

# Syria and Iraq after the Islamic State

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In 1881, a Sudanese cleric, Muhammad Ahmad, declared himself the Mahdi (the rightly-guided one) and launched a revolt against the Egyptian-controlled administration of Sudan. He achieved such signal success against the Egyptian army that Britain felt obliged to intervene, and sent a large column under the command of General Charles Gordon up the Nile with the aim of relieving the siege of Khartoum, yet the city was overrun in January 1885. The Mahdi himself died shortly thereafter but the state he had established and bequeathed to his designated successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, lasted until September 1898, when an Anglo-Egyptian army led by Lord Kitchener crushed the main Mahdi forces. The Khalifa fled with the remnants of his forces until they were caught at Umm Diwaykarat in November 1899, and the Islamic State of the Mahdi ceased to exist. But while the Mahdi state was defeated on the battlefield, “its ideology remained, and outbursts of neo-Mahdist movement continued for a long time.”<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to know whether the twenty-first century counterpart of the Khalifa Adallahi, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, will follow in his footsteps. It is clear, however, that 2015-2016 was not a very good year for the Islamic State (IS). A year earlier, the Islamic State in its previous incarnation – ISIS – had made striking gains in Syria and Iraq, bringing large areas (including major cities) under its sway, declaring the establishment of the caliphate, and annulling the border between the two states. All this created an image of an invincible expansionary force with a self-reinforcing dynamic, particularly in terms of recruiting appeal. But toward the end of 2015, the Islamic State momentum was checked, in large part because of increasingly effective

intervention by outside powers – Russia in Syria; the United States in both Syria and Iraq – that took the form of close air support and air interdiction as well as stepped-up intelligence, provision of advanced equipment, the dispatch of special forces and military advisors, and the direct targeting of IS financial assets and leadership echelons. As a result, not only were there no more major advances; IS was actually pushed back both by government forces in Iraq and Syria and by non-government militias operating either in cooperation with the government (in Iraq) or as part of the opposition (in Syria). In the course of 2015-16, IS lost control of about 22,500 square kilometers, i.e., about one quarter of the territory under its domination at the height of its power in late 2014.<sup>2</sup> The losses included symbolically important locations such as Tikrit, Fallujah, and Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria, as well as strategic sites such as the Baiji dam in Iraq and Syria-Turkey border crossings and supply route junctions at Tel Abyad and Manbij. They also resulted in the loss of resources and a reduced population and economic base for tax revenues, and – because of the tarnished luster of its reputation – a decline in recruitment (including foreign volunteers) and a rise in desertions or defections and other indicators of ebbing morale, even including tribal revolts and assassinations of local Islamic State leaders in areas still nominally under IS control.<sup>3</sup>

These developments inevitably produced a change in the discourse about the Islamic State. Rather than viewing it as the wave of the future, analysts and policymakers increasingly began to question whether it had already become a wave of the past, little more than a blip on the radar screen of history, or what Barack Obama, in a January 2014 interview immediately after ISIS captured Ramadi, dismissively described, a “JV [junior varsity] team,” i.e., a second-rank squad of youngsters. In the second half of 2016, many observers were predicting the imminent loss of the Islamic State’s capital city in northeast Syria, Raqqa, and the municipal jewels in its crown, Aleppo in northern Syria and Mosul in northern Iraq, events that might well signal the complete collapse of the enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

Should the Islamic State lose its entire territorial base and revert to its pre-2014 status as an insurgent movement, the consequences would be profound, though much would in fact depend on the circumstances of its downfall, and particularly on the identity of those who deprived it of its

status as a state. It should, however, be borne in mind, that first of all, this outcome is not foreordained. As long as a sense of Sunni grievance and deprivation persists and IS continues to embody the Sunni cause of self-preservation – against the Iranian-backed Shiite majority in Iraq and the Iranian- and Shiite-backed Alawite minority in Syria – the Islamic State, for all of its depredations and cruelty, will continue to enjoy a significant measure of support among its Sunni constituencies.

Second, the continued commitment of foreign actors to the struggle against IS cannot be taken for granted, because while IS has managed to alienate almost everyone, it does not constitute the highest priority target for anyone in the Iraq/Syria theater (except, perhaps, the Obama administration) and remains only “the second most important enemy” for most.<sup>5</sup> The Gulf monarchies still see Iran as the greater geostrategic threat and are preoccupied with the containment of Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria (and Yemen), an objective that would hardly be facilitated by the destruction of IS; Turkey is more concerned about repressing Kurdish aspirations than about crushing IS and therefore aims to contain Kurdish power in northern Syria and Iraq, which constitutes a particularly effective military counter-force to IS; and the Russians are primarily focused on shoring up the regime of Bashar al-Assad and therefore disperse their efforts and target anyone in Syria who opposes the regime, including (and perhaps especially) Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the former al-Qaeda affiliate, previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra), which competes with IS, as well as the non-Islamist opposition movements, which directly combat it. Even the United States, for whom IS may well be at the top of its “enemies list” in the Middle East, is unwilling to expand its current contribution to the struggle against it by, for example, sending significant numbers of ground forces. However, the election of Donald Trump, who declared that defeating the Islamic State was his highest foreign policy priority, might well change the pattern of American behavior in the region in 2017.

