The Rise of the Islamic State Organization

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The Rise of the Islamic State: The Starting Point

The rise of the Islamic State organization (IS) in Iraq and Syria is an outgrowth of three main developments. One is the appearance of al-Qaeda in the global arena, which seeks to promote an Islamic jihadi approach around the world. While al-Qaeda was established in 1988, after the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States it was perceived as a threat to the stability of the international system and the security of many countries. Al-Qaeda's radical approach attracted many young Muslims to its ranks and contributed to the establishment of other organizations of its kind, which were grouped together into a broad movement called global jihad. The Islamic State organization is the most threatening outgrowth of this development.

The second development is the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003. The American occupation led to a complete change in Iraq's political and social characteristics and its strategic capabilities. The central government was greatly weakened, and the Shiites, who constitute some 60 percent of the country's population but for generations were suppressed by the Sunni minority, became the leading players in the Iraqi political system. The Sunnis, accustomed to ruling in Iraq, were pushed to the sidelines, though they were given representation in the government and Parliament. Their frustration prompted them to establish armed militias, some of which used terrorism against their adversaries, particularly the Shiites, who responded in kind. The result was a civil war, mainly between Sunni and Shiite militias, in which at least 130,000 to 150,000 people were killed, if not more.

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At the same time, the United States completely dismantled the Iraqi army, which in the early 1990s was the largest Arab army. In its stead, they established the Iraqi security forces, a large force that in 2014 numbered 650,000 troops – 280,000 in the army and the rest in the police. However, despite their size, these forces lack the ability to defend Iraq from an outside enemy: Iraq has no real air force, missiles, or nonconventional weapons, and has only a small armored corps. The main task of the security forces is to ensure domestic order and security. Yet even in this they have failed, evidenced by the bloody inter-ethnic violence, and in fact, the ethnic militias have assumed greater importance than the government security forces. In late 2011 US forces withdrew from Iraq, thus leaving it to internal struggles, and ultimately, to an IS takeover of key targets in northwest Iraq.

The third development is the ongoing and inconclusive war in Syria, which thus far has led to the deaths of over 200,000 people. The struggle between the Assad regime and domestic opposition forces has been infiltrated by jihadis, some of them connected to al-Qaeda, who threaten the regime and have contributed to the civil war in Syria and the growing power of IS. The governmental vacuum in Syria has allowed IS to establish an operational base there, which facilitates its successes in Iraq.

The Islamic State: Background

The Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), broke off from al-Qaeda after a quarrel over the leadership of the global jihad movement between its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. The organization sees itself as the true heir of al-Qaeda. It believes that today's al-Qaeda has deviated from the path of Osama bin Laden, and that Zawahiri's authority is therefore not legitimate. Suspicion and violence exist between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda faction operating in Syria against the Assad regime. In April 2013, the hostility rose to the surface, when Baghdadi announced the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq to Syria and also changed the organization's name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Zawahiri tried ordering the group to withdraw its operatives from Syria and return them to Iraq, but Baghdadi refused and in January 2014 announced that the organization was not part of al-Qaeda.

In the spring of 2013, the group began moving forces from Syria to western Iraq, and in early 2014, it took control of several cities in Anbar Province, including Fallujah, some forty kilometers west of Baghdad. Its

main successes occurred in June 2014, when it succeeded in capturing Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein. It also attempted to take over Kurdish-controlled Kirkuk, which would have meant the control of an important part of the Iraqi oil infrastructure. In several battles it defeated the Peshmerga, the main Kurdish militia. While it did not succeed in pushing the Peshmerga out of Kirkuk, for several weeks it managed to control the Mosul dam on the Tigris River, which has strategic significance, and set as its main goal a takeover of Baghdad as part of its multi-stage plan to establish an Islamic state from Iraq to Lebanon.

In the wake of the achievements of June 2014, Baghdadi declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, appointing himself as caliph. He shortened the group's name to Islamic State in order to emphasize that he does not accept the division of the Muslim world into nation states separated by borders. IS urges Muslims around the world to change the existing order, rebel against existing governments, and extend the borders of the caliphates to the entire Muslim world. The idea of restoring the caliphate and establishing an Islamic political entity excited many young people, and the combination of the vision and the successes on the ground attracted them to the organization. At the same time, IS has challenged competing Islamic organizations, including al-Qaeda, beset by its own difficult situation, and it has heightened the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.[1]

The Islamic State: Strengths and Weaknesses

The rapid success of the Islamic State in Syria, and even more so in Iraq, surprised all parties concerned: the Iraqi government, the Shiite and Kurdish militias, the Assad regime, Iran, the other neighboring countries, the United States, Western governments, and Israel. The Islamic State's unexpected achievements; the collapse of the forces deployed against it; its extremism and cruelty; its unbridled and boundless pretensions and ambitions; its strengthening as a result of its achievements; and the grave threats inherent in its establishment of a large stronghold in Iraq and Syria have all aroused much concern among the countries that could be affected yet are hard pressed to provide an appropriate response. Some already believe that the large IS stronghold makes the group more dangerous and threatening than al-Qaeda.

