

Conclusion

Above and Below the Surface of the Islamic State

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The volatile turbulence marking the Middle East since 2011 is the backdrop to the rise of the Islamic State and the context for its current vitality. The unstable state of affairs makes it impossible at this point to assess the Islamic State's historical importance and its long term ability to expand or even survive. Moreover, its singular nature and its stated ambitions defy a precise definition. Is this a multi-dimensional terror organization? Is it a religious-terrorist state entity? Or, perhaps, is it a mixed breed that intends on becoming a supra-national empire? One way or the other, it seems that the Islamic State is a phenomenon that does not fit the conventional definition of a non-state actor, and one that has succeeded in creating global repercussions that magnify its size and influence well beyond its actual scope and power.

Characteristics

The Islamic State is in essence an entity that defiantly decries the civilized world and its values. Its actions flout norms that have been institutionalized in the world over recent decades, including those relating to the laws of war, treatment of occupied populations and captives, protection of women's rights, avoidance of harm to children, and non-use of children as combatants. The Islamic State also challenges the established order within the global jihad camp headed by al-Qaeda, the organization from which it originally sprang. Its decision to establish an Islamic caliphate and crown Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph, without receiving the approval of senior Muslim clerics, essentially denied their religious authority and provoked all the rulers

and leaders of the Muslim world, who automatically, as it were, became the subjects of the caliph.

With impressive determination and efficiency, the Islamic State exploited the disintegrating Arab regimes that had lost their legitimacy to continue to rule their countries and local populations. Against a backdrop of regional upheaval, the Islamic State conquered areas within the borders of certain states in the region and established its sovereignty in these territories. At the same time, it undermined the regional order by nullifying the borders defined in the Sykes-Picot agreement, and the erased border between Syria and Iraq signals the Islamic State's intention to continue in this vein and establish its rule in other failed states that suffer from chronic instability, such as Yemen and Libya. Indeed, it has extended its tentacles to other parts of Africa, the Caucasus, and Southern Asia. At the same time, the Islamic State, which successfully exploited the geopolitical state of affairs, is not only a product of regional volatility but is also an engine that furthers and fashions the instability.

The Islamic State believes in the imposition of Salafist Islam through violent jihad; it is in the name of this jihad that it rationalizes and justifies its actions. The Salafi jihadist ideology strives to destroy all other ideologies and ways of life, as the negation of the other lies at its root. This includes even Muslims – both Shiites and also Sunnis – who do not submit to it, and who are thus defined as infidels; it is of course all the more true of members of other religions, especially non-Muslim minorities. The vilification of rivals has become a central policy for the Islamic State, whereby any deviation from a pure and rigid form of Salafist Islam is considered straying off the correct path. The creation of this model by instilling fear and terror among its rivals as well as its supporters and subjects imparts an image of power to the Islamic State and casts it as a successful, unrelenting entity, in contrast to its rivals within and outside the Salafi jihadist camp. What it spouts as ethical superiority justifies in the eyes of its adherents acts such as ethnic cleansing, murder of civilians, rape, looting, robbery, and destruction of antiquities and historical sites.

Despite the Islamic State being in essence a fundamentalist Islamic entity striving to reestablish the Islamic rule of yore in accordance with the Salafist model, its leaders do not hesitate to use modern means to promote their goals. Their operatives make maximal use of technology and diverse forms of modern media. They document their brutality and distribute this

testimony for everyone to see on social media, which impacts on millions of terrified viewers and enthused supporters throughout the world. The purpose of such conduct is to express open disdain and absolute rejection for the values of the world of the other, as well as to present Islamic State values as the proper alternative that must be imposed throughout the world.

How real and extensive is the threat the Islamic State represents? Whom does it endanger, and to what degree? In international discourse, it is difficult to find many people who would dispute that the Islamic State represents a clear danger to the stability of the Middle East, and even beyond that – to the world order. However, is the Islamic State a passing phenomenon, or an enduring Salafi jihadist state entity that will likely continue to foment unrest? Will it be capable of spreading beyond the regions it currently controls, even to non-Sunni areas, or has it, perhaps, exhausted its ability to expand? The results of the wars in Syria, Iraq, and maybe even Libya will serve as tests for assessing its strength and vitality.

