

UNVEILING DAESH'S RESURGENCE IN AFRICA AND THE MENA REGION THROUGH THE THREADS OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Andrei-Cristian MORARU*

* "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *This study utilizes OSINT and document analysis as qualitative research methods to examine the impact of local terrorist leaders on the resurgence of Daesh in the African continent in 2022. After a period of decline, Daesh reemerged prominently in countries like Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya, expanding its operations beyond its traditional strongholds in Syria and Iraq. The coordinated timing and increased attacks in Africa raise important questions about the organization's intentions. The objective of this research is to provide insights into Daesh's resurgence in Africa and the MENA region through the threads of local leadership. Daesh has the potential to disrupt regional and international stability, particularly in the MENA (the Middle East and North Africa) region, leading to irreparable chaos. This study aims to uncover Daesh's aspirations to regain influence and regional power, echoing its past territorial control in 2014. Additionally, this research explores the symbolic significance of local leaders in the jihadist narrative, where they become icons with enigmatic meanings in the holy war. The analysis includes an examination of the nicknames chosen by these leaders, which carry considerable weight for the terrorists or "freedom fighters". Understanding the role and influence of these local leaders provides valuable insights into the strategies and ideologies fueling Daesh's resurgence. By investigating these aspects, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges posed by Daesh's resurgence in Africa and its potential implications for regional and global security.*

Keywords: *Daesh resurgence; local terrorist leaders; MENA region; jihadist narrative; global instability*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we have addressed the terrorist issue in the MENA region, especially given the recent history of a major terrorist organization, Daesh, which shows clear intents of evolution as a form of rebirth and reinforcing of the Sharia Law and a rebranding of the "New Califate" in the African continent. In achieving this, they have employed new leader figures, which have demonstrated a different approach toward the evolution and ultimately survival of the Daesh organization. The objective of this research is to provide insights into Daesh's resurgence in Africa and the MENA region through the threads of local leadership.

By identifying the trends put in effect by the entity in question, we can achieve the objective of the current qualitative research, based on OSINT analysis and document analysis, which is establishing a pattern of evolution for the non-statal organization. The research is based on a research hypothesis, which states that Daesh is now being formed around local leaders who make use of a new approach to successfully reproducing jihadist

ideology in the MENA region. A limit of the study is the low quantity of reliable sources regarding the current Daesh leadership shift and reconfiguration in Northern Africa, therefore many sources were cited from local Arabic articles, which have a high degree of reliability based on their neutral approach to the Arab world and their consistency.

2. DAESH EVOLUTION AND RECONFIGURATION

2.1 Deciphering Daesh's nickname symbology. Studying the nicknames adopted by Daesh leaders provides valuable insights into their identities and roles within the organization. It is noteworthy that Daesh leaders often operate under multiple aliases, which adds complexity to understanding their true identities and activities. For instance, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former leader of Daesh, was known by various names, including Ibrahim Awad al-Badri¹ and Abu Duaa

¹ Ibrahim is a common Arabic name derived from the biblical figure Abraham, meaning "father of many"; Awad is an Arabic name that signifies "reward".

al-Samarrai². Similarly, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, a former leader, is also referred to as Hajji Abdullah Qardash³ and Abu Omar Qardash⁴. These multiple identities reflect the fluid nature of their leadership positions and the clandestine nature of their operations.

Among the surviving first-class leaders, Zaid al-Iraqi stands out as a prominent figure within Daesh. Known as one of the “Iraqi princes” he hails from Iraq and holds significant influence within the organization. These Iraqi leaders, often referred to as the “princes” exercise substantial control over internal affairs and oversee field operations. Zaid al-Iraqi has held various positions within Daesh, including the Emir of the Court of Justice and Grievances, the responsible figure for the Emirate of the Central Office for the Follow-up of Legal Diwans, and the Emir of the Diwan of Education (Ain News Agency, 2022). From an ideological and religious perspective, he is considered a key local leader within the organization.

