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Middle East Analysis Report

The Islamic State, which transformed into a global safety and security threat from 2011, has recently lost much of its military, political, and social influence. Considering the attributes of the Islamic State, which possessed a large number of military personnel, massive amount of ammunition and equipment, and vast occupied territory, it is possible to analyze, evaluate, and predict the rise and fall of the Islamic State through observations of its logistical activities and the lifestyles of its frontline fighters. In this paper, Chief research fellow Takaoka provides an analysis based on the results of the study by the Middle East Institute of Japan Islamic Extremist Monitoring Team.

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The Decline of the Islamic State Through the Perspective of Food

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Introduction

The Islamic State has been extremely enthusiastic about attracting the interest of its supporters and opponents through various public relations activities. This tendency is like its activities as Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia or the Islamic State in Iraq from 2004 to 2011. It appears to be aware of how it can receive more media coverage through PR activities, which include the kidnapping and beheading of foreigners, announcing the establishment of a nation (2006), and announcing cabinet personnel, and how to more efficiently reach its audience with information that is beneficial to its own position.

In addition, the Islamic State (IS) has maintained its activities by accepting

large numbers of foreigners from outside of Iraq and Syria as *muhajirun* (or “immigrants”) and importing money and supplies from many places worldwide. Thus, the PR activities of IS, include many images and videos that depict an ideal life within IS. Foreign women who have joined IS have published information about how blessed their lives are within the State, with their permission, helping to invite other new “immigrants” to join IS by suggesting that there are opportunities for marriage and so on. As a result, aside from official PR activities, a great deal of stories have been circulated, beautifying life within IS. “The Last Girl” by Nadia Murad (Japanese version is published by Toyokan Publishing, 2018) describes the construction of media that conveys a “happy life” for women threatened into “sexual slavery” (or of the opportunity for men who wish to join IS to satisfy their sexual desires freely).

Furthermore, the activities of fighters and military victories on the frontline, along with the blessedness of the environment for the fighters (excellent equipment and food, devoted religious practice, etc.), are important PR materials for demonstrating and enticing new IS members. In fact, the images that show how IS fighters live on the frontlines and what amount and quality of food is provided to them are extremely useful because they determine the organizational and economic power of IS. Here, by observing PR efforts related to the amount and quality of food provided to IS fighters on the frontlines, it is possible to witness the abilities of IS logistical systems, the rise and fall of IS influence, and the outlook on future IS activity.

Discussion

Image 1 shows a group of people, who have been smuggled in from a foreign country to join IS, sharing a meal upon arriving in Fallujah in Iraq (December 11, 2014). Meat dishes and fruit are provided for the meal, and an explanatory note that reads “Tourist Mujahidin” appears in the corner of the image. This image, besides showing fans and those who wish to join IS from worldwide that “immigration” to IS is safe and enjoyable, also depicts that the state has

sufficient resources to provide food and meals to help and accept “immigrants.”



Image 1: A meal for “immigrants” who have reached Fallujah in Iraq

Comparatively, Image 2 is from May 29, 2015 and shows food being prepared for frontline fighters in “Damascus Province.” The huge quantity of food being prepared in a kitchen shows the organization power of logistical systems that allow meals to be systematically sent to the fighters.



Image 2: Members of IS preparing meals for the frontline in “Damascus Province”

Similarly, Image 3 (November 25, 2015) shows that meals are being prepared for the frontlines in “Anbar Province” in Iraq. In the image, several lunch packages of meat and rice, considered excellent food in the Middle East, are being prepared. There are no such signs that small groups of fighters must individually procure their own food, or that individuals within small groups are given meal duty. Similarly, in Image 4 (January 17, 2016. A scene of activity in the Al-Hawl area of Northeast Syria), many lunch packages are piled up in front of a person preparing meals, showing that the people and

space necessary for preparing (and delivering) meals are well-organized. Image 5 (February 13, 2017) shows a variety of food being provided to the frontlines in “Raqqqa Province.”



Image 3: A scene of meals being prepared in “Anbar Province.”



Image 4: A scene of meal preparation in “Baraka Province.”



Image 5: A scene of organized food being sent to the frontlines in “Raqqah Province.”

The organized and delivered meals are, as shown in Image 6 (December 12, 2016), split into small containers and distributed along with tableware to the frontlines. From this scene, it can be clearly seen that to provide meals to the frontlines IS determined the position and status of bases scattered across the frontline, the number of soldiers at each location, and so on, and then calculated the amount and quality of food required. This kind of activity implies that IS possessed enough staff and equipment to support such a professional logistical department. However, starting from around 2017, even within IS occupied territory, differences in the amount and quality of meals due to the position and the circumstances of individual sub-units become conspicuous.