Several factors have contributed to the strength and success of IS. First, the forces arrayed against it, particularly in Iraq, have shown blatant

weakness and helplessness. For about seven years the Iraqi security forces were built, equipped, and trained by US forces at great expense, and even after the US withdrawal from Iraq, American advisors continued to help build the forces. However, these forces comprise members of three ethnic groups, and exist alongside ethnic militias not dependent on the security forces. The security forces are not united and have not demonstrated resolve in the face of pressures from a small determined organization. As a result, once tested, they failed to fulfill their main task: in parallel to the fall of Mosul, almost five of the security forces' eighteen divisions collapsed within forty-eight hours.[2] In their current state, the security forces are not capable of coping with IS. Even the Shiite militias, some of which are armed and trained by Iran, have not demonstrated an ability to stand up to it. The Peshmerga, one of the largest militias in Iraq, which has operated from its bases in the Kurdish enclave, has shown weakness against IS for several reasons: it was armed by the United States mainly with light weapons, which are inadequate against the heavy weapons possessed by IS; it has experience with rural guerilla warfare and not with urban warfare and offensive operations; and many of its men are older.[3]

Second, IS is not a large organization. According to various estimates, when its string of successes started in Iraq it numbered some 10,000 members, about a third of them trained and experienced fighters, including "alumni" of the fighting in Syria, and some 1,000 foreign volunteers, some of whom gained experience in Chechnya and Bosnia. However, the organization receives aid from Sunni tribes, former Baathists, and armed Sunni militias, and according to a recent CIA estimate, its force now includes 20,000-31,000 members. Labeling IS a terrorist organization does not fully reflect its capabilities, which combine tactics in the realm of terrorism perfected in the years of combat against US forces with elements of a small regular army. Officers and soldiers from Saddam Hussein's army have joined the group, and the officers have experience in planning operations and deploying units of 200-300 fighters on the company and battalion level.

Even though the US government and the Iranian regime take the jihadi threat projected by IS very seriously, both have already stressed their reluctance, f not refusal, to intervene militarily against the organization.

The military experience of some of the IS fighters has contributed to its success on the ground, particularly through rapid movement along the well paved roads in Iraq with armored vehicles captured from Iraqi security

forces and the Syrian army. This mobility enables IS fighters to achieve a local numerical advantage over their adversaries and surprise them. They have no bases, command and control centers, or fixed installations, which makes it difficult to attack them.[4]

Third, since June 2014, IS has demonstrated improved capabilities. As a result of its successes, it has gained control of modern heavy weapons of US manufacture seized from Iraqi security forces and arms captured from the Syrian army, which have given it an advantage over the Shiite and Kurdish militias. No less important, IS took over significant financial resources while advancing, primarily as a result of its success in seizing banks in cities under its control and taking over oil resources. It also has other important financial resources at its disposal: it extorts money from businesspeople and protection money from minorities in areas under its control and demands ransom in exchange for release of hostages.[5] Its acquisition of financial resources has turned IS into a wealthy organization, and its ability to pay salaries to its members has brought many volunteers into its ranks and expanded the pool of manpower at its disposal.

Fourth, today, the entire Iraqi-Syrian border is controlled by IS. Weapons and fighters move freely in both directions and strengthen the organization's combat capability in both countries, as needed. The group's successes in Iraq strengthen its outposts in Syria and vice versa. The total withdrawal of Iraqi security forces from the area of the border, and the fact that Iraq lacks aerial strike capability, enables IS to move troops and heavy weapons to areas in northwestern Iraq where it is fighting local tribes armed with light weapons.[6] Control of both sides of the border allows the organization to build a large territorial terrorist stronghold in the heart of the Middle East, attempt to realize its concept of eliminating borders between Muslim countries, and advance toward creation of a large Islamic caliphate. According to estimates, IS today controls about one third of the territory of Syria and about one quarter of the territory of Iraq, with at least 8 million people in areas under its control. Its takeover of the Rutbah area in western Iraq has given it direct access to the borders with Jordan and Saudi Arabia. IS does not necessarily have full control of these areas, although its hold on them is growing stronger. It has built a quasi-government and administrative mechanism to handle them, and its control over several important cities, mainly Mosul, and several traffic arteries, rivers, and dams gives it an advantage over its adversaries.[7]

