CREST Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats

After Islamic State: Understanding the End of the Caliphate

WORKSHOP REPORT II

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This report is the product of a CREST workshop held in February 2017. The workshop was hosted by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office and convened by Dr Cerwyn Moore, a CREST programme lead based at the University of Birmingham.

The workshop was the first of a series addressing the potential implications of the demise of Islamic State's (hereafter: IS) territory in Syria and Iraq. It brought together leading academics from around the globe to address these issues.

For questions regarding the report, please contact Dr Cerwyn Moore at:

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About CREST

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is a national hub for understanding, countering and mitigating security threats. It is an independent Centre, commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and funded in part by the UK security and intelligence agencies (ESRC Award: ES/N009614/1).

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FOREIGN FIGHTERS - CERWYN MOORE

'Foreign fighters are non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a combat zone to participate in hostilities.' This definition of foreign fighters is an early, loose and useful working definition, which can be supplemented with an understanding of 'transnational activism' – so as to recognise the many roles employed by foreign nationals in conflicts.

It is important to recognise that those who often fall under the label of 'foreign fighters' don't always take part in fighting themselves. The most important figures are often those who mobilise others. These ideologues are usually veterans of other conflicts. One example is Shaykh Fathi al-Shishani, who was welcomed in to the North Caucasus in 1995. He had been too ill to fight in Afghanistan, but as a Jordanian-Chechen had credibility within local communities. That he could also speak Arabic and Chechen, gave al-Shishani further legitimacy and credibility, enabling al-Shishani to establish links between internal and external groups. The importance of local language skills – and a shared sense of identity (the formation of 'fictive kin') – also appears to have re-emerged in Syria, with some groups organising themselves around particular kinship networks and militia leaders.

In his organisational role, it was Shaykh Fathi who invited the Saudi Ibn al-Khattab into Dagestan in 1995 and gave him command of a local militia. Khattab was a competitor to Osama Bin Laden, rather than a lieutenant as the Russians have tried to claim. On the ground there was contestation over resources in a similar vein to what is now being seen in Syria. The same anti-Russian sentiments also play a key role in some of groups fighting in Syria.

Following Abdullah Azzam's lead, Khattab implemented a model where individuals of any nationality could join his forces. However, as a military man, Khattab ensured any prospective cadres were carefully selected, something that we don't appear to have seen seen when considering foreign fighters in Islamic State (IS). The Khattab group included a small inner circle of largely Saudi fighters, some of whom had travelled to Afghanistan or Bosnia. Other groups, such as the Turkish volunteers, appear to have operated independently in the first war. The structure for the group of fighters Khattab led after 1996, mirrored the organisation of jihadi groups who had fought in Afghanistan.

To this end, Khattab also followed the Azzam model in setting up training camps: this preparation would prove crucial in sustaining the movement after setbacks in 1999. In particular, this increased the resilience of the network, enabled it to become embedded in the region, and afforded the foreign fighter movement some limited room to adapt. Khattab's influence still lingers in wider jihadi literature and resonates through new media. In particular, he was the first to establish a multi-language portal for disseminating statements and media. It is clear that Khattab's thinking extended beyond the conflict. In particular, he ensured that his foreign fighter network became embedded locally and incorporated local ideologues and financers.

There were, however, still fractures in the movement. The core of the local ideological movement garnered support from Jordanian-Chechens and Saudis. It was the support from particular local

warlords (Basayev), and the financial support Khattab (and his religious advisor – Abu Omar Sayf) had access to (Benevolence International Foundation - BiF) that created a marriage of convenience in the North Caucasus.

By 2001, many of the foreign fighters in Khattab's network had been killed, including a considerable number of his trusted inner circle. However, the resilience of the network allowed it to adapt and survive. Careful preplanning had also ensured that exfiltration routes could be adapted and changed. The local insurgency was successful at harnessing communities embedded in Europe, particularly in Turkey, to channel support. As the conflict widened, some of the affiliates linked to the Khattab network supported sophisticated insurgency-related attacks on military and political targets. Doctrinal and ideological guidance was garnered from the Middle East, through the Saudi foreign fighter group originally linked to Khattab, to justify the use of female suicide bombers by local Chechen groups. Women were also used in the recruitment of foreign fighters.