Another major question regards the caliph and caliphate. A significant part of the Islamic State's power rests on its ability to preserve the status of the caliph, and to validate its audacity to establish a caliphate. Success in this regard has enabled it to recruit the masses and offer them an existing alternative regime with an attractive Islamic *sharia*-based character. The fate of the caliph himself, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is closely intertwined with the caliphate's prospects for survival. His self-identification with the caliphate project contributed inestimably to the building of a powerful and authentic image for the Islamic State in the eyes of its supporters. This image depicts the caliph as the shepherd leading his flock and restoring the Islamic nation to its purest and most glorious state.

The image of the chosen caliph also plays a crucial role on the strategic-military level, as it helps present and implement the lofty vision, while providing support for the bravado required in making the vision a reality. Since declaring the establishment of the caliphate, al-Baghdadi has escaped a number of assassination attempts, after becoming the major target of all his enemies that came together in the Western-Arab coalition against the Islamic State. The basic assumption is that sooner or later, al-Baghdadi will be taken out of the game, as was his predecessor heading the Salafi jihadist camp, Osama Bin Laden. Consequently, it is important to understand to what degree the concept of the Islamic State depends on the existence and prevalence of al-Baghdadi the caliph, and to assess the consequences of

his removal. This question is different from the general question of the effectiveness and justification of assassinating heads of terror entities, as the Islamic State has its own particular properties.

Observations

At the time of this writing, approximately a year and a half after the announcement of the establishment of the caliphate, the Islamic State finds itself in relatively stable condition. Its control over territories conquered in Syria and Iraq, which are administrated from regime centers in Raqqa and Mosul, has been maintained despite some territorial changes resulting from various achievements and failures on the battlefield. The Islamic State has deepened its hold over the population under its rule by establishing a mechanism of governance, and it has established an economic infrastructure for financing its operations. Fighting its enemies in Syria and Iraq, including the US-led international coalition and the coalition established by Russia, has hurt it but has not weakened it to the point of collapse. Moreover, the Islamic State has refrained from fighting in areas populated by communities that are not Sunni, and it has yet to be tested in fighting against an army of significant size. The loss of commanders from its ranks has not caused system-wide shock, due to the decentralized structure that gives independence to lower command ranks. Moreover, despite the losses, a large number of fighters, including foreign volunteers, still seek to join its ranks.

The challenge is, therefore, to identify ways of weakening the Islamic State and bringing about its decline. Political recommendations promoting these goals must be based on a number of crucial observations.

First, this is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is not limited purely to the military realm. It is a phenomenon with roots entrenched deep within the societies from which it sprang, and it represents the ongoing failures of local Middle East politics. It is vital to fight it also with an understanding of the distress of the people who chose to adopt its precepts, whether regional residents or foreign volunteers. Beyond this, it would be a mistake to relate to the Islamic State as a military framework that works only with kinetic tools. Its power stems in large measure from a blurring of the boundaries between fighting and propaganda, between recruitment of fighters and recruitment of the masses.

Second, while treating the phenomenon as a framework built around a single, unified idea, careful attention must be paid to the differences and

distinct modes of expression and nuances that it embodies. In other words, the different spheres in which the Islamic State operates possess different characteristics. First and foremost, this is true of the territories where the Islamic State has established de facto rule – portions of Iraq and Syria. Thus, for example, the social fabric in Iraq – where there is a Shiite majority and a Sunni minority that had the ruling power taken from it with no suitable compensation, a minority that is accustomed to violent inter-sectoral, as well as intra-sectoral, conflict – is quite distinct from the dynamic in Syria, where an Alawite minority ruled over a Sunni majority for over 40 years. Moreover, as to consequences for the expansion of the Islamic State, it is difficult to equate between the destabilization of Lebanon – with its sectorial society and its unique political balance – and the threat to the stability of Sunni Jordan, which has signed a peace treaty with Israel and enjoys American support. Another example of essential distinctions regards Islamic State actions against Iran and Saudi Arabia. These countries have different and opposing interests, and only an appropriately tailored plan of international action that takes into account specific geopolitical considerations and particular interests can lead to coordinated action to eradicate the threat.