Image 6: Meals distributed on the frontline

Image 7 and 8 are scenes of dinner at bases in “Kirkuk Province” and

“Dijilah Province” in Iraq. Comparing these images to Image 6, however, it does not seem that meals are being provided from a centrally organized food department at the base. Above all, there seems to be no sign of side dishes or meat in these meals.



Image 7: A meal scene in “Kirkuk Province.”



Image 8: A scene of dinner on the frontlines in “Dijilah Province.”

Scenes of similar amounts and quality of food being eaten for iftar were published during Ramadan, the month of fasting, from the various bases in Iraq, in 2017 (Image 9 is a scene in “Dijilah Province” on June 5, 2017). However, the meals in these scenes were also prepared at individual bases by groups of fighters themselves.



Image 9: Iftar at a base in “Dijilah Province”

In comparison, Image 10, circulated at the same time as Image 9 (June 15, 2017) shows that prepared meals were being packaged to be sent to frontline bases as before, indicating that delivery functions were still in place. In addition, in the province of Deir al-Zor, which was one of the last IS occupied territories (IS established the “Furat Province” in this place, which straddles Iraq and Syria, a province which functioned until halfway through 2018. After this, the Syrian side of “Furat Province” was reorganized into “Sham Province Khair” and “Sham Province Baraka,” and the PR-driven appearance of IS having destroyed the border between Iraq and Syria was eliminated.), food was provided that included meat but appears to have been prepared by base units themselves, as in Image 11 (December 12, 2017).



Image 10: A meal preparation scene in “Raqqa Province.” Abundant meat is provided in this meal.



Image 11: A meal scene in “Furat Province”

As Raqqa was lost and cities along the Euphrates River, within Syria, were given up one after another, the amount and quality of IS meals within these areas also decreased. Image 12 (January 12, 2018) shows meals provided in frontline bases in “Baraka Province.” Burnt, and a truly unappetizing, meat tells the story of the cook’s lack of ability and falling troop morale. In Image 13 (July 11, 2018. A scene from “Damascus Province”), the cooking and delivery departments are functioning as before, and the cooking appears to be as well-prepared as before. However, at this time, IS had been expelled from the cities in the Damascus area, so the cooking site is not a specialized kitchen but an open-air area of a campsite.



Image 12: A meal scene in “Baraka Province”



Image 13: A cooking scene in “Damascus Province”

In 2018, the decline of IS could be seen even more clearly in meal scenes. Images 14 and 15 (August 30, 2018) show meal scenes in “Sham Province Furat.” It is like the images from the other “provinces” circulated at the time, in that the cooking or meal place is outdoors, a shabby net or pot is being used, and most cooking is done over a fire. Images 14 and 15 appear to be the final images taken from the Baghuz area of the province of Deir al-Zor. At the time this image was taken, it seems that meals still included main dishes and side dishes. However, such meal scenes were only rarely seen in IS public relations materials in 2017.



Image 14: A cooking scene in “Sham Province Furat”



Image 15: A meal in “Sham Province Furat”

Conclusion

By early 2019, there was nothing left to eat for IS members in Baghuz. Image 16 (March 11, 2019) was taken in Baghuz just before it fell and is a scene from a video intended to incite and inspire IS followers. In the video, IS members speak about Allah’s victory and the eternity of the Islamic State. Close to the individuals who are giving inspiring speeches, another person who seems to have no interest in such things is seen eating, what looks like, beans boiled in water. This scene symbolizes the fact that the logistical functions of IS had finally been lost and that as an organization it was no longer capable of occupying and managing a wide territory with considerable numbers of personnel and equipment.



Image 16: The meager cooking that appears in a video pronouncing the victory and permanence of the Islamic State

Image 17 (Dated April 14, 2019) represents the daily life of fighters in “Iraq Province Salaheddine.” It appears to be quite a feast, but this meal was not cooked and provided as a part of the organizational functions of IS in an occupied city’s specialized facility. In Iraq, IS cells in various regions have gone dormant. There is the dangerous possibility of the movement’s rebirth. However, as examined in this paper, the Islamic State as an entity equipped with a logistical and accounting or management department no longer exists. Nevertheless, fact-based analyses and determinations of current and future fluctuations in the influence of IS must be conducted, not only with respect to the unverifiable element of ideological spread, but also by observing PR materials and the quantity and quality in the themes and topics contained within them.



Image 17: Cooking served in “Iraq State Salaheddine”

(End)