The individuals travelling from Russia to Syria today are not necessarily North Caucasian. Many Russian-speaking transnational activists are originally from Central Asian countries who have large migrant populations in Russia. There are around one million of these migrants in Moscow, which appears to be a centre for radicalisation. There is also evidence of IS inspired, self-starters or lone attackers. Again, these individuals are not only from the North Caucasus but other parts of Russia, and have included a number of converts.

In a similar vein to the end of criminal networks, there will be a period of considerable uncertainty within the ranks of the foreign fighter movement. Small numbers of disillusioned foreign fighters – especially those with local support networks - may manage to escape. However local militia fighters, with dwindling local support, may change sides. As the local militias are granted amnesties, many foreign fighters may become trapped, unable to return home or leave the conflict zone. Those foreign fighters who were trapped in the North Caucasus after 2001, largely fought to the death in battles with Kremlin-backed local militias who knew the terrain and could operate with impunity.

In Chechnya, a small number of activists who had travelled from overseas to fulfil logistical or support roles had been injured in Bosnia. Others injured in the first war (1994-96) – notably Jordanian, Turkish and Saudi volunteers - gained support and rehabilitation in overseas hospitals during the inter-war period. Small numbers of Yemenis, Egyptians and Algerians arrived in the period from 1995, via staging points in the region (Baku) and Pankisi (Georgia). Very few became integrated into the Khattab network – which was in competition with Al-Qaeda (AQ) for resources in the period from 1995-2001.

Central Asian and local affiliates (i.e. from ethnic communities across the region, such as the Nogai or Azeri) were welcomed into training facilities in the inter-war years (1996-99). Common language (Russian; Turkish) – and the capacity to travel to the region – along with informal support networks organised by Khattab, appear to have helped the Central Asian foreign fighter network grow in the inter-war years. Small numbers of foreign fighters left – disillusioned with the cause.

As argued, the capacity of foreign fighter networks often depends on their ability to adapt. This can be seen in Chechnya – as foreign fighters dwindled the movement adopted a more regional focus, drawing on support from Turkish communities, especially after 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq. IS may be doing this by encouraging self-starters. Exfiltration routes can change and we may see the flow of foreign fighters from Syria alter with other conditions.

Algerian recruitment to IS has been low compared to Tunisia and Morocco, although their remains some residual terrorism than demonstrates the persistence of these movements. However, there remains the fundamental problem of the state; until economic and social needs are met, there will always be support for groups that challenge the existing order.

RUSSIA - MARK YOUNGMAN

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from the decline of the Caucasus Emirate (IK). This self-proclaimed 'state' was divided into four main *wilayahs* (provinces) broadly corresponding to the republics of the North Caucasus (NC). The conflict in Syria has been marked by the presence of ethnic North Caucasians who have joined both IS and rival jihadi groups. As a result, the rivalry between the two has been replicated in the North Caucasus.

The IK's senior leadership backed al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusrah in their dispute with IS, while many commanders and rank-and-file fighters favoured IS. In this way the Syrian conflict has moved the North Caucasus conflict closer to al-Qaeda. However, the first senior leadership defection to IS occurred in December 2014, when the emir of the IK's Dagestan Wilayah pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Within six months, the IK lost its place as the main insurgent force in the region. IS formalised its advance into the region by proclaiming the North Caucasus to be an official province, the Caucasus Wilayah, in July 2015. The few remaining IK leaders were killed in security service operations. Within a year, IK more-or-less lost its presence and ceased to function on the ground.

There are a number of reasons for the decline of the IK. First, the Syrian conflict created external pressures on the insurgency, and the IK found itself in competition with an ideology that appeared to offer better prospects for success. The IK came to be viewed as a dead-end, whereas IS appeared able to deliver results. Second, it may be argued that the soft policies the authorities deployed from 2010 onwards, such as rehabilitation commissions to deal with former fighters and engagement with Salafi communities, allowed individuals the opportunity to leave violent groups.

The third reason for the decline of the insurgency is increased security service pressure and, apparently coordination, in the run-up to the Sochi Olympics in 2014. Although violence has continued, much of it has been driven by the security services in special operations and attempted detentions, rather than rebel attacks. This undermined the soft policies which were later largely abandoned. This is one of the reasons why insurgency will likely continue, because the long-term foundations for stability haven't been laid.