Third, one of the dangerous side effects of the panic created by the Islamic State is the whitewashing of crimes and problematic actions perpetrated by other regimes and terror groups. Such groups have ruthlessly and violently murdered thousands of innocent civilians throughout the world, both before and after the Islamic State was founded. Thus, al-Qaeda and its partner the al-Nusra Front are sometimes presented as “moderate” Salafi jihadist organizations that are more pragmatic and thus worthy as potential partners for fighting the Islamic State. The campaign against the Islamic State has “redeemed” Hezbollah, designated as a terror organization; the Shiite militias in Iraq, partners in the war on terror alongside the regimes of Bashar al-Assad – responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of his own people; and Iran, which more and more is perceived as a stabilizing factor in the Middle East. Despite the problem of perception, it must be remembered that in the fight against the Islamic State, a common enemy does not necessarily turn rivals into allies.

Based on these distinctions, the challenge is to formulate and implement a plan of action that will strike a balance among the various interests, and be based on an understanding that the nature and values of the Islamic State do not allow any compromise or agreement with it. It is clear that it will

always act as a subversive element that forcibly disseminates its destructive ideology throughout the world. Thus, defeating it to deny its survival and proliferation are an historic necessity. This challenge is difficult to implement, but imperative.

A key question, which may be instructive regarding future trends in the struggle against the Islamic State, is to what extent Western countries will manage to overcome the stinging memories of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In recent years, there has been a noticeable aversion among Western countries to direct military involvement in Arab and Muslim countries, including action against the Islamic State. Such reservations are understandable from an historical perspective. There exists a certain fatigue, accompanied by fear of being dragged into another Middle East war with high costs in life and treasure. In addition, the military involvement of Western forces in Muslim countries may play into the hands of the Islamic State, which will depict the Western forces as invaders who occupy and despoil Islamic lands and must therefore be fought by all Muslims.

However, all of these reservations are expected to change in light of the continued outrages perpetrated by the Islamic State – in its territory and throughout the world. Many countries, including Western – especially European – states are currently compelled to receive hundreds of thousands of refugees from the civil wars in the Middle East, some fleeing Islamic State barbarity. Syria is the main but not only example of a country experiencing a combination of a cruel, prolonged civil war alongside Islamic State terror against civilians. This has led to the migration of approximately half of the country's population to neighboring countries and Europe. This flow of migrants will change the demographic balance in Europe, which in turn will further intensify the already existing tensions between “old” residents of the European countries and the new and old Muslim immigrants, which may awaken extremist movements on the radical right. Developments in this direction may prove to be far worse than terror attacks, as dramatic and deadly as they are (such as the attack in Paris on November 13, 2015). Furthermore, the West has a clear interest in weakening the Islamic State to prevent a repeat of the phenomenon that took place with the “Afghan alumni” – but this time by “jihad alumni” in Syria and Iraq. In the past, some such alumni have returned to their countries of origin and raised the level of violence there; some migrated to other war regions; others founded

and operated ad hoc terror cells and networks in the West; the highly skilled fighters among them were accepted into the ranks of al-Qaeda.

Another significant unfolding event, which provides an example of the unexpected turns that characterize the volatile era in the Middle East, is Russia's decision to intervene militarily in Syria, at the head of a coalition that includes Iran, the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and the Shiite forces in Iraq. This action is expected to impact on developments in the Syrian arena and beyond. Will this intervention save the Assad regime? Will it lead to solidifying its control only over the "vital" portions of Syria, or will it result in the re-conquest of the rest of the country currently ruled by Salafi jihadist organizations, including the territory now controlled by the Islamic State (and the end of its rule in Raqqa)? It is difficult to assess the results of this intervention and envision how Western states will react to the Russian involvement. Will they take significant steps toward military intervention, or work mainly through diplomatic channels to form a political-diplomatic settlement to stabilize the situation in Syria while dividing the country? Either way, a failure of the Western-Arab coalition in its war against Islamic State may result in making it stronger, and the Western-Arab coalition must be ready for such a scenario.

Recommendations

In the current age of turbulence and frequent change in the Middle East, more twists and turns are to be expected. Thus, for example, it is not impossible that countries of the region will experience further turmoil – including states whose regimes have thus far not collapsed. Such changes may not necessarily be connected directly with the Islamic State, but its influence on the development of such upheavals may be significant; it is certainly expected to attempt to exploit such events to promote its causes. Other unexpected turns of events may result from decisions of certain countries to change their policies regarding the Islamic State. For example, Western or Arab countries may become involved in Syria as a result of a major and highly lethal terror attack or exceptional action perpetrated against them.

