



Pakistan shows off military might, calls for peace with India

Accepting Golan annexation, Trump risks new precedents



BAGHOUZ: Photo shows a body reported to be of a slain Islamic State (IS) group fighter, in the IS's last bastion in the eastern Syrian village of Baghouz after defeating the jihadist group. — AFP

Islamic State: Pioneers of 'digital caliphate'

Barbaric catalogue of grisly execution videos haunt global imagination

PARIS: The Islamic State may have lost its self-styled caliphate, but its barbaric back catalogue of grisly execution videos will continue to haunt the global imagination and serve as a template for how to sow terror, analysts say. At the height of its reign over a vast chunk of Iraq and Syria in 2014-2015, the Sunni jihadist group had a huge digital footprint, flooding social media with slick videos lionizing their fighters and showing the gruesome executions of "infidel" soldiers and civilians.

Today, its once-sophisticated propaganda machine, like its proto-state, has been reduced to rubble. But the images of a Syrian soldier being crushed with a tank, a Jordanian pilot being burned alive in a cage, and countless other IS atrocities, including Western reporters and aid workers being beheaded, will endure. "It clearly will stick with us, rather like how Al-Qaeda stuck with us persistently even after Osama bin Laden was killed," Charlie Winter, senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London said.

Propaganda pioneer

The group was not the first to use gore as a propaganda tool, with Al-Qaeda releasing a video of the beheading of US journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi in 2002 and Mexican drug cartels also regularly sharing decapitation

videos. But IS's Hollywood-style action clips - and use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the encrypted service Telegram to reach millions of viewers - took graphic terror videos into the mainstream. IS invested "a lot more time, a lot more money, a lot more energy, and a lot more human capital in the production of propaganda than other groups have before it," Winter said.

"It was the pioneer in terms of really upscaling and industrializing the production of propaganda." Analysts say the group was particularly savvy in its use of social media to cement the radicalization of thousands of disenfranchised Muslim youths by projecting an image of invincibility on the battlefield. To expand its audience, it piggybacked on popular hashtags on social media, such as those linked to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and one linked to singer Justin Bieber.

And while the videos and pictures of crucifixions and decapitations dominated international headlines, other IS videos tried to show a softer side of life in the caliphate. "Most of the videos, and broadly, most of the web con-

tent produced by ISIS at the time, were actually utopian content, trying to show that they were trying to build a utopian state, a utopian society," Marc Hecker, foreign policy expert at the French Institute for International Affairs said.

'Frontline selfies'

Foreign fighters were also the forefront of the propaganda drive, snapping grinning selfies of themselves with assault rifles slung across their chests, on what David Thomson, author of a best-selling book of interviews with French jihadists, called their "LOL jihad". Pointing to the likes of Junaid Hussain, a young British hacker who enlisted and died in Iraq, Raffaello Pantucci, director of international security studies at RUSI, noted: "Their communications people were kids in their twenties operating in a terror group the way they do back home."

"They weren't doing anything exceptional." Their social media presence made IS propagandists a prime target for international intelligence agencies, with a

US airstrike killing IS spokesman Abu Mohamed al-Adnani in northern Syria in August 2016 and another hit taking out its media centre in the Iraqi city of Mosul. Under pressure from Western governments, Facebook, Twitter also clamped down on jihadist propaganda, establishing filters on violent content that IS and other terror groups struggle to circumvent.

These days IS propagandists mostly use the "dark web" - a heavily encrypted part of the internet which is almost impossible to regulate, or the Telegram app - to encourage supporters to launch attacks on their own initiative. A research note in November from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think-tank, said the group retained a "digital caliphate" to support its insurgency in other countries.

Noting its launch of a new series of weekly videos providing statistics on purported IS activity across the world, author Maxwell B. Markusen noted: "This propaganda effort also may indicate an ongoing effort to over-emphasize its real role on the battlefield, and to recruit new fighters." Winter described the group's impact on terrorist propaganda as "enormous". "It has globalised its ideology in a way that was never really feasible before. And that will definitely stand to have an impact in how the global insurgency in terms of jihadists will look for years to come," he said. — AFP



Sunni jihadist group has huge digital footprint

Priest stabbed live on TV at Canada's biggest church

MONTREAL: A priest was stabbed in front of his congregation live on television during morning mass on Friday at Canada's biggest church, in what police described as an isolated incident. Footage broadcast on a Catholic television station and picked up by the top-rated CTV network showed a man in jeans, parka and white baseball cap approach Claude Grou at St Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, in front of 60 horrified parishioners.