By studying these nicknames and understanding the roles of local leaders like Zaid al-Iraqi, researchers gain deeper insights into the intricate dynamics and structures within Daesh. Analyzing their multiple identities and positions sheds light on the ideological and religious foundations that underpin their leadership roles within the organization.

2.2 Daesh leadership shifts. The latest Daesh leader, Abu al-Qurashi, was an Iraqi of Quraish descent (Ain News Agency, 2022). One of his nicknames was “the ISIS professor” (Najat, 2022), as he oversaw the Emirate of the Diwan of Education in Daesh when the terrorist organization controlled large areas of Syria and Iraq. After the United States of America announced the death of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi in February 2022⁵, as a result of a security operation in Northwest Syria, Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi took his place.

Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi is the third official leader of the terrorist organization. His inauguration took place forty-two days after Abu Ibrahim’s death, indicating the possibility of

evolving weaknesses in Daesh command and operations headquarters in Iraq and Syria, which is currently isolated from Daesh global/main command.

Under the leadership of the “new caliph,” there are two high-level committees: the five-member Shura Council, headed by Hajj Juma’a Awad al-Badri, al-Baghdadi’s brother, and a five-member executive body, led by Sami Jassim al-Jubouri (Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022). The latter is responsible for the administrative sectors, such as religious affairs, mass media, and finance, while the first decides the modus operandi of their field activity, closed-door discussion forums. The most important observable change from the former leadership structure is the decentralization of various groups and branches at a local level, which operate semi-autonomously and are financially self-sufficient, such as the African branches.

2.3 The reconfiguration of Daesh from Syria and Iraq to the Northern Africa region. After the Turkish military operations “Euphrates Shield” in 2016 and “Peace Spring” in 2019, Syria was not a viable region for the terrorist organization to expand anymore, as they faced the threat of extinction. However, their pursuit of reclaiming lost territory persisted. According to Iraqi sources (Ain News Agency, 2022), the late 2022’s announced a surge in Daesh attacks in countries like Iraq and Syria. The OSINT analysis employed revealed a significant increase in Daesh financing in the last year, resulting in the reorganization of their ranks, particularly in Iraq.

Following the collapse of the caliphate system in 2019, Daesh gradually rebuilt itself in Iraq and Syria. On the Syrian-Iraqi border, Daesh capitalized on ethnic and sectarian tensions and the deteriorating economic situation. The competition between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish autonomous region in the North had also created opportunities for the infiltration of the terrorist organization. Based on this safety net, the same year Daesh launched an attack on a prison in Al-Hasakah, Syria, freeing the detainees and increasing their ranks to around ten thousand fighters (Fayed, 2021). In response to this, local security forces only limited the terrorist organizations’ activities, making arrests among the organization’s leadership at the beginning of 2021. As expected, these kickbacks did not startle Daesh. A report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (2022) highlighted that in 2021 alone, Daesh conducted approximately 342 operations in Syria, with many targeting the Kurdish-led forces. The

² Abu Duaa translates to “father of prayer”.

³ Hajji is a title bestowed upon someone who has completed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

⁴ Omar is an Arabic name derived from the Islamic caliph Umar, meaning “flourishing” or “long-lived”.

⁵ The former leader blew himself up using an explosive belt as the US special forces surrounded his hideout.

killing of Abu Hamza and Abu Ibrahim in February 2022 further compounded the challenges

faced by the organization, which had already gained international attention once again.



Fig 1. Current official Daesh leadership (Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022)

Daesh alarming resurgence could be pinpointed on January 20, 2022, when members of the organization launched an attack on Sina'a prison in Al-Hasakah Governorate, Northeastern Syria. They utilized a car bomb to breach the prison, resulting in the escape of numerous terrorist-affiliated detainees. Researchers suggest complicity by the SDF forces in the escape of Daesh elements from the prison (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2022), with Iraq being the entity most impacted by the fleeing terrorists.

