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One Year since the Establishment of the Islamic State:

Al-Baghdadi's Successful Gamble, Thus Far

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The Islamic State, now marking its first anniversary, is an autonomous entity controlling a considerable geographical area within the territory of Iraq and Syria, two countries of major importance in the Middle East. Assessing the first year of his tenure as caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi can crown his gamble a success, at least in the meantime.

Over the past year, al-Baghdadi has managed to survive a number of assassination attempts, and the Islamic State (IS) project has not collapsed, despite international pressure. Although the string of conquests that began following the establishment of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in April 2013 was halted, the Islamic State can still nonetheless claim some new territorial gains, for example Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. Despite the extensive casualties suffered by the Islamic State in those two countries, the flow of new recruits to its ranks has not stopped. According to reports published in the West, their number has grown steadily and already exceeds the overall number of volunteers who in the 1980s joined the ranks of the mujahidin in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet army.

The military action in Iraq and Syria by the international coalition against the Islamic State was manifested over the past year primarily in air strikes and consulting and training for Iraqi forces; it still has not resulted in the organization's defeat. Thus, the absence of significant achievements in this realm and the weakening of the international and inter-Arab coalition have allowed al-Baghdadi to maintain his image of success and resilience in the eyes of his supporters. This image has been reinforced by an aggressive media strategy, implemented in a centralized and sophisticated manner by Islamic State operatives, and in a decentralized manner by supporters around the world using a variety of social media outlets.

Al-Baghdadi has also succeeded in establishing his standing within the global jihad world following the coup d'état he staged through his self-appointment as caliph, which placed

him in a supreme position, above Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda. As a result of the split, different organizations and groups throughout the world declared their loyalty to the Islamic State in order to join its ranks as subordinate partners. Although the major groups belonging to al-Qaeda's network of alliances, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Somali Shabaab, Jabhat al-Nusra, and AQIS (al-Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent) did not switch alliances, other organizations such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in the Sinai Peninsula, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and groups in Afghanistan, the Caucasus, and the Philippines have already sworn allegiance to the Islamic State and to al-Baghdadi, the caliph.

Furthermore, the Islamic State has taken advantage of the anarchy and weakness of the central government in Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia in the wake of the Arab Spring, in order to send groups of trained fighters from its ranks to join local rebel groups and form effective military coalitions. After these forces established their control in large areas within their respective countries and set up government districts (*wilayat*) in the spirit and image of the Islamic State, they too swore allegiance and joined its ranks. In this manner, Libya, where the areas under the influence of the Islamic State continue to expand, serves the Islamic State as an arena for training and refuge, and in the future – in the event of the Islamic State's significant loss of control over its territory in Iraq and Syria – may serve as an alternative region of control.

During its second year in existence, the Islamic State can be expected to continue fighting its enemies. In Iraq, these include the Iraqi army, the popular Shiite militias, (al-Hashd al-Shaabi), and the Kurdish forces that are currently operating with the support of the international coalition forces and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. These forces will continue to work to liberate important areas captured by the Islamic State, most prominently the city of Mosul and parts of western Iraq. At the same time, the Islamic State will be influenced by developments in the civil war in Syria. If Assad's regime collapses, the Islamic State will attempt to seize control of central areas through a struggle with the different opposition forces operating within Syria, including Salafist jihadi elements such as Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates in the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition. If it succeeds, this will help establish its status as a significant regional actor. At the same time, it is extremely likely that such a situation would prompt a significant increase in the military activity of the international and inter-Arab coalition against the Islamic State aimed at its eradication, due to the implications stemming from its control over such a central region of the Middle East.

Another major issue that may impact on the future of the Islamic State is a concern that has troubled the leaders and security services of Western nations regarding the Islamic State's intentions to launch terror attacks within their territory. Most of the attacks that have taken place thus far in Europe, North America, and Australia have been based on

the local initiative of individuals or pairs of activists acting out of identification with the Islamic State, and in some cases, in its name, without having actually been sent by its commanders or directly operating under their auspices. Still, there is concern that the Islamic State could use international terrorism to avenge the activities of the coalition operating against it, and undermine its unity and the mobilization against IS. The fact that many young Westerners, particularly Europeans, have already made their way to Syria and Iraq, been trained in terrorist and guerrilla warfare, gained combat experience in the course of the fighting, and been the subject of Salafist jihadi indoctrination threatens to manifest itself in Western countries in future terrorist activity either inspired or dispatched by the Islamic State.

The strategic plan drawn up by General John Allen, the special US presidential envoy to the international and inter-Arab coalition with the aim of halting the expansion of the Islamic State and bringing about its defeat, can be expected to present it with a challenge that is much more serious and complex than what confronted it during its first year in existence. The plan includes five primary efforts: military activity aimed at reducing the territory controlled by the Islamic State in order to sever the territorial contiguity; action aimed at cutting off the Islamic State from economic, financial, and natural resources; the creation of protected areas and safe havens for local populations, to enable them to lead regular daily lives; a halt to the flow of foreign fighters arriving in Syria, primarily via the Turkish border; and concerted activity, both physical and rhetorical, against the dissemination of the Islamic State message and propaganda around the world. The campaign must be carried out by a broad international coalition that includes Muslim elements.

The terrorist attacks that were carried out last week in Tunisia, Kuwait, and France are sharp new indicators that the campaign to defeat the Islamic State can be expected to exact a heavy price in human casualties in different locations around the world, not only in Iraq and Syria. However, the fact that the ideology behind the Islamic State's activity is such a blatant challenge to the moral, social, and legal codes and norms of human society in the twenty-first century requires a massive effort toward the group's total defeat. If it is not stopped soon, we can expect to witness many similar atrocities in the years to come and the growth of Islamic State influence, particularly among Salafist groups.

Israel, which monitors vigilantly the events along its borders and regards itself as a part of the international effort against the Islamic State, must take into account that it too will be a future target of Islamic State attacks or attacks by Islamic State partners, both along its borders, and abroad. Therefore, it must assist and support, to the best of its ability, the international efforts to defeat the Islamic State, and take preemptive intelligence and operational measures to thwart any potential attacks aimed at Israel and Israeli citizens, and strike those behind the attacks when they occur.