He is seen chasing the priest around the altar and standing menacingly over the 77-year-old as he falls to the ground, scattering candles and a banner, before stabbing his victim. Witness Adele Plamondon told public broadcaster Radio-Canada the priest-who escaped with minor injuries was about to start reading the gospel, when "this man drew a knife and ran up to stab him." "I'd thought he was just going to kneel in front of the altar to pray, like many people do," she said.

The suspect remained silent during the assault but appeared "very determined," Plamondon added. Grou recovered enough to get to his feet and is seen backing away as security officers surround the assailant, who drops his knife. Three guards restrained him while others tended to Grou, who appeared to be in shock. The priest was taken to hospital,



MONTREAL: Catholic Priest Claude Grou speaks at a press conference about the work to be done at Saint Joseph's Oratory in Montreal. Grou was stabbed during a livestreamed morning mass at the church. — AFP

where his condition was said to be stable, with police reporting to AFP that he had been "slightly wounded in the upper body."

'Horrible and inexcusable'

The church was cordoned off, but services resumed later in the day. The 26-year-old suspect, whose name was not released, was scheduled to appear in court on Saturday via videolink from a detention facility. Police did not reveal a motive for the attack, but spokeswoman Caroline Chevretil told AFP he is "known to police." "This was an isolated attack, and there is nothing to link it to terrorism," she added. Church spokeswoman Celine Barbeau said Grou was conscious when he was rushed from the scene. "We are hopeful he will pull through," she added. Prime

Minister Justin Trudeau spoke out to condemn the "horrible attack" while mayor Valerie Plante called the assault an "inexcusable act that has no place in Montreal."

"We are all in shock over this act of violence in a place dedicated to peace," Montreal archbishop Christian Lepine said in a statement, lamenting that places of worship could be targets of violence. Saint Joseph's Oratory, built from 1920 to 1955, sits atop the north face of Mount Royal overlooking Canada's second-largest metropolis, and attracts some two million pilgrims and tourists each year. The national shrine was founded by Brother Andre Bessette, a central religious figure among French-Canadians, who was canonized by Pope Benedict in 2010 for his devotion to the sick and disabled. — AFP

Baghouz, where the last black flag came down

BAGHOUZ: It once flew over a chunk of the Middle East larger than Britain but yesterday the Islamic State group's sinister black banner lay crumpled in the dust of its final bastion. A few meters from the reedy banks of the mighty Euphrates, what was likely one of the last flags of the "caliphate" had been torn and trampled. Near it was one of at least 10 discarded explosives belts spotted by AFP reporters in the last strip of land conquered by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.

In a small and remote village near the Iraqi border, the nightmare of the "Islamic caliphate" has ended. The encampment on the edge of the village of Baghouz where the jihadists made their last stand is a churned-up wasteland of tents and truck carcasses. Music rings out from one of the SDF cars, and the applause of male and female fighters echoes across the hills surrounding the fallen jihadist encampment. "Three days ago we clutched our weapons, trying to break forward even a few meters," a fighter called Rami says. But "now we've finished with IS and its black banner and we've hoisted our own instead," the 33-year-old tells AFP. On the rooftop of a battle-scarred building near

the Euphrates, a large yellow SDF flag now flies in the breeze. A small group of fighters have already removed their military uniforms, to slip on jeans, tracksuits and sandals.

'Get married'

Just two days ago, they were combing the camp for holdout jihadists, when suddenly three suicide bombers jumped out from a tunnel wearing explosives belts. "They were running, we were scared. We killed one, and the other two blew themselves up," says a 25-year-old fighter who gives his name as Ashkarani.

A fellow fighter was wounded and he had to carry him off to their armoured vehicle for evacuation, says the fighter from a small village in the wider province of Deir Ezzor says. His wounded comrade is now in the Kurdish-held city of Qamishli further north and recovering, he says. "It was just a light wound," adds Ashkarani, wearing a track suit rolled up above his ankles and sandals on his feet.

When victory was declared, he emptied his last cartridge into the air. "We put music on. We started to dance," one of his friends interjects, laughing. Ashkarani has already told his fiancée he and his comrades have finally won after a grinding months-long battle. "I told her we'd finished and we were coming home. She was happy," he says. "We're expecting to get married in 10 or 20 days time." At the foot of a hill, only charred cars and abandoned canvas remain of the cross-border "caliphate" that the extremist group declared in 2014 across large swathes of Syria and neighboring Iraq. — AFP