Following the operation, Daesh members proceeded to carry out a terrorist attack on the headquarters of the Iraqi army in Diyala. This attack claimed the life of an army lieutenant and ten soldiers. In response, Iraq tightened its control over its borders with Syria and intensified its operations, aiming to combat the remnants of Daesh. During the same period, Daesh initiated similar attacks in several Maghreb countries, particularly Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria. In Libya, on January 26, Daesh “liberty fighters” targeted a security patrol near Jabal Asida, west of the town of Qatroun, resulting in the killing of three patrol members (Ain News Agency, 2022).

Despite the terrorist organizations’ decline in Syria and Iraq, its branches have remained resilient.

The West Africa Province (ISWAP), the largest Daesh branch in Africa, emerged victorious over its rivals in 2021 and gained control over significant areas in Northeastern Nigeria (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2022). In the Sahel region, Daesh became involved in extensive smuggling networks that stretched from the Gulf of Guinea to the Mediterranean Sea. In East Africa, the organization had disguised itself as rebel groups in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, resulting in an escalation of bombings in the capital of Uganda. The closely knitted network in South Africa facilitated the growth of Daesh, while the Khorasan Province in Afghanistan has posed a challenge to the Taliban regime and is likely to maintain a haven even if the Taliban attempts to suppress the organization.

These developments indicate that Daesh still maintains global strength, although its influence has been curtailed by the pressures faced in Iraq and Syria. Even though the US-led military operations had a limited effect on Daesh’s ability to exercise centralized leadership and control over the global network, its branches continued to carry out terrorist attacks. To summarize, counter-terrorism operations in Iraq and Syria in the last decade have faced significant challenges and

setbacks (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014, p. VII-23). Currently, the real threat Daesh poses lies in Africa, Afghanistan, and other countries from the MENA region, where Daesh branches are experiencing a degree of prosperity and reduced pressure from the fight against terrorism.

2.4 The current adapted approach towards a “New Caliphate”. Specialists and researchers ruled out the return to power of the terrorist organization in Iraq and Syria (Abu Rumman, 2021: 83-91), but according to the OSINT analysis conducted in the current research, a trend to attack on multiple fronts has been observed in the 2020-2022 period. Currently, the terrorist organization lost its strength and reformed into small groups with local leaders, which in turn, provided a dangerous autonomy. The recent security breaches in Iraq, the escape of prisoners in Syria, and the emergence of new “liberation” organizations in Libya suggest the possibility of a new Daesh scenario emerging in the Mena Region.

As a *modus operandi*, those behind the organization's recent movements in several countries are local leaders who are trying to resurrect Daesh on a different radical ideological basis. This conclusion was reached as after the Iraq and Syria downfall, there had been leaders who planned attacks within several specific countries, aspect which was against the organizations' ideology at the time⁶ (Ain News Agency, 2022).

Libyan military and strategic expert, Adel Abdel Kafi (2022) attributed the Daesh attacks in the 2020-2022 period to the emergence of democracy in the MENA region, their aim being to prevent the proliferation of such ideologies (Youssef, 2022). This synchronization of Daesh terrorist attacks in Syria, Iraq and Libya aims to prove its presence and capability to carry out operations, even when facing challenges on other fronts. Another possible explanation lies in their efforts to impose an expansive strategy in the form of “divide and conquer”.

The actions and statements of Daesh regarding the appointment of a “new caliph”, specifically Abu Hassan, reveal ongoing concerns about the organization's operational security (Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2022). It is anticipated that the leaders of various Daesh branches will recognize Abu Hassan as their successor, as they all pledged allegiance to Abu Ibrahim after the death of al-Baghdadi, rejecting

the idea of secession due to their commitment being rooted in ideological principles rather than material gain or status. The absence of a physical caliphate and financial constraints following al-Baghdadi's death diminished the prospect of the group pursuing glory or wealth to distribute among its ranks. The swift adherence of the African branches highlights the idea that their strength and sense of security are now decentralized and can act autonomously, while still pledging their loyalty to Daesh.

