The Islamic State Challenge: How Severe Is It?

Amos Yadlin

In June 2014, after crushing five divisions of the Iraqi army trained and equipped by the United States, a few thousand Islamic State soldiers conquered the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. This unexpected development, which took place before the name "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" was replaced by "Islamic State" as an expression of a material change in the organization's strategy and goals, prompted the sense that a new militarily powerful and threatening enemy had arisen. The perception of a threat was also due to the barbaric fighting methods employed by Islamic State forces. The extensive and expert use of the social networks to disseminate horrifying images – kidnapping, beheading, burning prisoners alive, selling people into slavery, human trafficking, mass execution using a variety of cruel methods, and destruction of civil infrastructure and historical cultural treasures – greatly contributed to the fear, and to the belief that the Islamic State heads the list of threats to the West and Israel.

In the summer and fall of 2014, it appeared that the Islamic State was altering the balance of threats and alliances in the Middle East. It made al-Qaeda – the organization that was its original incarnation – look moderate. It positioned Iran as a country playing a stabilizing role, and even brought the United States back into the Middle East, only a few years after President Obama had withdrawn all American forces from Iraq, as he had promised during his presidential campaign. This reversal by the United States was supported by the American public – the same public that did not support intervention in Syria a year earlier, when Bashar al-Assad crossed the red line drawn by Obama and used chemical weapons against his own people. This support came only after the beheading of two American journalists by

Islamic State operatives, which brought the public in the United States to accept the campaign against the Islamic State with greater understanding.

I have already pointed out the tendency to overestimate the Islamic State's military and political power,[1] and I suggested removing "our hand off the siren button," at least in Israel. Analysis showed that the Islamic State posed four possible threats to Israel, all of which were unlikely to materialize: the Islamic State reaching the Golan Heights; its ideology taking root in the Palestinian territories; showcase terrorist attacks of the type committed by al-Qaeda; and a decision by the Islamic State to make the Kingdom of Jordan its main target. This final threat is the most significant theoretical possibility for Israel: Israel's longest border is with Jordan, and preventing the destabilization of Jordan is a leading Israeli interest.[2]

Consistent with this assessment, the Islamic State did not become a military threat to Israel in 2015. It consolidated its hold on areas in Iraq and Syria with strong Sunni populations, but was repelled wherever it waged war against communities and groups fighting for their country and their homes: the Kurds in northern Iraq, the Shiites on the outskirts of Baghdad (with Iranian and American aid), the Kurds in Kobani, and even the forces of Bashar al-Assad in areas where he invested sufficient combat energy. The Islamic State's efforts to expand into the heart of Iraq, Jordan, and Damascus have been unsuccessful. Its forces have repeatedly seized Sunni areas, such as Ramadi and Fallujah in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria, but its attempts to advance into the Shiite and Kurdish parts of Iraq encountered strong local opposition that brought their progress to a halt. The fears that the Islamic State would conquer the capital of Baghdad and take over all of Iraq also proved at an early stage to be unfounded. This likely occurred in part due to fear of a military clash with the Shiite population in the city, the Shiite militias, and Iranian al-Quds forces – ultimately prompting the Islamic State to avoid any attempt to attack Baghdad.

Moreover, from a military perspective, the Islamic State's mode of operation is not groundbreaking. It relies on the use of vehicles carrying explosives driven by suicide bombers timed to explode simultaneously, lightly armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons, and automatic weapons fire. Its attempts to use heavier and more sophisticated weapons captured in battle have not led to significant battlefield achievements. On the other hand, the use of light weapons has made the Islamic State forces highly mobile on the advanced road system in Syria and Iraq. It has thereby acquired the ability to

concentrate forces quickly and surprise remote enemies. Still, these tactics and tools are not suitable for fighting a modern Western army, such as the US army or the IDF, which have reconnaissance-based air forces and for which the Islamic State's vehicles are relatively easy prey. In addition, the battle training of most of the Islamic State's soldiers and its decentralized command and control structure emerged from guerrilla warfare in an urban environment in Syria and Iraq and are unsuitable for a large scale conventional campaign against a country like Jordan, and certainly against Israel.

