

The Islamic State Kingdom in Syria

Eyal Zisser

Five years of civil war and bloodshed have led to the collapse of the Syrian state and the shattering of its social mosaic. The Islamic State (ISIS) burst forth from the ruins – first of Iraq, then of Syria – to assume power and fill the vacuum left behind by crumbling states. In eastern Syria, which it occupied in the summer of 2014, the Islamic State serves as an effective alternative to the Syrian state institutions that have since disappeared. The entity aims to seize western areas of the country if and when the Syrian regime collapses – an outcome that is virtually assured, as it appears as though none of the rebel groups active in western Syria have the power to stop this from happening.

Such a development has far reaching implications for Syria, because unlike the other rebel elements active in the country, the Islamic State is not a local group seeking simply to rule the country. Rather, it hopes to turn Syria into a Salafist Islamic entity. It is, in fact, an entity with an all-Islamic worldview and identity, interested in far more than geographical expanses in Syria and Iraq. Alternatively, it is at the very least an Iraqi project whose foundations lie in the Sunni Muslim base in Iraq that gave rise to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his closest advisors and assistants.

In any case, however, it is clear that the Islamic State still sees itself as a warring, expanding jihadist outfit; in areas under its control, it proclaims the war of jihad and a campaign of conquest. Ironically, for the millions of Syrians finding themselves under Islamic State rule, this is a reprieve – albeit temporary and illusory – from the horrors of the bloodshed possessing their country. The population, mostly traditional Sunni Muslim, though occasionally still tribal in structure, accepts with ease if not enthusiasm the practicality

of the Islamic State as well its mechanisms, which seek to turn the Syrian-Iraqi clock back more than a thousand years to the earlier years of Islam.

The Summer of 2014: ISIS Seizes Control of Eastern Syria

In June 2014, ISIS surged from the depths of the Syrian-Iraqi desert and seized large portions of northwestern Iraq, including Mosul. In tandem with its success there, ISIS fighters also managed to wrest control of most of eastern Syria (the Jazeera region), starting with Abu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border, through al-Raqqa, a city that became the seat of their rule in eastern Syria, to the outskirts of Aleppo in the west. Their military successes paved the way for al-Baghdadi's announcement on June 29, 2014 of the founding of an Islamic caliphate under his leadership,¹ henceforth known as the Islamic State.

Ever since the seizure of eastern Syria in the summer of 2014, the Islamic State has tried to expand its circle of influence and control in four principal directions:

- a. In eastern Syria, it has tried to entrench its control of the Jazeera region (eastern Syria, the provinces of Deir ez-Zor, Haskha, and al-Raqqa) while trying to eliminate enclaves such as Tabeka (which it conquered in the summer of 2014), and Haskha and Deir az-Zor (which became a steady target for its attacks), which were still controlled by the Assad regime in the region. At the same time, the Islamic State tried, unsuccessfully, to unseat the Kurds from their enclaves in the north, such as Kubani (Ein al-Arb).
- b. In northern Syria, in the summer of 2014 and the spring of 2015, the Islamic State succeeded in entrenching itself in the rural areas north and east of Aleppo, though its attempts to reach the city itself were rebuffed by various rebel groups.
- c. In central Syria, ISIS fighters unsuccessfully tried to make their way toward Homs, though in May 2015 they managed to conquer the city of Tadmur, the entrance point into the heart of Syria from the eastern desert.
- d. In the spring of 2015, Islamic State fighters managed to gain control of some suburbs of Damascus in southern Syria, while advancing to the eastern foothills of the Druze Mountains. In addition, they managed to gain the loyalty of some of the rebel groups operating on the Syrian-Lebanese border in the mountain range of Qalamoun and the Syrian Golan Heights.²

The Syrian Portion of the Islamic State Kingdom

The part of Syria under Islamic State control is a portion of the Islamic caliphate that extends to the northwestern part of Iraq. The caliphate is headed by the Ibrahim caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (full name: Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samrani). Several councils operate at his side and constitute the core of the Islamic State.³ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has two deputies who are responsible for managing the various provinces (*wilayat*) of the country. The deputy in charge of the provinces in Syria is Abdullah al-Anbari, also known as Abu Ali al-Ambari, who served as an intelligence officer in the Iraqi army during Saddam Hussein's rule. The province (*wilaya*) governors are thus subordinate to religious law and his authority.⁴

