

DAESH ON THE DEFENSIVE

Over the past few months terror group Islamic State, or Daesh, has suffered a series of very serious setbacks. Under military pressure its has lost ground in both Iraq and Syria, its revenue sources have been curtailed, its senior leadership has suffered a number of high-profile losses and the personal files of its fighters have fallen into the eager hands of Western intelligence. It seems the tide may finally be turning against Daesh.

The US military is firmly of this opinion. At a Foreign Office briefing, held in London in February, US Army Colonel Steve Warren said: "We believe that Daesh is now beginning to lose. We see them in a defensive crouch. We see them having lost about 40 percent of the territory that they held at the pinnacle of their strength in Iraq, and they have lost about 10 percent of the territory they once held in Syria".

It appears that Daesh is very firmly on the back foot. According to research conducted by a leading think tank, Daesh has been driven from 22 percent of the territory it held in Iraq and Syria over the past 14 months. It has also lost some 40 percent of its revenue, which will severely affect its ability to pay its fighters and buy weapons. The latter is partly due to the Syrian army recapturing three large gas and oil fields near the city of Palmyra – thanks to the support of Russian air power.

Colonel Warren puts this reversal of fortunes down to a combination of air power in Iraq and Syria as well as the improving capabilities of the Iraqi security forces. In addition the Russian military withdrawal from Syria signals that Assad's regime now has the upper hand. Notably, the ceasefire talks with the Syrian opposition's Free Syrian Army have not included the jihadist groups such as Daesh, Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra. The implication is that the truce will free up Syrian army resources to fight these jihadi groups.

Certainly President Assad's position in Syria seems to have been greatly strengthened thanks to Russia's five month-long military intervention. In fact, President Putin claimed Russia's goals have been achieved and announced a military draw down from Syria in mid-March. Thanks to intensive Russian air strikes against the opposition forces and support on the ground by Iranian-backed Hezbollah, the conflict has seen the Syrian army pushing its way toward both the Turkish and Jordanian borders. After this very controlled muscle flexing, Moscow has re-established itself as a military power in the Middle East for the first time since 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless both Syria and Iraq remain far from stable

and continue to be a magnet for those inspired by the concept of jihad. Security agencies across Europe have been struggling to understand and counter the steady flow of recruits willing to fight and die for Daesh. Although the migrant crisis in Europe may have led to the tightening of border controls, intelligence agencies continue seeking ways to shut down recruiting operations as well as the transit conduits used by would-be jihadists.

In early March this year, amid much media fanfare, it was revealed that British and German media agencies had secured access to top secret Daesh personnel files, which included details of 22,000 jihadist fighters. Entries on recruiters' and recruits' modes of travel will be highly useful – as will entries on the recruits preferred roles as this will give some idea of numbers willing to become martyrs. Initially there was some scepticism whether the files were genuine or some sort of Daesh counter intelligence operation.

The German Federal Bureau of Investigation was quick to announce that it had every reason to believe that the files were indeed authentic. Information included addresses, telephone numbers and family contracts of jihadists. The files identified recruits from up to 50 countries. Among them are 17 Britons, at least eight of who are now dead including two killed in air strikes in Syria. Dutch, Canadian, German, Italian and Spanish recruits were also identified. Three of the Paris attackers who carried out the Bataclan theatre murders are named in the files. On the face of it, the loss of this information seemed a body blow to Daesh's organisation and recruiting operations.

However, all was not what it seemed. It transpired earlier in the year that Daesh personnel documents, stamped with the black flag of the caliphate, had been handed over on a memory stick by a former Free Syrian Army recruit. He claimed that Daesh is becoming increasingly secular because it is now dominated by former soldiers of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Baath party. The presence of Sleiman Daoud al-Afari one of Saddam's chemical weapons experts seems to support this accusation. The man, named as Abu Hamed, had stolen the memory stick from the head of Daesh's internal security force and handed it over to the Syrian opposition in Turkey.

The contents were first published online in Arabic by Qatari-based Syrian news website Zaman Al-Wasl at the beginning of the year. While this data included 1,736 Daesh members, it transpired many of the 22,000 names were duplicates and it is not clear if this information is the same as that obtained by the British and German media. According to Zaman Al-Wasl, 72 percent of those fighters named were Arabs and 25 percent were Saudis.