The main reason for the Islamic State's successes on the battlefield against the Iraqi army in the northwest of the country in territories with Sunni populations is that the units of the Iraqi army are composed mostly of Shiite soldiers who refused to defend territory populated by Sunnis and therefore abandoned the battlefield. The claims of global expansion by the Islamic State beyond Syria and Iraq to Libya, Nigeria, Afghanistan, and the Sinai Peninsula also require clarification. This alleged "expansion" consists mostly of declarations of loyalty by local terrorist organizations, whose activity and targets are primarily restricted to a defined and limited area.

Against this background, the question arises why, despite the Islamic State's limited military capabilities, it is still of such great concern among Middle East countries, the European Union, Russia, and the United States. The answer lies in the non-military aspects of the Islamic State's actions. In other words, it has become patently clear that the Islamic State is a much wider phenomenon than its territorial delineation and state structure established in northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq. Rather, the Islamic State comprises four principal dimensions: it is a state; it is a collection of terrorist organizations from many places in the world, such as Sinai and Libya, that have pledged loyalty to it; it is a global terror entity that attacks in Paris and brings down a Russian airplane; and above all it is an extremist religious ideology that is spreading rapidly and wielding increasing influence on the internet and the social media. Thus beyond its military activity, the Islamic State is defined by its religious and ideological messages, the media tools it uses to disseminate these messages, and its psychological effect, including fear, aroused by its brutal acts against people and property.

The regional upheaval, which began with the so-called Arab Spring, reflected the scope and depth of the tension prevailing for decades between the public in Arab countries and the respective regimes. The chain of events that succeeded this upheaval reflected the height of the growing search for

a new comprehensive ideological framework in the Arab world. Both the pan-Arab national ideology and the socialist-Communist ideology lost their attractiveness at the end of the twentieth century, and no longer serve as a political and value lodestone for Arab societies. The democratic-liberal-capitalist idea gave rise to disillusionment in the early twenty-first century, as did the political Islam advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood, which momentarily seemed to offer a viable alternative solution. The social-economic-political crisis has escalated, and the public, especially young people, has continued its search for a new guiding light. Salafi jihadist Islam offered a new-old idea of an Islamic caliphate existing in accordance with *sharia* law. This is the background for the insight and anxiety prevailing in the Middle East and beyond, i.e., that even if the Islamic State is stopped on the battlefield, the ideology it promotes will continue to stoke the social and political fire and agitate for violent change.

The Islamic State's organic ideology and its willingness to sacrifice in the name of jihad are a form of soft power that can be spread through the internet and the social networks. In this way, it threatens the stability of social structures and regimes in Arab countries. This threat can be realized through terrorist actions that will destabilize the status quo countries politically, socially, and economically, or through local popular revolutions inspired by the Islamic State.

An Islamic revolution and a military territorial threat are not realistic scenarios for European countries. On the other hand, the possibility exists of a wave of terrorism in European countries housing large Muslim populations. The likelihood of this scenario – and the accompanying fear of its realization – has grown given the possibility that citizens of those countries who left to fight in the ranks of the Islamic State will return to their home countries with battle experience and a heavy ideological payload calling on them to take action in the name of jihad. The European Union is having difficulty combating the problem of the foreign fighters, mainly due to legal, cultural, and political restrictions.

In contrast to Europe, the United States and Israel are better protected against the Islamic State, in part because of geographical factors. The United States is further from the Islamic State's region of activity, and Israel's borders are closed and defended. The composition of the two countries' populations, their immigration laws, and the fewer restrictions on their freedom of action in the name of "political correctness" – a principle that makes it very difficult

for European countries to cope with Islamic extremism in general, and with its manifestation in their territory in particular – make its easier for the United States and Israel to deal with the challenges posed by the Islamic State. Moreover, there is extremely limited support for the Islamic State among Arab citizens of Israel. While the number of Muslim citizens of Israel is the same as in the UK, the extent of terrorist attacks carried out in Israel in the name of Salafi jihadism, and the force of the rhetoric supporting jihad ideas, are at a much lower level that what has prevailed in European democracies in recent years. Actually, rather than a direct threat, the United States and Israel regard the Islamic State as an indirect threat – one that results from the threat it poses to the stability, and perhaps to the very survival, of the Arab countries having common interests with the US and Israel, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states.