For the fourth reason for the IK's decline, it is necessary to look at the reasons the IK was proclaimed in the first place, and why its ideology evolved in the direction it did. This process was driven predominantly by weakness, and the IK's leadership continually sought to expand its support base. One of the key reasons it needed to do this was its original support base was no longer sufficient. Finally, by 2011 the IK had lost most of its own ideologists, well-known figures such as Said Buryatskiy, Anzor Astemirov, and Supyan Abdullayev. Existing research shows that the effects of decapitation strategies can be mixed, and the case of Kabardino-Balkaria illustrates this particularly well: violence sky-rocketed following the death of Anzor Astemirov, one of the IK's founding fathers, but fell significantly after the death of his successor. Ideological leaders can act to constrain as well as aggravate violence.

The Islamic State's proclaimed province in the North Caucasus has not had a revitalising effect on the insurgency. IS in Russia has thus far demonstrated very limited capacity especially in terms of its capability to carry out attacks. A year after its proclamation, the Caucasus Wilayah finds itself in a very similar position to that of the IK a year earlier, with a recognised leader in only one of its republics. It faces the same challenging operating environment, and IS has failed to transfer its ability to inspire into the North Caucasus insurgency. The North Caucasus insurgency will continue to pose a threat because Russia has not taken the steps that would lay the foundations for long-term stability, but its ability to rejuvenate itself is hindered by its lack of indigenous ideologists capable of translating those global ideologies to local circumstances. The threat that IS poses to Russia arguably stems more from the number of its citizens that have travelled to Syria and IS' ability to inspire attacks, rather than from any link-up with an existing vibrant insurgency. Finally, drawing on the lessons of the decline of the IK, the future of IS may depend as much on what happens to its second- and third-generation ideologists as on what happens to its fighting cadres.

Q&A

Will Russia employ similar counter-terrorism tactics in Syria to those used during the Chechen Wars?

The Russian strategies employed in the two wars in Chechnya were very different. During the first conflict, the strategy was almost entirely focused on the application of firepower. In the second war, we saw a much more sophisticated campaign including a whole host of measures such as local amnesties, purges, extra-judicial killings and the isolation of certain villages.

The long-term effects of Russian counter-terrorism policies have been to fuel the insurgency in the North Caucasus, although federal tactics have had some short term 'success' in disrupting existing groups. Amnesties created infighting and turned local fighters against one another. The use of moles and means to deliberately foster fears of infiltration and mistrust have also been used with propaganda often painting individuals to look like informants. As a result, groups have stopped coordinating.

Has there been a flow of North Caucasian fighters returning home from Syria?

There has not been a significant flow of individuals re-joining the insurgency in the NC after engaging in Syria. That a number of senior figures have been eliminated also dissuades many potential fighters. Some may join individually but not in large enough numbers to make a difference. The option of re-joining is also unavailable for senior or well-known figures.

Turkey has traditionally proven a safe haven for NC fighters and is the most likely destination for those transiting from Syria. This is one of the reasons why NC groups have been so critical of IS' actions in Turkey as they don't want to put the diaspora community there at risk of reprisals.

How has the defection to IS played out on the ground in the North Caucasus?

Proclamation of the caliphate gradually galvanised support with something of a domino effect of public statements in support of IS by various groups. Relations between IS and al-Qaeda supporting groups has remained rather conciliatory with no conflict between the two. NC fighters killed in Syria have been referred to as 'heroes' in statements by factions that are aligned to both IS and al-Qaeda. Local leaders are pragmatic and are keen to avoid tensions when they work with other groups, even if they do not fall on the same side of the al-Qaeda/IS divide.

Are there any morally acceptable lessons that can be learned from Russian counter-terrorism practices?

In Ingushetia there have been genuine efforts to reintegrate those who have travelled to Syria. This includes attempts to re-socialise these individuals and ensure that they have jobs to return to. Whilst there has been a policy of not pursuing prosecutions against returnees at the local level, the problem remains that this policy is not incorporated into Russian law. Prosecutions can be initiated at the national level even if local authorities have said that individuals won't be charged.

