

Testimony of Hassan Hassan – Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, and author of New York Times bestseller *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*

Exactly a month ago, the Islamic State's spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, issued a global call for action to sympathizers with his group, particularly in Europe and America, to launch attacks in their countries. This was the second such call made by Mr Adnani in the space of a year. He said that they should be attacked until "every neighbour fears his neighbour".

In the statement, he also said something that departs fundamentally even from extremist Islamic groups such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban. He said he received complaints from sympathizers in the West that they were unable to find military targets and that they were concerned about killing innocent civilians. He responded that in the West there is no such thing as innocent civilians and, here is the departure, that killing civilians is more "beloved to us and more effective, as it is more harmful, painful, and a greater deterrent to them."

For other extremist groups, killing civilians is justifiable as collateral damage. For the Islamic State, civilians are the preferred target. They justify this through the religious concept of reciprocity, even though that Islamic texts explicitly state that killing one innocent life is equal to the killing of the entirety of the human race. But this goes to show that it is time governments took this threat more seriously than they currently do, and recognize it is different from previous threats.

Unlike Al Qaeda, the Islamic State seeks to integrate sympathizers – who tend to sympathize with the group without necessarily in sync with its strict ideology, and thus tend to be wider than those who actually join it – into its active army. A key part of the group's strategy, especially today as it is losing ground in Syria (where it lost 20% of the territory it controlled in 2014) and Iraq (where it 50%), is that it does not want sympathizers to sit idly by.

Al-Qaeda presents itself as a vanguard movement whose aim is to rally the Muslim masses to the cause of jihad. The very existence of sympathisers means its project is working and so is regarded as a gain in and of itself. The Islamic State, in contrast, views sympathizers as potential recruits to its army, and views the mobilization of its sympathizers strategically, rather than as a revenge tactic or a short-term call for action. Sources within Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate active in Syria, see small-scale attacks by jihadi sympathizers as counterproductive. They believe that the Islamic State is "bleeding" jihadi-minded Muslims in the West, and regard its strategy as playing into the hands of Western governments.

It is important to remember that for most of its existence since it was founded in 2004, the Islamic State has been an Iraqi organization with largely local focus. It was only after its expansion into Syria in 2013 that it began to focus internationally and extend foreign networks. The group is developing its foreign cells and tapping into both its sympathy base and Al Qaeda's old networks. Today, it is helpful to think of the Islamic State as two organizations in one. There is the international terrorist organization, which learned a great deal from Al Qaeda but it is developing its own brand in terms of appeal and operation. The messaging of its foreign cells is distinct from its core in Iraq and Syria, albeit they obviously feed off each other. There is then the locally focused branches in the Middle East and North Africa, which operates more like an insurgency.

I come from an area controlled by the Islamic State and witnessed as the group started to roll into my region and recruit people. I have also interviewed dozens of members from Syria to Iraq to Bahrain. In Turkey, for example, I spoke to a security official who spoke about international expansion way before the group began to launch attacks in the West. He said the lesson we learned from the war in Iraq is that we should not wait for others to spy on us and attack us, and that the group was already developing its foreign apparatus benefiting from the flow of foreign fighters in 2013 and 2014.

This is a group that knows what it is doing. It could have tried to neutralize the West and limit its ambitions, instead of turning the whole world against it. But it chose to deliberately to wage war against everything. For them, territorial control today is not the overarching goal. For them, it is a war of *nikaya*, or attrition. They teach that in their training camps since they expanded into Syria in 2013-2014. They knew the US will deploy its firepower and troops into Iraq and Syria. It knew that fellow Muslims will join the fight and serve as footsoldiers for foreign powers. The group's spokesman reiterated this during his statement in May, when he said: "Or do you, O America, consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of land? Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land? And would we be defeated and you be victorious if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa or even take all the cities and we were to return to our initial condition? Certainly not! True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight."

The terror attack in Orlando shows that the group's territorial losses over the past year have not diminished its appeal. And I argue that we have reached a point where the Islamic State's international appeal has become untethered from its military performance on the ground. This is because the campaign in Iraq and Syria has not been conducted properly. It has treated the Islamic State as a disease, and not a symptom of broader problems that helped the group rise in the first place, and will ensure it will survive the territorial losses. The US-led campaign has failed to rally everyone against the Islamic State, including those who proved to be opposed to the group. In Syria, for example, the campaign has failed to mobilize rebel forces -- who in January 2014, before everyone declared war on the Islamic State, fought the group in five Syrian provinces and expelled it from much of Syria before the group returned after the takeover of Mosul, armed with momentum and advanced weaponry seized from the Iraqi army.

It is imperative to understand that the fight against the Islamic State is everyone's fight. The group has not spared anyone. In a village next to mine in Deir Ezzor, near Iraq, the group slaughtered 700 civilians after a tribal rebellion against the group. The group targeted Yazidis, Christians, Shia, but it has also slaughtered thousands upon thousands of supposedly fellow Sunnis. In Ramadi, Haditha and Marea in Syria, Sunni locals fought the group till the bitter end.

I will end with this critical note. The US should acknowledge publicly that there are thousands of Syrians, including refugees in this country, have helped the US in its fight against the Islamic State. Thousands are providing information and intelligence on the Islamic State, which operates in historically marginalized Sunni areas. Highlighting that this war is not sectarian, that Sunnis are victims of this group just like everyone else, is key to defeating it. You can defeat the group in Raqqa, Mosul, Fallujah, but these defeats will remain tactical defeats unless the group is discredited by the same people it claims to represent. The Islamic State is learning from the lessons of Iraq, that its greatest enemies are fellow Sunnis who reject it. It is time the United States learned from the lessons of the Awakening Councils that

its troops helped organize in Iraq in the period 2005-2007, which led to the defeat of what was then the Islamic State in Iraq, or Al Qaeda in Iraq, until its resurgence in 2014.