Iran, Turkey, and even Russia are more vulnerable to the threat posed by the Islamic State than Israel and the United States. The Islamic State regards Shiites in general as heretics, and Iran as an enemy country. Iranian forces are also the main factor in conflict with the Islamic State forces in Tikrit and Baghdad. Furthermore, Iran, which regards the continued existence of the Assad regime in Syria as a strategic asset, is expected to continue and even extend its involvement in the ground battles against the Islamic State, whether directly or through Hezbollah, its proxy in Syria and Lebanon.

For a long time Turkey turned a blind eye to the movement of jihad forces from its territory into Syria, until a wave of terrorist attacks began in Turkey in 2015 and the Islamic State derided Turkish President Erdogan as a heretic. Russia, which has a large Sunni Muslim minority that supplies many of the recruits to the Russian army, regards the Islamic State as an important enemy for several reasons: the Islamic State directly threatens Assad's Syria, a Russian ally, and also threatens Russia itself and that of the countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, which are considered Russia's sphere of influence. Clear evidence of this Russian attitude can be found in President Putin's decision to send air force units, air defense weapons, cruise missiles, and special ground forces from Russia to Syria. In effect, Russia has been directly involved militarily in fighting the Islamic State since October 2015.

If the threat posed by the Islamic State is so substantial and concerns so many countries, why has no significant solution been devised until now, and why has the Islamic State not yet been pushed back or defeated

on the battlefield? In addition, why has the "broadest coalition in history" formed against the Islamic State, led by the United States – 64 countries, supported from outside by additional countries, including Israel and even Iran, as well as by non-state players, including the Jabhat al-Nusra Syrian opposition militia – not dealt successfully with it, and contained or defeated it?[3] This question does not refer to the eradication of Salafi jihad Islam as an ideology, or to fighting against a terrorist organization that has no strong organizational structure or control of a defined territory, such as al-Qaeda. On the contrary – what is involved is warfare against an entity in control of a defined territory, and which has created a state framework in it, maintains a regular government structure, operates courts and municipalities, produces oil from the territories it has conquered as its main source of income, and takes advantage of the area's topography for modern warfare. The armies of the West, Turkey, Jordan, and even Russia were designed for fighting against countries. The difficulty involved in fighting against an asymmetric enemy, however, is less valid for the Islamic State.

The reason why the Islamic State has not yet been defeated, despite being surrounded by countries that regard it as a threat, is that not a single one of the countries in the coalition against it regards it as the greatest threat to its national security. Turkey is more concerned about the Kurds attaining autonomy in northern Syria and the effect this would have on the national aspirations of the Kurds in its territory, and about Assad's regime being left in power in Syria. Russia is concerned first and foremost about the extension of NATO to Ukraine and the possibility that the Assad regime will fall. The Iranian regime regards the hostility of the United States and Israel as the biggest threat to its survival. Saudi Arabia is mainly concerned about Iran's strategic ambitions, in the Gulf in particular and the Middle East in general.

Furthermore, the Islamic State enjoys complex relations with its neighbors, Syria and Turkey, which can be called "hostile-friendly." Indications of this include purchases of oil from the Islamic State by the Assad regime and by sources close to the government in Turkey, and the fact that most of Turkey's attack missions, and those of Russia in Syria, were conducted against the Kurds and the "moderate" rebels, respectively, while only a few were against the Islamic State. The Assad regime is also operating according to a similar set of priorities. Its efforts are directed primarily against the secular Syrian opposition – Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups – while it regards the Islamic State as a marginal factor in the civil war.

Another reason why the Islamic State has not yet been defeated is the American strategy. On the one hand, this strategy is ambitious: "to degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State." On the other hand, this has not been translated into the political will to put boots on the ground and to allocate the necessary resources – political, financial, and military.

