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The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State: A Fifth-Year Assessment

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In March 2019, nearly five years after its founding, the Islamic State suffered its final military defeat when it lost control over its last stronghold in al-Baghuz, in eastern Syria. At its peak, the Islamic State controlled an area the size of Britain and a population of about six million people. Despite the fact that its attempt to establish an Islamic state, followed by an Islamic caliphate, was halted, the Islamic State and its affiliates, together with al-Qaeda and its allies - who share their ideology while themselves seeking the leadership of the Salafi jihadist camp - will continue to threaten to spread terrorism and guerrilla warfare throughout the world. This article surveys the emergence and departure of the Islamic State, which swept through the Middle East like a hurricane, leaving death, destruction, and a broad humanitarian disaster in its wake. Its actions and their aftermath spilled over to other regions of the world, and despite its defeat, the threat that it posed, even if not in territorial terms, remains.

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When it was established in 2014, the Islamic State, led by self-appointed caliph Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, was able to attract tens of thousands of Muslims from all over the world, who joined its ranks in order to realize the vision of establishing an Islamic caliphate. They fought in its ranks for five years. But at the end of those five years, many of the tens of thousands who had volunteered to fight or live under Islamic State control

were wounded and suffering from emotional trauma, with no option for refuge. As a result of the military campaign against it, the Islamic State lost its main achievement – the territorial foundation (“tamkin”) that was the premise for its divine vision, which for believers was proof of divine satisfaction. The loss of its territorial base forced al-Baghdadi to present his followers with an alternative message that would reconcile the contradiction between the military-territorial loss and the alleged evidence of divine blessing. For example, in a public appearance recorded on video and distributed by the AMAQ news agency in April 2019, al-Baghdadi explained the Islamic State’s new situation as a test for believers and a commandment imposed on them to meet the challenge with faith and persistence.

The Islamic State’s failure to realize the vision it offered its believers was due to al-Baghdadi’s underestimation of the balance of power between his forces and those arrayed against him. Al-Baghdadi refused to internalize the lesson learned by al-Qaeda when it was forced to operate against an international coalition that formed against it following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US with the aim of preventing it from carrying out its threat to “soak the West in rivers of blood.” Al-Baghdadi also erred in assessing the broad international coalition’s readiness and determination, both western-Arab and Russian-Iranian together with Hezbollah, to act with strength and determination to halt his territorial ambitions and his brutal behavior. In the end, the Islamic State’s takeover of broad swathes territory in Syria and Iraq, while enforcing combat and behavioral norms reminiscent of ancient times – including mass executions of prisoners and minorities, public beheadings, use of children as soldiers or cannon fodder, and use of women as sex slaves – attacked the order in the Middle East and the vital interests of regional and global superpowers, while threatening to spread to additional areas around the world. All this brought about its downfall.

In addition, al-Baghdadi erred in his estimation that once he appointed himself caliph (late June 2014), he would win widespread support for his leadership and Islamic State hegemony over the Salafi jihadist camp, as well as complete compliance on the part al-Qaeda’s supporters and partners. However, the vast majority of organizations that were al-Qaeda affiliates remained loyal to al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. Moreover, al-Qaeda and its affiliates reinforced their strength elsewhere in the world (in Yemen, Somalia, the Islamic Maghreb, the Sahel, and particularly in Mali, Afghanistan, India, and Syria), under cover of the smokescreen created by Islamic State activity. The broad media focus on the Islamic State diverted attention and resources from the struggle against al-Qaeda, leaving the latter time and space to regroup and grow stronger.

The lessons of the fall of the Islamic State join those learned from the campaign against al-Qaeda. Examining them is of particular importance in view of the difficulty in

specifying the enemy and the challenge it presents when dealing with organizations such as these. When the Islamic State arose, the West had difficulty internalizing that this was not just another “ordinary” terrorist organization, but a multi-dimensional entity with state-like characteristics. This entity ruled over a broad expanse of territory rich in resources. It established its own economic, legal, religious, and cultural systems, and acted as an entity that supports and operates Robespierrian terrorism – using harsh violence against citizens that rebelled against its authority, ethnic and religious minorities, and opposition forces working in areas under its control. It also acted with extreme brutality toward its external enemies. In its fight against the coalition that formed against it, the Islamic State operated as a terrorist and guerrilla force combined – an “army of terrorilla” – shielded by civilians. Its operational arm carried out guerrilla attacks in the combat arena, in parallel with terrorist attacks in urban areas in the Levant and showcase attacks abroad.

This entity that ruled by casting brutal threats has disappeared, but even now, when discussing an enemy such as the Islamic State, it is important to understand the change in the nature of the enemy and the challenge it poses. Thousands of Islamic State combatants remain in Syria and Iraq, hiding and operating in various regions. What is left of its forces constitutes a multi-arm terrorist organization, and the extent of its control over its branches and the nature of its contacts with allies throughout the world remain unclear. Islamic State operatives continue to carry out terrorist and guerrilla attacks in various places around the world. These attacks indicate that the threat remains even for the next few years, despite the military defeat in the Levant. The Islamic State has manpower reserves among its fighters imprisoned by the Kurds and Iraqis in prison camps in eastern Syria, who find it difficult, despite limited American and Western assistance, to locate the organization’s fighters among the prisoners. It is also difficult to find the organization’s fighters implanted in refugee camps throughout these areas and in neighboring countries, who act like innocent civilians. At the same time, the organizations allied with al-Qaeda and its active partners in the Maghreb, Hijaz, and Sahel regions, southern Asia, and the Indian subcontinent are growing stronger.

It therefore seems that the sense of relief due to the fact that there have been no showcase terrorist attacks in the West recently, even as a response to the defeat of the Islamic State, relies on short historical memory. Even al-Qaeda and its partners needed about a decade from the end of the fighting in Afghanistan in the late 1980s to launch terrorist attacks in the West. The Islamic State is reorganizing, in conjunction with its partners. At the same time, there is a process of strategic reorganization even in al-Qaeda’s alliances, from focusing on terrorist activity in the West to gaining footholds and building foundations among local populations in regions where there is weak government authority. The two camps will likely continue to work to maintain and even advance the Salafi jihadist

agenda, including through the use of terrorism and violence, while adjusting to both the challenges and opportunities presented by the situation. The Salafi jihadist camp is guided by a different concept of time than what is common in the Western world: strategic restraint and patience underlie the struggle, and therefore the fall of the Islamic State is not perceived as defeat.

Israel's interests are affected due to the Salafi jihadist drive to destabilize Jordan, as well as Egypt – particularly the Sinai Peninsula, by way of the Sinai Province organization. Terrorist activity in the international arena, in Western countries where Israelis have an economic, business, and/or tourist presence, as well as in countries in Israel's peripheral area such as Africa, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Southeast Asia, may also pose a threat to Israeli interests.