Russia also certainly played a good game at factionalising and overloading the insurgency during the second Chechen war. This included sophisticated exploitation of a failure on the behalf of rebels to control the information space.

YEMEN - ELISABETH KENDALL

Al-Qaeda's influence in Yemen is considerable and has only increased in light of the conflict that started in March 2015. When UAE special forces advanced in April 2016, they telegraphed their movements. As a result, al-Qaeda fighters melted away into the North and East of the country. This ability to go to ground demonstrates the extent to which al-Qaeda has made its links with tribes and tribal militants and smuggling networks. IS is currently not as ingrained. By the best estimate there are likely no more than 100 IS fighters on the ground in Yemen and it is important to not exaggerate this presence. Inaccurate research, that has been picked up by others, has led to ideas that there are 10 wilayahs. In reality there are fewer than five *wilayahs* plus IS' 'Green Brigade'.

Al-Qaeda had around 4,000 members at its peak with a 'passive toleration' from local constituents who neither supported nor opposed the group. The local population, who are themselves heavily armed, are not easily terrorised by al-Qaeda. An analysis of all tweets from al-Qaeda's governance twitter feed reveals that 56 per cent regarded issues of governance, 18 per cent to legalistic matters and only 3 per cent to punishment for breaches of Islamic law. This is very different to IS' output.

Al-Qaeda has stepped in where the state has failed. This has including providing public services and even entertainment events. Recent al-Qaeda festivals have included ice-cream eating and best anti-US poster and Qur'an recital competitions. By contrast, there have been 15 legal cases brought against IS in Yemen by its own fighters. The claimants accuse IS' leaders of being corrupt, hoarding power and failing to adhere to local customs. Al-Qaeda on the other hand try to work with local tribes and communities. The 'outsider' label of IS has also been clear in local reactions to its first video that featured footage from Yemen. Local constituents thought the choreographing of the video was also considered too slick and fake. Al-Qaeda has instead continued to distribute print copies of newspapers.

Yemen's problem with returnees is not as great as many other Arab states. The ongoing war against a supposedly Shia enemy also diminishes the desire to crack down on these individuals. Returnees will not shift the balance in favour of IS over al-Qaeda and instead what we might see is the two groups blending together. There certainly appears to be a change in public rhetoric from criticism of other groups to sympathy for fellow jihadis being killed. Terrorism, smuggling and the 'legitimate government' are all intermeshed so deeply they are different to pull apart. All relations are also underpinned by complicated tribal relations and disputes that date back over 300 years. Yemen's neighbours do not have a handle on the security situation resulting in further weapons coming in.

Q&A

In Yemen, jihadist elements have tried to hold territory. Are these groups learning lessons from the failure of IS' Caliphate or are they paying little attention to events elsewhere?

Al-Qaeda in Yemen has focused on trying to exploit IS' struggles. Al-Qaeda's '#exposingthedeceitofDaesh' (in Arabic) campaign has gained significant traction on social media. In terms of lessons learnt on al-Qaeda's behalf, IS' failures have only strengthened the perception that they are right to conceptualise their caliphate as a yet-to-be defined entity. Since 2011 and 2012, al-Qaeda in Yemen has sought to learn from its own failures. For example, not attempting to implement Islamic law rigorously because local population wouldn't allow it. IS however, have been critical of this failure.

The emergence of a number of Salafi charities is also a worrying development in Yemen. These organisations find it easy pickings to take children from poor and often broken homes. Families often play a moderating influence and removing children from these networks only leaves them vulnerable to extremist influences. The IS suicide bombers who attacked Aden were groomed by Salafi charities. These charities are now emerging in the East of the country.

What are the likely consequences if returnees to Yemen bring other foreign activists from Syria with them?

Local IS leaders are already seen as foreign. Returnees who are Yemeni can legitimise these existing elements. With its 2000km long coastline and established smuggling networks, Yemen could prove an ideal sanctuary for IS. There are also four million internally displaced people within the country. Society in the East is only being held together by local, tribal law. With the influx of so many people, there is likely to be a break down in law and order, which IS could exploit. IS could also adapt and fit into al-Qaeda's local facing framework. There was no condemnation by al-Qaeda of IS' last attack given that the two groups' targets have aligned to focus on the Houthis. The two groups could even cooperate quite well if they chose to go after the same targets in this way.