Each province is divided into counties (*qita'*), which in turn are subdivided into cities and rural areas. Every province is headed by an emir and has local institutions charged with managing the province's routine needs: law and law enforcement, religious matters, including the enforcement of religious laws, and the provision of services to residents (managed by the ministry of service – *diwan al-hidamat*, or the institute for public services – *mu'asasat al-hidamat al a'ama*). These are subordinate to the province governor but coordinate issues and maintain contact with the councils and ministries at the level of the Islamic State leadership.⁵

Islamic State Provinces in Syria

Islamic State provinces are for the most part congruent with already existent administrative divisions in Iraq and Syria. The Syrian provinces of the Islamic State consist of: al-Raqqa, whose capital is al-Raqqa; Aleppo; Idlib, the province of Damascus; al-Badiya, the desert province and the official name of Homs province; Hama; the coast province, the official name of Latakia province; al-Khayr ("the good"), the new name given to Deir ez-Zor province; and al-Baraka ("the blessing"), the name given to Haskha province. In late August 2014, the Islamic State founded the Euphrates province (*wilayat al-Frat*), which includes the Syrian city of Abu Kanal and the Iraqi city of al-Qa'im. The establishment of this new province was meant to symbolize the breakdown of Sykes-Picot borders, i.e., the Iraq-Syria border imposed by the West. All the same, some provinces, such as Idlib, the coast, and Damascus, are still not under Islamic State control.⁶

It seems that the Islamic State, the Syrian regime, the Kurds, Turkey, and even certain rebel groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra share a quiet understanding

on the free flow of goods and people through the various areas of Syria, especially when it comes to the sale of oil and petroleum products and the maintenance of infrastructure facilities, such as dams and power stations controlled by the Islamic State. This maintenance is carried out jointly by the Islamic State and the Syrian government, which continues to pay the salaries of government workers in the areas controlled by the Assad regime.⁷

Two other aspects of the Islamic State's governance of eastern Syria are worth mentioning: first, its attitude to the Arab tribes that constitute a significant power in this area; second, its attitude toward minorities. The tribes were certainly an important source of power and support for ISIS when it first made its way in Iraq. In Syria the Islamic State worked to win various tribal coalitions over to its cause. On the other hand, the Islamic State's relations with Arab tribes are tense and hostile, as many refuse to subjugate themselves to its authority and surrender the autonomy they have been enjoying since the onset of the civil war in Syria. Their insubordination has forced the Islamic State to act with lethal violence in order to impose its will.⁸

When it comes to minorities, the Islamic State accepts the existence of "protected people" or *dhimmis* – a concept applicable to the various Christian sects in the region – and allows them to lead their lives wherever they reside. Thus in February 2014, for example, the Islamic State agreed to provide Islamic protection (*ahad aman*) to the Christian residents of al-Raqqa in Syria, which allowed them to continue living as usual in the city, but imposed on them the *jizya* per-capita tax, which they must pay twice every year. The agreement also banned them from publicly celebrating Christian rituals or exhibiting religious symbols. In reality the Islamic State's treatment of the Christian population is marked by continued harassment and persecution, implying that its real goal is to expel Christians from areas under its control or even to force them to convert to Islam. Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that most of the Christian population has left eastern Syria.⁹

Unlike Iraq, where the Islamic State treated the Yazidi population horrendously, slaughtering its men while selling its women on slave blocks in the cities of the Islamic State,¹⁰ eastern Syria contains few people who are neither Sunni Muslims nor Christians. Yet in Syria too, the Islamic State is acting savagely toward anyone who is not Sunni, including Alawites and Shiites who have fallen into its hands.

Conclusion

The importance of the presence of the Islamic State in eastern Syria lies in the fact that it was the first rebel organization fighting the Syrian regime that managed to position itself as a realistic alternative to Assad both militarily and politically, and to establish an administrative entity that sustains, even if only partially, systems of governance and a range of economic, social, and legal services.

The Islamic State has in practice established a state-like system whose objective, motives, and ideological foundations are fueled by jihad war and expansionism. Its new conquests are thus meant to achieve not only its ideological goal but also – and especially – its practical goal of maintaining the momentum it had gained through its conquests and continued maintenance of the state that it runs using a range of conquests and the manpower joining its ranks in the wake of each new conquest. In this sense, there is a surprising resemblance between the Islamic State and the tribal nations that the region has known since the beginning of Islam or even earlier, and between the current Islamic State and the one instituted by the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabian Peninsula.