Finally, the policy of Iraq's former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, played an important role in strengthening IS. Prime minister from May 2006 to July 2014, Maliki proved to be a tyrannical and corrupt ruler who prevented a genuine process of national reconciliation among Iraq's ethnic groups. He weakened and corrupted the Iraqi security forces with his efforts to build his personal power and his government almost exclusively on the basis of Shiite support, and destroyed all the good will and trust of the Sunnis. Maliki relied on Iran and forged strong ties with the Assad regime, thereby alienating the Sunnis even further. Most of the moderate Sunni tribal leaders, militias, and organizations are not sympathetic to the radical religious and cultural approach of IS. However, their hatred of Maliki and his government was so strong that they were prepared to support the organization, especially since many of the Sunni leaders belonged to the Saddam regime and were hoping that IS would restore control to the Sunnis.[8]

However, IS has several significant disadvantages and limitations. First, an organization on the scale of IS will find it difficult to control areas it has conquered and at the same time seize more territory, when it has responsibility for the lives and welfare of millions of people. It will be more successful in areas in which there is a significant Sunni population but will have difficulty in regions with high concentrations of Shiites and Kurds. The group will need to decide whether to concentrate its efforts on establishing its rule in areas it has conquered and building a stable economic infrastructure for the state it seeks to establish or expanding its attempts to take control over Shiite southern Iraq or central Syria, which is the base of the Assad regime's rule.[9] In particular, IS apparently lacks the power to take over Baghdad, which is a key target, because it is mainly Shiite and the Shiite militias and government security forces will do all they can to defend the city. Instead, IS is expected to increase its showcase attacks in the capital in order to sow fear and destruction there.

> In their current state, the Iraqi security forces, the moderate Syrian opposition, and the Assad regime as well are not able to cope with IS by themselves, either in terms of their operational training or the weapons at their disposal.

Second, IS cannot represent and unite all Sunnis over time. The coalition that supports it is far from monolithic, and includes tribal leaders, veterans of the Saddam regime, and jihadis with conflicting interests. Thus far, a large number of Sunni leaders have supported IS to some extent, not so much out of support, but because they oppose Maliki more. At least some

of them have reservations about the organization's religious extremism, including its establishment of the caliphate, erasure of borders, persecution of minorities, and cruelty. Nevertheless, they continue to support it out of hatred for Maliki and his policies and the hope that it will strengthen the position of the Sunnis in Iraq. It is not clear how long their support will last, especially since Maliki has been ousted and there is an expectation of change in the government's domestic policy. This also pertains to officers from Saddam's army who have joined IS, and there is a possibility that the Americans and the Iraqi government will attempt to transfer some of them to aid the government security forces.[10] This happened in 2006 and 2007 when the Americans succeeded in driving a wedge between the Sunni leaders and al-Qaeda, but after the disappointment and frustration among Sunnis in recent years, it will be much more difficult to repeat this success.

Third, thus far, IS has benefited from the fact that the international response and outside intervention against it in Iraq and Syria have been limited. However, its adversaries are beginning to organize. While implementation of what is necessarily a complicated response to the threat presented by IS will take time and its success is not guaranteed, if the US effort to build an effective coalition begins to bear fruit, IS is likely to find itself facing far stronger forces, and it could lose its momentum, and gradually, some of its gains as well.

Ways to Obstruct the Islamic State

Although many countries are very worried about the rise of the Islamic State, only two are taking significant steps against it: the United States and Iran. Both view the organization as a genuine threat to their interests, and both have the ability to use military means against it. The US administration is worried by the possibility that a radical and violent stronghold in the Middle East will grow, export terror against American and Western targets around the world and against US allies in the Middle East, and undermine the stability of Muslim nations in the region and beyond. As for Iran, IS's current area of operation is found in the three countries most important to it: Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. IS threatens the leading position of the Shiites in Iraq, including the Shiite militias that are connected to Iran, the future of the Assad regime, and the Shiite community in Lebanon. The group threatens Iran's relationships and economic interests in Iraq and Syria. And if ultimately Iraq splits into two or three states, Iran, which is

also a country of minorities, is concerned that the split will spill over into its territory as well.