How has the recent uptake in the use of technology in Iraq and Syria, translated into other contexts?

Within Yemen, Jihadi films in a snappy, IS style have become popular in recent years. There has also been a noticeable increase in internet accessibility within tribes also helping to share these videos. On the coast, new internet cafes have resulted in a big increase in viewership, especially with younger audiences. Although Facebook is extremely popular, Twitter has not taken off in Yemen. There is also huge use of Telegram which appears to be having the effect of internationalising the jihad movement. Yemeni jihadis have used Telegram to send messages of support to other areas such as Mali.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Numerous case studies show that jihadist movements are learning the lessons of past attempts to establish a caliphate. These historical examples may provide some example of what comes next. However, in reality each situation is unique and groups will always do what is most appropriate for local circumstances. The ideology of IS will stitch itself back together and adapt. The result may even be the emergence of a more viral ideological strain but will nevertheless be influenced by local conditions.

There are three different ways of looking at the fall of IS' caliphate. The first is in terms of the group's physical loss of a state. Second, is to look at IS as an organisation embodied by a membership who define themselves as the Islamic State and who may go elsewhere. Finally, the Islamic State and caliphate may be viewed as an idea in itself. All jihadi groups aim to establish such a state with only the accompanying terms and conditions varying.

A new manifestation of IS that does not try to go so far so quickly may emerge but its model will still vary from that of al-Qaeda. IS' original model has appealed to a different, rasher and less patient market that even an adapted al-Qaeda model cannot compete with. The result is that although IS may emerge in a different guise, its core ideology will nevertheless remain the same. IS will continue to identify with increasing sectarianism, apocalypse, and notions of a black and white, Sunni-Shia battle playing out. In Yemen, sectarian tensions were not seen as a problem five years ago but according to the 2016 the Arab Youth Survey, 88 per cent of Yemeni youths believe sectarianism is on the rise.

Q&A

With limited resources to fight IS' ideas, is containment the best option available?

One presenter noted that they had come to the conclusion that although it is impossible to kill an idea they can still be undermined and twisted. Al-Qaeda has done exactly this with IS' message. We should also learn from these groups and how they have responded to competitors. In addition, it is not always essential to kill ideas, to stop groups. Instead, it is necessary to kill a willingness to fight for these ideas.

There are a number of conditions very specific to the North Caucasian communities that are impacting upon support for IS. Many of these are poorly integrated, with serious long term problems to do with the legacy of trauma they have fled. In such circumstances there are few role models. Instead, the heroes of young people are fighters and jihadis. We have to help create other choices and alternative pathways.

How have non-violent religious communities in Yemen, Libya and the North Caucasus responded to the emergence of IS and what have been the repercussions for these populations?

In the North Caucasus, the result has been to polarise local viewpoints. Communities in Chechnya are struggling with a number of issues resulting in very little potential support at the grass roots level for IS. Furthermore, the North Caucasus are largely excluded from the political process given that Russia is emphasising orthodoxy as part of its identity. As a result, these communities are extremely wary of discussing potentially contentious issues publically.

There is a sense of an increasing sympathy for extremist ideologies in Yemen, linked to the alignment of different interests. In particular, the Houthis are cast as 'others' by locals. Al-Qaeda were the quickest to take up the fight against them and mobilised local fighters. When these individuals returned home they brought with them the al-Qaeda ideology they had absorbed. Tribesmen are also becoming more aware of external issues such as the persecution of Muslims in other regions. Anecdotally, there seems to be an increasing notion of a global Muslim identity within these communities, which may result from greater use of smartphones and access to social media.

Circumstances have allowed jihadis to set up in certain Libyan cities. Elites in many communities now have forces at their disposal. Traditional leaders are losing control because of the proliferation of arms. As a result, there has not been effective action against jihadist groups.

If we view jihadi groups as social movements, collapsing these organisations from within appears the best approach, but how can we help facilitate and accelerate this collapse?

Western governments often want big policies to deal with problems in Syria or Yemen. It may be a smarter policy to nurture regionalist and local cultures. Western policymakers have not attempted to replicate the magazines and films that al-Qaeda has found success in using and in this way are not creating an alternative collective voice for local communities. These concepts are manifesting organically but appear weak with no one collating them.