Third, even if the Islamic State is destroyed as a consequential force in Iraq and Syria, that does not necessarily mean that stable, authoritative centralized governments will be reconstructed in those countries. Both countries have suffered tremendous casualties, leaving physical damage and emotional scars. And despite the widespread ethnic cleansing, both will continue to have heterogeneous populations with identities that would be difficult to reconcile

or accommodate peacefully under almost any imaginable political system but that would resist the reinstatement of the kind of regimes that existed before the outbreak of the so-called “Arab Spring” (even after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq), that is, of regimes seen as repressive and/or unjust by large segments of the population. Besides, many of the setbacks already inflicted on IS have been at the hands not of central governments, but rather at the hands of Kurdish militias (in Syria and Iraq) and Sunni tribal forces (in Iraq), and those forces are unlikely to voluntarily turn over control of territory they have wrested from IS to representatives of Damascus or Baghdad. Indeed, at least in Iraq, it is precisely the concern about the aftermath of the “liberation” of Sunni-populated areas from IS rule by non-Sunni forces that will oblige the government to try to maximize Sunni visibility in future anti-IS operations (and especially to minimize the involvement of the hated Shiite militia, the *hast ash-sha’bi*, whose depredations against the local Sunni population following the “liberation” of Fallujah further dampened any remaining Sunni enthusiasm for a reunified Shiite-dominated Iraq).<sup>6</sup> That very imperative, however, is what further reduces the feasibility of any strong central government in the aftermath of a putative IS defeat. Thus, the end of control of Syrian and/or Iraqi territory by IS does not by any means ensure that Syria and Iraq will avoid the post-war fate of Yugoslavia or even the post- post-war fate of Serbia and Bosnia.

Nor does it mean that IS will disappear completely from the physical or political map of the Middle East. Depending on developments elsewhere, it could simultaneously create or expand other territorial bases – in Libya, in Sinai, or even in Yemen and the empty quarter of Saudi Arabia, where it might supersede al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula just as it superseded al-Qaeda in Iraq. In terms of serving as strategic foundations for a resurrected caliphate, such redoubts would be poor substitutes, both materially and symbolically, for the Fertile Crescent, but they could serve as bases for continued planning, training, and propaganda, meaning that IS would remain a major inspirer of discontent in the Arab world and encourager/implementer of terrorism everywhere. Indeed, there have already been examples – most notably, the bombing of a civilian Russian airliner flying from Sharm el-Sheikh – of spectacular IS-organized acts of terrorism outside the territory under its direct control and directed against the “far enemy.” In other words,

the progressive loss of territorial control might well prompt IS, unable to maintain its uniqueness as the embodiment of the caliphate, to borrow ever more from the classic playbook of al-Qaeda and blur the operational/doctrinal distinction that has existed between the two, in order somehow to preserve its relevance in the ongoing global jihad.

Finally, even without any territorial base at all, IS might no longer exist as a material entity, but the convictions that it encapsulates and espouses – including a strong sense of Muslim deprivation coupled with devotion to the divine injunction to recreate the caliphate and spread the rule of Islam using every variety of jihad – would not be eliminated as an ideational force because those convictions stem, not from the creative “public diplomacy” of IS, but rather from the very historical and theological origins of Islam. Believers in the power of organizational dynamics might persuade themselves that the physical defeat of the Islamic State would also result in the bankruptcy of its ideology. Against that hope, it is worth juxtaposing the following reaction to the battle of Omdurman in 1898, which seems vindicated by subsequent events:

“The downfall of Mahdism” is a phrase which has been used often in the last few days to characterize the importance of the victory of Sir Herbert Kitchener’s British and Egyptian troops in the Soudan [sic]. But Mahdism has been down many times in the course of the centuries, and it is most persistent in its habit of resurrecting itself. The present triumph of the English in the Nile region may indeed have effectively crushed the Khalifa Abdullah, who declares himself the vice-regent of the Mahdi, but it has always been the rule in Islamism for another Mahdi to appear upon the defeat of a predecessor. The failure of a so-called Mahdi to accomplish his plans and conquests is generally construed by the faithful to mean that he must have been a false prophet, and they turn ever hopefully to the future for the real Mahdi to appear. ... When and from what quarter the black ensigns [the Islamic State symbol] of a new Mahdi may appear is wholly uncertain, but it is safe to say that when they are raised they will command at least a respectable number of supporters... who are ever ready to welcome a powerful leader.<sup>7</sup>

In short, defeat may force the ideology of IS into dormancy for long periods of time, but not into total bankruptcy, and circumstances can at any time revive it with the full force it seemed to have – for decades in the seventh century under the Prophet and his successors, for over a decade at the end of the nineteenth century under the Mahdi and Khalifa, and for only a little more than two years – perhaps – under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

## Notes

- 1 John O. Voll, “Abu Jumayza: The Mahdi’s’ Musaylima?” in *Islam, Politics and Social Movements*, eds. Edmund Burke, III, and Ira M. Lapidus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 108.
- 2 “Islamic State has Lost Grip of 12% of Territory in Six Months – Study,” *The Guardian*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/11/islamic-state-has-lost-grip-on-12-of-territory-in-six-2months-study>.
- 3 “Assassinations, Unrest and Military Defeat – Has the Tide Turned against Islamic State?” *The Telegraph*, March 7, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/12186766/Assassinations-unrest-and-military-defeat-has-the-tide-turned-against-Islamic-State.html>.
- 4 See, for example, David Petraeus, “The challenge in Mosul won’t be to defeat the Islamic State. It will be what comes after,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2016, <http://goo.gl/lZqTD7>.
- 5 Jonathan R. Laing, “Islamic State in Retreat,” *Barron’s*, April 30, 2016, <http://www.barrons.com/articles/islamic-state-defeat-in-2017-1461990736>.
- 6 Uzi Rabi, “The Islamic State: From Insurgency to Caliphate and Back,” *Tel Aviv Notes* 10, no. 14 (August 10, 2016).
- 7 “The Downfall of Mahdism,” *Lewiston Evening Journal*, September 30, 1898, p. 8.