In early September 2014, the US administration presented the strategy it had formulated against IS. The administration seeks to stop the successful IS crusade in Iraq and Syria, gradually undermine its achievements, and first and foremost, liberate Mosul and Tikrit and remove the pressure on the Kurds. Later in the process, the goal is to eliminate the large stronghold built by the organization in Iraq and Syria, and finally, to destroy the group and remove the grave threat it presents. It is clear to the administration that a combination of military operations and political actions is needed to fight IS because recourse to only one channel will not be enough. It also realizes that it cannot achieve its goal without partners, and therefore seeks to build a broad coalition with Middle East countries as well as Western governments, which will contribute to the overall effort to stop IS and provide legitimacy for US actions. This contribution will include participation in airstrikes, provision of logistical services, training of units to operate against IS, and financial assistance.

In order to achieve these goals, the administration envisions three stages: (a) It plans to expand the airstrikes in Iraq and Syria and launch systematic attacks against IS targets with the goal of helping the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces retake areas seized by IS. (b) It intends to support the Iraqi

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security forces and moderate Syrian opposition by supplying weapons and equipment, sending some 1,600 advisers to Iraq, cooperating on intelligence, coordinating operations, and training 5,000 Syrian opposition members in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the coalition will work to reduce the flow of volunteers to IS and block its sources of funding. (c) The longest and most difficult stage will be reducing the organization's strongholds until it is eliminated. At the same time, the United States will work to protect itself and its allies against IS attacks. The administration estimates that the entire operation could take about three years.[11]

However, there are serious shortcomings in these military and political courses of action. With the military approach, it is totally clear that the Iraqi security forces in their current state, the moderate Syrian opposition, and in fact, the Assad regime as well, are not able to cope with IS by themselves,

either in terms of their operational training or the weapons at their disposal. However, after the trauma of military intervention in Iraq, the US government is not prepared to launch extensive ground operations there – except perhaps limited operations by special forces – or in Syria.

There are at least two problems with this method of operation. One is that airstrikes, no matter how successful, are unlikely to erode IS gains sufficiently. While airstrikes will cause losses and damage to IS, the organization does not present clear targets for attack; its forces are mixed in with the local population and it is difficult to distinguish between them, particularly in densely populated cities; and effective strikes require establishment of a comprehensive intelligence system as a basis for planning.[12] The IDF learned in Gaza that airstrikes alone are not effective enough to destroy a terrorist organization whose base is in a large urban space. The airstrikes in Iraq and Syria that began in August 2014 were carried out by the air forces of the United States and Western and Arab countries. Thus far, they have helped restore the strategic dam near Mosul and several cities and villages on the edge of the Kurdish enclave to the Kurdish militia and prevented the city of Erbil from falling into the hands of the Islamic State. This is a significant achievement, but it does not change the general picture of IS control of large parts of Iraq and Syria, especially since during the same period, the group took over an important air base in Syria and later scored further gains in Syria near the border with Turkey.

The limitations on the effectiveness of the airstrikes prompted General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to say that if they are not effective enough, he would not rule out the possibility of recommending sending troops into a ground operation, though this counters President Obama's policy. Dempsey added that the main challenge will come when the Iraqi army and the Kurds attempt to push IS out of densely populated areas such as Mosul. In such cases, he might recommend sending US forces for special operations to help the Iraqi army, but in a different manner than the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003.[13] Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has noted that if there are US forces in Iraq, some of them may enter Syria.

The second problem is connected to the need to improve the capabilities of Iraqi security forces, as the United States has invested major efforts and financial resources in building forces that have not passed the test. It is clear that improving their capabilities would take many months, and more likely, years. The question is what the chances are that the Americans would

succeed now, when their troops are no longer in Iraq, where they failed in the past. Furthermore, the Iraqi army has not proven itself in defense, and it will have even more difficulty with offense.

The political approach is no less important, as the military moves, even if they are effective, will likely not be sufficient to undermine the Islamic State's strongholds. The main political direction is to drive a wedge between IS and the leaders of Sunni tribes and organizations in order to undermine their support and isolate the organization. However, this is currently not easy because of their hostility to the Shiite leadership. Even after the US government succeeded, apparently with Iran's agreement, in bringing about Maliki's ouster, the Sunnis will not rush to agree to return to the previous situation to fight IS. In exchange, they will likely demand the transfer of the central government's powers to the provinces and the redistribution of government powers, an agreement to distribute oil royalties, and perhaps even the establishment of an autonomous Sunni province like Kurdistan. To mobilize the Sunnis for the struggle against IS, the other armed ethnic militias will need to be weakened and the government security forces strengthened. However, this will be a formidable challenge because the ethnic groups do not trust the security forces and will refuse to disband the militias or subordinate them to the central government.[14] In other words, the key to confronting IS may be a significant political change in Iraq.

In addition, since the Islamic State operates in both Syria and Iraq and its activities in the two countries are linked, the US government believes that it must be dealt with in both states. However, a strike against IS power in Syria would strengthen the Assad regime, which the United States believes is illegitimate and should be ousted. Understanding this contradiction, the administration made it clear that it would not cooperate with the Assad regime and would examine ways to strengthen the moderate opposition until it can bring about the fall of the Assad regime.