Finally, education is critical. However, this needs to amount to more than a box ticking exercise with programmes tailored to local circumstances. This involves community engagement and asking local populations what exactly it is they want. It would also be beneficial for these programmes to address issues such as critical thinking and discussing how different communities can live alongside others.

In terms of internal collapse, jihadist groups love to argue with one another to such an extent that it is the one universal factor between them. It is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy that if we treat all groups as the same, they are encouraged to gloss over their differences. It is necessary to distinguish between 'insurgent' and 'terrorist' groups as designating all as the latter is often counterproductive.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

DR CERWYN MOORE

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Cerwyn Moore is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Birmingham. He leads the 'Actors and Narratives' work-stream in CREST. His work focuses on the insurgency in the North Caucasus. He has particular interests in militant ideologies and aesthetics, social networks and social movements, conflict dynamics and transnational activism. He has written extensively on foreign fighters in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and *Terrorism and Political Violence*, militant ideologies and suicide attacks in the North Caucasus in *Europe-Asia Studies*. Within IR theory, he has published work on narrative, aesthetics and interpretivism. His monograph, *Contemporary Violence: Postmodern War in Kosovo and Chechnya* was published with Manchester University Press in 2012.

MARK YOUNGMAN

University of Birmingham

Mark is a PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham, researching the relationship between the ideological evolution of a group engaged in political violence and changes in its internal structure and operating environment. Mark is a fluent Russian speaker, having gained a BA in International Relations and Russian from the University of Leeds and an MA in Applied Translation Studies from the same institution. Prior to starting his PhD, he spent seven years working as an open-source analyst researching the North Caucasus insurgency and terrorism in Russia. He simultaneously acquired an MLitt in Terrorism Studies from the University of St Andrews. His work has been published in peer-reviewed journals including, most recently, T*errorism and Political Violence and Caucasus Survey.*

DR ELISABETH KENDALL

University of Oxford

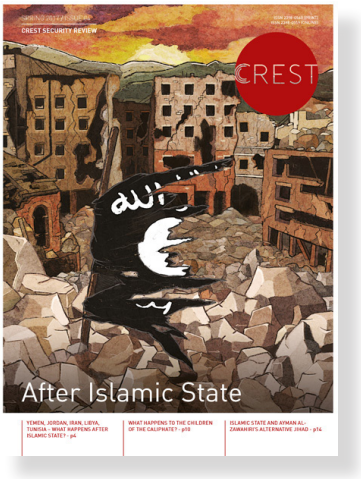
Elisabeth Kendall is a Senior Research Fellow at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. Dr Kendall's recent research has examined al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Yemen, and support for democracy in post-revolutionary Egypt. Dr Kendall has numerous academic and media publications, including her recent books *Twenty-First Century Jihad* (with Ewan Stein) and *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition* (with Ahmad Khan). She also conceived of and edits the Modern Middle Eastern Vocabularies series with Edinburgh University Press, which includes her self-authored titles *Intelligence Arabic* and *Media Arabic*.

AFTER ISLAMIC STATE

This report was produced out of CREST's Actors and Narratives programme.This Programme examines the narratives of people who get involved in, and disengage from, terrorism. It is led by Dr Cerwyn Moore at the University of Birmingham.

This series of reports addresses the issues that arise as Islamic State's territory declines. They draw on a series of seminars that pulled together international experts to address the regional, ideological and strategic challenges of life after the Islamic State.

Some of these presentations are also available in *CREST Security Review*, Issue 4 – 'After Islamic State' which is available from the CREST website here: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/csr/



The first report in the series, *After Islamic State: Workshop Report I,* focused on Iraq, Iran, Jordan and Syria. It also placed a spotlight on Ayman al-Zawahiri and what Zawahiri's writings signify for al-Qaeda's development and plans.

The third report, *After Islamic State: Workshop Report III,* examines Tunisia, Afghanistan as well highlighting militant ideology, militant mobilisation and building a caliphate.

The fourth report, *After Islamic State: Workshop Report IV,* looks at how losing territory effects IS's ideology, with a special focus on Algeria and jihadi culture.

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