The story of the Islamic State in eastern Syria is one of success. An organization that once lacked a real presence, support, or infrastructure has managed to sweep out of the desert and seize control of vast tracts of land in eastern Syria within the course of a few years. It is now looking to seize control of western Syria as well. However, it is not the Islamic State that toppled the Syrian state, as it did in Iraq. Rather, it is the collapse of the Syrian state that enabled the Islamic State to conquer eastern Syria with relative ease. The power of the Islamic State actually lies in the weakness of its enemies – local forces that cannot gather the strength to stand up to it and in many cases opt to join its ranks. Nonetheless, wherever the Islamic State has encountered firm opposition, as it has from the concentrations of Shiites in southern Iraq or the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq, it has halted, at least for now.

Finally, eastern Syria, which has been controlled by the Islamic State since the summer of 2014, was seized and dominated easily. Still, one should not assume that this relative success in the region augurs what might happen should all of Syria fall into its hands. The western parts of the country are densely populated by mixed populations of minority groups as well as wealthy urban Sunnis, mostly secular and harboring moderate worldviews.

In conclusion, the Islamic State is neither a decree of destiny nor a natural disaster that must be accepted passively. Notwithstanding its ability to adapt to the changing regional reality, to confront complex challenges and a range of enemies while exploiting their weaknesses, and especially to fill the vacuums left by the collapse of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State has weaknesses of its own. Indeed, wherever it has encountered fierce resistance it has withdrawn. In the long term, the radicalization and lack of pragmatism that currently constitute its sources of strength are liable to become key weaknesses that will generate broad coalitions that would otherwise never cooperate against it. In addition, the Islamic State may encounter friction with Israel on the Syrian front sooner than expected. Israel must therefore find a way of joining the broad coalition that is currently operating against the Islamic State.

Notes

- 1 On ISIS's military achievements in the summer of 2014, see "How ISIS Stormed Iraq: A Chronology of the Militant Offensive," June 16, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2014/06/16/How-ISIS-stormed-Iraq-A-chronology-of-the-militant-offensive-.html>. For more on al-Baghdadi's announcement on the establishment of a caliphate, see Hannah Strange, "Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Addresses Muslims in Mosul," *The Telegraph*, July 5, 2014.
- 2 On ISIS's military successes starting in the summer of 2014, see "The Fall of Tadmur, Ramadi and the Border Crossings Impose ISIS organization as a Main Player," *Khalifa*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.khilafah.com/the-fall-of-tadmur-ramadi-and-the-border-crossings-impose-isis-organization-as-a-main-player>.
- 3 For more about the organization of ISIS, see "ISIS: Portrait of a Terrorist Organization," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, November 26, 2014, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/article/20733>; see also Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria," *Middle East Security Report* 22, July 2014, www.understandingwar.org/report/isis-governance-syria.
- 4 See Charles Lister, "Islamic State Senior Leadership: Who's Who," Brookings Institution, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling-islamic-state-lister/en_whos_who.pdf?la=en.
- 5 See "ISIS: Portrait of a Terrorist Organization," pp. 65-66, 70-71.
- 6 For more on Islamic State provinces in Syria, see "The Provinces of ISIS," *Watan*, <http://www.watan.fm/syria-news>, and the website associated with ISIS, <https://isdaratdawlatlislam.wordpress.com>.
- 7 See Orlando Crowcroft, "Isis: Inside the Struggling Islamic State Economy in Iraq and Syria," *International Business Times*, April 11, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-inside-struggling-islamic-state-economy-iraq-syria-1495726>.

- 8 See, for example, “Mass Grave of 230 Tribespeople Found in Syria’s Deir Ezzor: Monitoring Group,” *al-Akhbar*, December 18, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22938>.
- 9 On the *ahad aman* document, see <http://barefly.net/index.php?topic=33284.0>.
- 10 See “Isis Slave Markets Sell Girls for ‘As Little as a Pack of Cigarettes,’ UN Envoy Says,” *The Guardian*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/09/isis-slave-markets-sell-girls-for-as-little-as-a-pack-of-cigarettes-un-envoy-says>.