The international community must thus accustom itself to the current Middle East zeitgeist – i.e., the undermining of the existing state order and the dissolution into individual communities – and develop flexibility regarding the state borders drawn in the region over the last century. The aspirations of various sectors in the Middle East can no longer be ignored, especially

considering that their frustration in large measure led to the deterioration of internal stability and the growth of phenomena such as the Islamic State. In the current regional reality, new arrangements should be considered, as well as the formulation of alternative frameworks that will suitably address the sentiments forming among the various communities. Thinking in this direction may make it easier to contain the spread of the Islamic State.

The campaign should capitalize on a set of inherent weaknesses of the Islamic State in order to defeat it. For example, the Islamic State has amassed a great many enemies, and the number is growing steadily – enemies hungry for revenge among the occupied populations and the minorities that have been murdered, robbed, and exiled (in the Middle East, the blood feud takes on special meaning); international coalitions with an ever-growing number of countries joining the common effort to defeat the Islamic State; and bitter internal enemies from the global jihadist camp who want to help defeat it. The abundance of enemies opens potential intelligence channels for recruitment and actions against the Islamic State on an operational level. Similarly, the repeated promises of the Islamic State for victory and continual progress toward realizing the vision of the caliphate within a short time frame can serve as fertile ground for exposing its failures and harming its image as a victor. The Islamic State's eschatological vision, which holds that the world is about to face the final battle to ensure the victory of Islamic State-led Islam, enables the depiction of the caliph as a deceptive false messiah dragging Islam along a catastrophic path that will end with his own death and the deaths of leaders and followers alike – with whoever survives almost certainly living out life as a convicted war criminal.

In practical terms, the key to success for the struggle against the Islamic State is the conduct of a joint military-ideological-public relations campaign, to be led by combined Western and Arab-Muslim forces. On the military plane, the strategic goal must be to stop the spread of the Islamic State and strike at it with a proactive policy that combines kinetic tools with soft power. While it is impossible to completely eliminate the phenomenon in the short term, it is certainly possible to quickly contain it within a limited sphere. The Islamic State's successes in conquering territory were the result of the avoidance of direct conflict with regular, strong armies in hostile regions, along with its arrangement in a decentralized structure that made the command chain less vital. Thus, regular forces composed of special units should be formed against it under international direction, while at the same

time, weak points and vital assets can be identified as future targets. This will help undermine the image of constant success and momentum that the Islamic State seeks to promote for itself.

Military action must be accompanied by the wielding of soft power. The Islamic State casts itself as a sovereign institution conducting itself as a state in all respects. This obligates the Islamic State's opponents to seek ways to undermine the foundations and influence of the alleged state. One possible way is to distance it from the oil reserves in its possession, and thus to significantly diminish its potential sources of income. On another level, an attempt can be made to reach the civilian population under Islamic State rule, as well as that under threat of being taken over, and provide them with alternative governance solutions in the areas of education, healthcare, welfare, employment, and other civilian realms. It will thus be possible to compete with the services offered by the Islamic State and puncture this critical image of a welfare provider. Taking a broader view, assistance should be given to threatened countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt to address their social distress and reduce the danger of recruitment of young people in these countries by Islamic State.

Regarding the Salafist jihadi camp, the absurd idea of cooperation with elements wrongly depicted as "pragmatic," such as al-Qaeda and its partners – including the al-Nusra Front and others – must be abandoned quickly. Their inclusion as allies in the defeat of the Islamic State will only lay foundations for tomorrow's disaster. Therefore, it is actually best to exploit the split within the Salafist jihadi camp in order to deepen the rivalry and violence between the Islamic State and its allies, and al-Qaeda and its partners. Such a policy will help harm these organizations from within and disrupt their ability to create momentum for future actions. Assuming that this will be a long, drawn out campaign, it is crucial to ensure that responses to short term challenges presented specifically by the Islamic State do not contradict the long term solutions required in the struggle against the Salafi jihadist camp as a whole, including the al-Qaeda camp.

The ideological, public relations campaign must reach the potential target audience for support and recruitment, on the basis of two main messages: first, undermining the image of success and momentum radiated by the Islamic State; second, depicting it as a deviant element within the Muslim world.

