost its brilliant victories.” Although ISIS has hardly been defeated, local setbacks have demoralized some of its followers. By expanding into new territories, the group continues to create headlines, allowing it to attract more foreign fighters to its core organization.
GOING TO EXTREMES

As ISIS grows beyond Iraq and Syria, so, too, does it spread its harsh brand of religious intolerance. In 2015, the group’s followers attacked Shiite mosques in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen; beheaded Egyptian and Ethiopian Christians in Libya; and attacked security forces and Sunni Muslims deemed insufficiently devout. Not only are such attacks tragic in their own right; they also risk setting in motion a cycle of retaliation, as has already happened in Yemen. Such cycles, which lead to revenge attacks against Sunnis, only bolster the group’s claim to being a defender of the faithful.

Growing sectarianism also threatens the legitimacy of the governments of Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other religiously divided countries. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the government currently finds itself in a dilemma: if it fails to stop ISIS from bombing Saudi Shiite mosques, it will embolden the extremists and show that it cannot protect its own people; yet if it cracks down on ISIS, it will risk looking like the champion of the country’s unloved Shiite minority, which could hurt its legitimacy among Sunni chauvinists.

The spread of ISIS will also worsen the region’s refugee crisis. The group embraces barbarism as strategy; beheadings, rape, and other grotesque acts are not byproducts of its wars but deliberate tools to intimidate enemies and reward supporters. In retaliation for a tribal revolt in Libya in August 2015, ISIS fighters killed dozens of members of the tribe, crucifying several of them in a traffic circle—a punishment familiar to anyone following the group’s parade of horrors in Iraq and Syria. If the provinces expand, many Muslims and religious minorities will flee rather than endure their rule.

From the West’s perspective, however, the bigger concern is that as ISIS grows, it will develop new staging grounds and operatives to use for international terrorist attacks. Baghdadi has called on Muslims abroad to travel to Iraq and Syria or to the provinces, if they can; if they cannot, he has said they should focus on local attacks. Gone are the days when Western governments had to worry about only the foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria; increasingly, they have to worry about would-be jihadists traveling to and from other ISIS bases around the region and beyond.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Despite all the benefits provinces offer ISIS, they also come with their share of trouble. For one thing, they can weaken the jihadist movement as a whole. Many of them exist because of local rivalries: members of
rival groups spend their time killing one another rather than fighting their supposed enemies. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban and a renegade faction that has pledged loyalty to ISIS have warred for control of Helmand Province, weakening both of them in their fight against the Afghan government.

Just as al Qaeda did, ISIS may soon learn that not all affiliates are obedient servants. When local groups, particularly strong ones, take on the ISIS label, they retain their own command structure, personnel, and parochial goals, and these often fit uneasily with those of the core group. Time and again, al Qaeda found that many of its regional franchises retained their traditional agendas, continuing to fight the local fights they always had (although perhaps adding some local Western targets to the mix). Al Qaeda’s leaders had particular difficulty controlling AQI, which they thought spent too much energy killing ordinary Shiites and Sunni imams and other leaders who opposed the group. When AQI bombed three hotels in Amman, Jordan, in 2005, killing some 60 people, roughly 200 Islamic scholars from 50 countries condemned the group, calling the killing of noncombatants “among the gravest of sins.” The ferocious criticism tarnished al Qaeda’s brand among many of its Muslim constituents.

As ISIS absorbs local groups, it will also take on the enemies they make. Western officials told The New York Times that when the leaders of Sinai Province decided to bomb the Russian plane, they did so without consulting ISIS. The move provoked Russia, which until then had limited its air strikes in Syria to attacks on the moderate opposition, to launch cruise missiles at ISIS’ forces and infrastructure in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, among other targets.

This process works both ways; local groups that link up with ISIS can also get themselves into trouble, painting bull’s-eyes on their backs. Again, the experience of al Qaeda is instructive. In 2010, bin Laden discouraged the Somali militant group al Shabab from declaring allegiance to his organization because doing so would give “enemies” an excuse to mobilize against al Shabab. Something similar is happening now. Before the extremist groups in Egypt and Libya pledged allegiance to ISIS, the United States cared little about them. Now it has zeroed in on them. In November 2015, for example, a U.S. air strike near the port

Just as al Qaeda did, ISIS may soon learn that not all affiliates are obedient servants.
city of Darnah, Libya, killed an Iraqi who may have been the leader of ISIS’ affiliate there. By attacking local governments, the provinces also risk pushing local regimes into the arms of the anti-ISIS coalition.