The data only covers late 2013 to 2014 and it is



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notable that some of those who are known to the intelligence services are already dead or facing trial in their home countries. During this period the flow of recruits from Europe reached its peak. Ironically the flow of migrants coming the other way has now made it harder for foreign fighters to travel. In addition Daesh was on a high, thanks to its military victories in Syria and Iraq and its successful social media propaganda and recruiting campaigns.

These leaked files show that terror groups, despite propagating anarchy and mayhem, like the bureaucracy of murder. It is interesting that both Al-Qaeda and Daesh turned themselves into well-organised bureaucracies using the same recruiting methods as governments and large corporations. US Special Forces seized detailed

Al-Qaeda files in Iraq's personnel records in 2007. These provided a valuable snapshot of the organisation and its methods. This latest intelligence coup against Daesh echoes that other sizeable seizure of important Al-Qaeda files in Abbottabad in 2011 when Osama bin Laden was killed. Amidst all the material taken was a job application form for joining Al-Qaeda. Most of the information required was fairly banal and routine, but one of the questions included: would you serve as a suicide bomber and who should be notified of your martyrdom?

The US recently released a second batch of Abbottabad documents in March 2016. These highlighted Al-Qaeda's dislike for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's methods employed by his Al-Qaeda in Iraq (which later morphed into Islamic State). Bin Laden was

Iraqi Government and counter-terrorism forces arrest men suspected of belonging to Islamic State



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opposed to their tactic of beheading and their plan to declare an Islamic caliphate. He felt they did not have enough popular support and would never be able to govern effectively. Bin Laden was, of course, proved wrong. Al-Qaeda had also proposed a 'University of Jihad' and created a study course that included teachings from the Koran and studies of contemporary jihadists.

While trying to stop the rank and file, Washington has now made it a policy to target top Daesh figures. In December 2015 it deployed the US Expeditionary Targeting Force to Northern Iraq. Its title is clearly self-explanatory. One of its first high-ranking successes was the capture of Sleiman Daoud al-Afari in February 2016. He was part of Saddam Hussein's biological and chemical weapons programme. Under interrogation he revealed that Daesh had succeeded in producing a powered form of mustard gas to be used in artillery shells. His capture was followed by air strikes against suspected Daesh chemical weapons sites near Mosul.

US Special Forces have also been taking part in raids against Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which has sworn allegiance to Al-Qaeda. Further North on 4 March US air strikes near the Eastern Syrian town of al-Shadadi reportedly killed Chechen Takhan Batirashvili, better known as Abu Omar al-Shishani. He is believed to be Daesh's de facto minister of war.

Washington is intent on tracking down anyone involved in clandestine chemical weapons programmes for good reason. At the Munich Security Conference in February Director of US National Intelligence, James Clapper, said Daesh was planning to attack America with

chemical weapons. Reportedly Daesh has conducted 20 unverified chemical attacks in the Middle East using chlorine and mustard gas.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons verified three Daesh mustard gas attacks last summer, which occurred twice in Iraqi Kurdistan and once in Syria's Aleppo province. The Syrian American Medical Society has catalogued 161 cases of chemical weapons being employed in Syria during the course of the war, but does not assign blame to any of the various factions.

The international community hopes that Daesh's medieval barbarism can eventually be brought to an end. The leaked Daesh files will help with profiling and understanding recruitment methods. Many named, including those from Britain, often have criminal records and little detailed understanding of the Muslim faith. Often it is simply a case of young people looking for a cause. These rebels without a cause often make potential jihadists. Social alienation and the internet have been blamed for this phenomenon.

The stolen Daesh files plus its setbacks on the battlefield are likely to be a blow to morale and a significant recruiting deterrent. Nonetheless any reduction in foreign volunteers will be a slow process. US officials have estimated that the number of foreign fighters with Daesh has fallen to between 19,000 and 25,000 from a high of 35,000. It remains to be seen how much longer the so-called 'Caliphate' can last or indeed whether it will bounce back as conditions on the ground fluctuate. In the meantime, during the beginning of 2016, Daesh remains very firmly on the defensive.

Iraqi Government forces in March after retaking the town of Zankura from Daesh

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