Furthermore, in its search for allies to help it stop IS, the US government has not ruled out cooperation with Iran in Iraq as long as Iran takes a "constructive" approach, though in any case, it has rejected the possibility of military cooperation. In the meantime, Iran is already working to help the Iraqi government and the Shiite militias. It has transferred weapons, including fighter jets, to Iraq and sent officers from the Revolutionary Guards to assist in planning operations, organizing troops, and gathering intelligence. Iran's public position toward cooperation with the United States in Iraq was ambiguous, perhaps because of differences of opinion

among its top leaders, but it too has ruled out military cooperation. In practice, there may have been limited coordination between the United States and Iran in military activity against IS in northern Iraq. However, it was not direct and was done through the government of Iraq, and the US government has denied its existence.

The reluctance of both the United States and Iran to engage in significant cooperation on Iraq, in spite of their joint interest in stopping and eliminating the Islamic State, not only reflects the suspicion and hostility between them. It also stems from their contradictory strategic goals in both Iraq and Syria. The United States seeks to help shape the Iraqi regime as a moderate government connected to the United States and the West and free of Iranian influence, under which a real role will be given to Sunni and Kurdish representatives and in which the influence of the armed militias will be reduced. In addition, the United States continues to work toward the overthrow of the Assad regime. Iran, in contrast, seeks to increase its influence in Iraq and relies on the power of certain Shiite militias to ensure that the Shiites continue to be the leading element in the Iraqi leadership, eliminate US influence in Iraq, and ensure the survival of the Assad regime. In light of these contradictory objectives, and with Iran likely to be the party benefiting from restraint of IS – as this would increase its influence in Iraq and help stabilize the Assad regime – it is difficult to envision real cooperation between Iran and the United States.

Conclusion

The Islamic State's success thus far reflects a combination of strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, the group's fighting force is mobile, fast, and capable of surprise, combining the capabilities of a small army with the tactics of a terrorist organization, and is not highly vulnerable. Its successes on the ground have increased its power – in obtaining large financial resources, seizing weapons, attracting additional volunteers, and building a deterrent capability. It has succeeded in building a large base in both Iraq and Syria, two countries with weak governments that lack the ability to cope with IS by themselves. In this situation, their ability to curb the IS threat is largely dependent on outside aid, especially from the United States and Iran. However, even though the US government and the Iranian regime take the jihadi threat projected by IS very seriously, both have already stressed their reluctance, if not refusal, to intervene

militarily against the organization, and a political approach to isolate and eliminate IS is not simple.

On the other hand, IS is a small organization. Its ability to take over additional territories is limited, especially when they are strongholds of the Shiites and Kurds in Iraq or the Assad regime in Syria, and at the same time, establish its control over the territories it has conquered. Support for the organization by Sunni leaders in Iraq could also decline, especially if Shiite leaders succeed in cultivating true national reconciliation among themselves. And above all, the Islamic State's adversaries in Iraq, the Arab world, and especially the international arena are beginning to organize against it, and over time, they may provide an appropriate response.

During August 2014, the situation changed in a limited way on two fronts. One is that the United States and other countries began airstrikes in Iraq, which helped transfer control of the strategic Mosul dam from the Islamic State to the Kurds and reduce the pressure on the Kurdish enclave. The second was that Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki was ousted, under US pressure and with Iran's agreement, and the US government hopes that the new government in Iraq will be more willing to reconcile with the Sunnis. However, these are limited changes that do not materially alter the situation, and it is still too early to judge how much it will change.

Nevertheless, it is more likely that in the future, the scales will tip toward the Islamic State's weaknesses, and not its strengths. Not only is IS a small organization; it does not reflect a major force in the Muslim world, and presumably the large majority of Muslims have reservations about its approach and doctrine and thus its potential to fulfill its vision of an Islamic state is not great. Yet even so, it is likely that the process of restraining IS will be prolonged and that the organization will not disappear quickly.

What is the significance for Israel? In principle, the Islamic State sees Israel as a declared enemy of the highest order, but for now, Israel is low on the IS list of priorities, since it is busy with its battles in Iraq and Syria and establishing the caliphate. However, the threat to Israel could expand in the future once the organization is freer of its internal struggles, and this could translate into the export of terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets; a military threat from the border with Syria; a threat to the regime in Jordan, whose stability is an important Israeli interest; an increased threat of terrorism from Sinai; or an attempt to infiltrate the Palestinian arena.

Notes

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