Joining up with ISIS can also cost affiliates local support. Outside terrorist groups tend to be less in tune with conditions on the ground than their native-born associates are. In 2003, for example, the al Qaeda core pushed its Saudi affiliate to launch an insurgency prematurely, despite local leaders’ warnings that they were not prepared. The result was a disaster: after the group conducted several terrorist attacks against Western targets in the kingdom and strikes on Saudi security forces, the Saudi government cracked down, killing or arresting most of the group’s members. Because foreign fighters lack grass-roots connections, they also have few incentives to exercise restraint. When ISIS tried to set up shop in Darnah in 2014, for example, its brutal behavior alienated residents, who worked with rival groups to expel it. The most successful terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, enjoy close ties with their local populations. They use violence, but they also carefully moderate their brutality. ISIS has yet to learn that lesson.

A NEW STRATEGY
Last year, it did not seem to matter that the United States and its allies had no clear strategy for dealing with ISIS’ provinces. Neither Washington nor its friends were eager to take on yet another messy fight in the Middle East. Indeed, targeting the provinces appeared counterproductive: if the groups were locally focused, then bombing them might just provoke them to attack the West. Yet the attack on the Russian plane exposed the danger of this line of thinking. Ignoring the provinces risks allowing ISIS to grow stronger and more dangerous.

Any strategy aimed at weakening the provinces must include two parts: severing the link between the core group and the affiliates and attempting to contain, weaken, and defeat the affiliates themselves. To that end, the United States and its allies should target provincial command-and-control centers and locals who have personal relationships with top ISIS leaders in Iraq and Syria. Deprived of instruction from headquarters, the provinces will be forced to go their own way, which could create a world of new problems for ISIS’ core, costing them local allies.

To fight ISIS as it spreads, the United States will need military bases in many remote parts of the world. Flexibility will be vital, since it is hard to predict which provinces will expand and demand the
most attention. (Yemen, for example, was not a major concern for U.S. counterterrorism officials until 2009, when the so-called underwear bomber, who had been based there, nearly downed an airplane over Detroit.) To gain the right geographic reach and to ease the burden, the United States should also work with its allies. France, for instance, is committed to the anti-ISIS coalition and has a strong military presence in North Africa. The United States should divvy up responsibilities and coordinate operations with France there.

The United States and its allies should also seek to weaken the provinces by portraying the core group as out of touch with local grievances in the news and on social media. This tactic is more likely to work in countries where anti-foreign sentiment is particularly strong, such as Somalia, than in places where national identity is weaker, such as Libya.

Washington also needs to strengthen the states where ISIS affiliates have set up shop. It should provide aid and training to military, police, and intelligence forces in such places. It should also offer to help these countries improve their administrative capacity through judicial reform and social service provision and assist them in securing their borders by building barriers, improving surveillance, and training border troops. In countries without a functioning government, such as Libya, the United States may have to work with local militias and tribes.

Diasporas that are involved in civil wars in their homelands, such as the Somali diaspora, are also a counterterrorist concern. Until now, such struggles have been primarily local, and so if a member of the diaspora felt compelled to take up arms, he often posed little threat to his host country. If groups such as al Shabab embrace ISIS, however, the threat may grow. But diasporas can also provide an opportunity, since it is far easier to gather intelligence from the members of a diaspora community than from their brethren back home. In many cases, the best way to gain leads is to work with the communities themselves; the less they feel alienated, the more likely they will be to report any troublemakers in their midst.

In all these ways, Washington must integrate ISIS’ many provinces into the overall U.S. strategy against the group. Left unchecked, these regional affiliates will increasingly threaten the Middle East and the rest of the world. But with the right policies, the United States and its allies can do serious damage to both the provinces and their masters, turning a mutually beneficial relationship into a disaster for both. ☹