In order to subvert the Islamic State's image of success, the campaign against it must focus on exposing its failures. Thus, for example, the mass

exodus from Syria should be presented as the failure of the concept of *hijra*, which serves as a fundamental principle in al-Baghdadi's vision. This vision of *hijra* involves the caliphate centers in Syria and Iraq becoming magnets drawing in the believers. The emigration of millions of Muslims from Syria expresses their fear and revulsion of the Islamic State and its manner of conduct. Moreover, despite the relatively high number of foreign volunteers enlisting into the ranks of the Islamic State (which are compared in the West to the number of recruits drawn by the mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s), it is still a small fraction relative to the number of Muslims in the world and the potential recruitment from among them. The implication is that al-Baghdadi's vision of the mass enlistment of Muslims into the ranks of the Islamic State is ultimately a failure.

At the same time, it is vital to enlist state and religious leaderships in the Muslim world, and include them in efforts to prevent the hijacking of Islam by a radical, unauthorized entity leading it to disaster in the name of an Armageddon-like fantasy. It is within the power of leaders of the Muslim states to enlist their spiritual leaders – recognized authorities – in providing religious authority and validity to the exposure of the religious and legal deviance of Islamic State. They must come together for a joint effort with parallel elements in the West who have the ability, talents, and tools to create an effective public relations framework that will turn the Islamic State brand and symbols from desirable to abhorrent. One example of what can be the focus of a joint effort is the exposure of the *sharia* prohibition on mass civilian executions – of minorities, Western civilians, and Muslims – which can thereby undermine the Islamic State's trademark, beheadings. Great value is attributed to authoritative and influential proof that such actions are not in the category of Islamic practice and are opposed to the spirit of *sharia*. The masses must be exposed to a clear, unequivocal message: judgment without trial, beheadings, and parading the heads on the bodies of the victim are a forbidden perversion, with no acceptable basis in *sharia*, and as such, acts of heresy.

In the ideological-public relations realm, there should be intensification of processes already underway in accessible internet platforms. An effective plan of action can become an inclusive multinational framework that operates as part of the international Western-Arab coalition working against the Islamic State. Such a framework will incorporate skilled marketing campaign managers from the West and Arab world, combined with recognized *sharia*

authorities with standing in the Muslim world. This will create a counterweight of public relations arrays with messages tailored to an audience of young Muslims and Muslim converts, who see the Salafi jihadist interpretation as the undisputed and clear truth. These messages will be disseminated in a manner customized for the various target audiences, through the diverse formats of social media, guided by the use of the Islamic State's own methods against it. This is an ongoing challenge that will require constant attentiveness to changes underway in the methods and ideological messages of the Islamic State, enabling the development of an overall campaign against it that adjusts to changes within the various target audiences.

Finally, attention must be paid to the connection between Israel and the Islamic State phenomenon. At this stage, Israel does not represent a central element in the international struggle against the Islamic State. The relatively significant distance of Islamic State forces from Israel's borders and its regional standing position it as a contributing, but uninvolved, factor. Indeed, any involvement by Israel may discourage cooperation by some essential Muslim partners. Thus, the main activity for Israel regarding the Islamic State must be assisting the international coalition with intelligence sharing and at the same time focusing on basic preparations for future escalation vis-à-vis the Islamic state and its allies, and on concerns of destabilization of neighboring countries. This reflects, *inter alia*, a basic Israeli assumption that holds that the greatest threat to its security is the Iran-Assad-Hezbollah axis. Despite the many arguments supporting this claim, it is possible that this order of priorities will change as a result of dynamic developments in the region in general, and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. While the Iranian threat is familiar and plays out as part of the "old order," the potential future entry of the Islamic State into the arena likely to occur on one of Israel's borders may change the situation. Moreover, Iran and Hezbollah represent Shiite interests in the Middle East, and thus their influence on Palestinian society, and Arab society in Israel, is limited. The Islamic State, however, has already proven (though still on a small scale) that there exists potential support for its ideas among certain parts of this population, most of which is Sunni. This potential is most likely to play out more aggressively in the case of a violent escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Thus, Israel must prepare to meet the evils expected from the direction of the Islamic State – evils that may appear both within its borders and without.