The development of Daesh African regional hubs also had a series of challenges for the organization, impeding direct communication with the main HQ. This challenge has led to a spontaneous solution: decentralized leadership. For instance, the local Somalia hub serves as a link with the Daesh leadership and coordinates activities in East and Central Africa (Security Council Report, 2022). Similarly, the “Al-Furqan” Daesh hub facilitates coordination between the West African Province and the High Command (Security Council Report, 2022). The existence of seemingly independent African branches within Daesh is accompanied by significant support, training, and guidance from local leadership. This approach, similar to the one observed in Afghanistan, aims to reduce dependence on the central command. However, while this strategy may limit the organization's potential for growth and international recognition, it serves as a means to navigate the circumstances that led to its downfall within the global network.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

The objective of the current qualitative research has been achieved, having established a pattern of evolution for Daesh and confirming, the research hypothesis which states that Daesh is now being formed around local leaders who make use of a new approach in successfully reproducing jihadist ideology in the MENA region.

To summarize, the organization is now being formed around local leaders who reproduce jihadist ideology at local levels, in certain African countries in the MENA region, providing a paradigm shift which, until 2022, was against the known terrorist ideology.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, one of the most feared terrorist organizations worldwide, Daesh, now faces a challenging situation in which they have to adapt

⁶ the Daesh ideology is based on not limiting jihad to a specific border area.

and change their radicalistic ideology and strategies in the new MENA regional security paradigm. The leadership restructuring also shows that the former Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant behave in a dangerous way towards achieving their desired Caliphate, adapting to all changes. The unusual element which raises concerns for regional and international security is represented by the readiness that the terrorist organization can make use of in times of crisis, thriving even when they have a difficulty surviving.

In light of the present research, the objective of the paper was achieved. It is confirmed that Daesh uses a new approach towards restoring the Caliphate in the MENA region, through local leaders that reproduce the evolving jihadist ideology. The present research serves as a preliminary step towards fostering a greater number of scientific papers focused on in-depth exploratory approaches, aiming to enhance comprehension and combat the vulnerabilities that Daesh is currently exploiting at a regional level.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Abu Rumman, M.S. (2021). *After the Caliphate: Ideology, Propaganda, Organization, and Global Jihad. Will ISIS Make a Comeback?*. Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
2. Security Council Report. (2022). *Counter-Terrorism* [online]. Available: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2022-08/counter-terrorism-10.php>.
3. Ain News Agency. (2022, January 23). انهيار بعد متوقعة غير هجمات تنظيم من داعش استطاع كيف.. "الخلافة" والعراق سوريا في [online]. URL:<https://eye-n.com/permalink/225791.html>.
4. Ain News Agency. (2022, October 3). الحسن أبو الجديد؟ داعش زعيم هو من ..الهاشمي Available: <https://al-ain.com/article/isis-new-leader-education-head>.
5. Fayed, B. (2021, November 10). داعش تنظيم. القائمة الخلايا وتوظيف العودة استراتيجيات [online]. Available: <https://asbarme.com/5262/>.
6. Joint Chiefs of Staff. (2014). *Joint Publication 2-01.3 – Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment* [online]. Available: <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp2-01-3.pdf>.
7. Najat, A. (2022, March 20). على القادة مقتل تداعيات. [الإرهابية التنظيمات مستقبل أنموذجاً (داعش)] [online]. Available: <https://www.bayancenter.org/2022/03/8238/>.
8. Syrian Network for Human Rights. (2022, February 10). المجتمع بحق داعش تنظيم انتهاكات أبرز. بالحرية المطالب الشعبي الحراك تشويه في وإسهامه السوري والكرامة [online]. URL:<https://snhr.org/arabic/2022/02/10/14769/>.
9. Syrian Network for Human Rights. (2022, January 11). تنامي 2022 عام الإرهابي النشاط اتجاهات. انحسار؟ أم [online]. Available: <https://trendsresearch.org/ar/insight/trends-of-terrorist-activity-in-2022/>.
10. Youssef, A. (2022, June 6). مؤشر التضامن حي فيديو. الأسد لنظام الإنسانية ضد ممنهجة جرائم على [online]. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/y53czzy3>.