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ISIL has evolved into something more dangerous

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On Saturday, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, ordered the Pentagon and other agencies to draw up a preliminary plan for fighting ISIL within 30 days. This is good news, as it could recognise and review some of the current plan's blind spots.

Officials can better assess the direction of the fight against ISIL by considering how the situation inside ISIL's areas has evolved over the past two years. The changes can be narrowed down to three main phases.

The first phase ran roughly from June to November 2014, the height of ISIL's rise. It is inaccurate to say that it was welcomed by the local populations, but the changes it brought were viewed positively by many locals. Those areas in Syria – stretching from eastern Aleppo to the Iraqi border – had been plagued by chaos. In Syria and Iraq, people were fed up with whoever had governed them.

Divisions, infighting and corruption, combined with a lack of security and services, were replaced by uniformity with record speed. Various people began to join the group to serve in its civil, military, security and religious sectors. Former government institutions began to function, albeit not with the same efficiency since resources were in short supply.

Militants and clerics engaged the people. They encouraged locals to approach them and ask for favours. Although the militants felt in full control and reached out to people they ruled, a specific

group of ISIL operatives continued to roam villages and towns with their identities hidden. Such members, operating under amniyat, or security units, were in their thousands. These operatives are the organisation's most trusted members, and locals – much less outsiders – had little to no knowledge about them.

The second phase ran from November 2014 to June 2016. As the anti-ISIL operation Inherent Resolve intensified and started to take effect, especially when commanders were directly targeted, ISIL's paranoia heightened. This brought to the fore the fearful and brutal amniyat. Clerics, fighters and other members took the back seat in day-to-day life under ISIL. Old suspects were recaptured. People were detained for the pettiest of reasons.

This was a critical phase for the organisation. Many of those who joined ISIL for reasons unrelated to its ideology left. Restrictions alienated local people and ISIL members, including former members of other insurgent groups who had pledged allegiance to ISIL. A mass exodus from ISIL-held areas, mostly of young people, intensified during this period. Parents fearful of seeing their children joining the organisation paid thousands of dollars to smuggle them out of ISIL areas, despite the risks.

By last June, the rise of ISIL's repressive security apparatus, the erosion of its self-styled caliphate and steady territorial losses led to the departure of many of its members and associates.

After the deterioration of ISIL began to undermine its project and ideology, came the final stage: the correlation between its steady geographic demise and ideological appeal began to fade.

Its appeal has become untethered from its territorial losses. This process is a result of the disproportionate focus on the military aspect of the fight, for a period of time that extended well beyond the initial goal of containing the group's rapid expansion. Containment of the group's initial advances should have been followed by a maximum diplomatic effort to challenge the group's ideology through the establishment of an alternative. Instead, people saw the destruction of ISIL-held areas, the abandonment of any political effort to provide a road map for what comes after it and the reliance on the wrong forces to fight in Sunni areas.

development should be profoundly concerning to those fighting ISIL, since much of the current strategy hinged on undermining its appeal by challenging its project. Instead, different people are drifting towards the organisations from those who joined it in 2014. These people seem to be more unhinged and many are willing to become suicide bombers.

The premise that ISIL's ideology will be undermined by showing it could not protect its project is flawed. It might have worked if the group lost quickly and a political road map was effectively implemented. It is unreasonable to continue to expect such a result after more than two years of fighting, despite how the campaign is being perceived on the ground. Rather than trying to show that its project did not work because of the military campaign, the focus should be to show what works instead.

If the new American administration is to properly challenge the appeal of ISIL, it should recognise this simple fact. The focus on military gains and the reliance on Shia forces to fight in

Sunni areas or Kurdish militias to fight in Arab areas enabled the group to establish itself as a movement rather than just a militia. This threat will not dissipate merely by dislodging it from Mosul and Raqqa, but by creating antibodies that reject ISIL in the very communities it claims to represent and seeks to control. Only then will its international appeal begin to fade.