The Islamic State also poses a threat to Israel, but substantially less than the threat represented by Iran, Hezbollah, what remains of Syria's conventional army, and even Hamas. The Islamic State does not play by the rules of the game, such as those that have been observed for years between terrorist groups and hostile countries and Israel, but its ability to attack Israel is limited to individual terrorist acts that do not constitute a systematic or strategic threat, and certainly not an existential one. In addition, the Islamic State's activity is accompanied by efforts to exploit opportunities and achieve surprise in isolated well planned operations (such as the one in Sheikh Zayed in Egypt in July 2015), but it lacks strategically important weapons, such as long range rockets, ballistic missiles, an air force, and air defense. This inferiority on the part of the Islamic State results from its lack of military or diplomatic support from a powerful country, in contrast to Hezbollah, for example, which receives sophisticated weaponry from Iran, Syria, and Russia.

Israel currently has two possible points of contact with the Islamic State – in the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. The declaration of loyalty by Wilayat Sinai (formerly Ansar Bait al-Maqdis) to the Islamic State gave the local organization in Sinai better organizational capabilities as a result of the flow of money and weapons. Although the forces of this terrorist organization threaten Israel to some extent, mainly the border communities, including Eilat, and traffic arteries leading to southern Israel, most of its attention has been devoted to the struggle against the Egyptian regime, which is deploying for a decisive military campaign against jihadi groups.

The presence of groups identifying with the Islamic State on the Golan front is negligible, compared with the presence of combatants from Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel organizations there. Israel's extensive intelligence familiarity with the border area, the IDF's precise and massive firepower, and the imposition of clear rules of the game for shooting into its territory have so far proved a correct policy. A takeover by Islamic State groups of the border area with Israel in the Golan Heights will require a revision of

the Israeli strategy, but Israel has the intelligence capabilities and means to cope with this challenge.

For its part, the Islamic State is currently devoting most of its attention and resources to fighting the Assad regime and its allies, meaning the Shiite axis, as well as competing entities in the area, including Jabhat al-Nusra, other rebel organizations, and local tribal groups. The relative quiet in the Golan Heights highlights the fact that the Islamic State does not perceive Israel as its main enemy; it regards the "heretical" Arab regimes as its main adversary. If the Islamic State decides to act against Israel, this will presumably occur only at a later stage. Meanwhile, one of the unintended benefits for Israel from the Islamic State's activity is the bloody cost it has exacted from Hezbollah fighting at the side of the Assad regime. This has a negative impact on the standing of Iran, which backs the Assad regime and Hezbollah, and whose senior commanders are also under attack in Syria.[4]

After many years of warfare against diverse formations of terrorist organizations, as well as against the armies of hostile countries, Israel has no reason to be excessively alarmed or frightened at the rise of another terrorist organization operating far from its borders without any powerful support. At the same time, intelligence resources should be devoted to monitoring the Islamic State's development in order to gain a profound understanding of how it operates, its strong and weak points, and what tactics it is liable to develop against modern armies. In turn, Israel should devise an appropriate operational response to these tactics; closely follow development of Islamic State advanced military capabilities, such as anti-aircraft weapons, air defense, and surface-to-surface missiles; and closely monitor the Syrian Golan Heights and the Palestinian territories in order to spot initial signs of its presence there, design an appropriate operational response, and execute it at the right time. In addition, Israel should continue supporting Jordan in its struggle against the Islamic State's efforts to expand its influence there. Consideration should also be given to less likely but no less dangerous developments, such as a possible scenario of the Islamic State establishing an extremist Sunni state bordering Israel. While there is little likelihood of this scenario materializing, primarily because of Iranian and Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria, in the unpredictable and unstable Middle East, even scenarios that appear unfeasible must be taken seriously.

Finally, Israel should be alert and identify opportunities emerging from the current situation. In this framework, all parties should realize that Israel is

an island of stability and clarity in the Middle East, and refute the allegation that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the main cause of instability in the region. The principal opportunity for Israel lies in the possibility of highlighting its status as a strategic asset and reliable ally for Western countries and the United States. Israel can help strengthen the Western coalition against the Islamic State and change the nature of its operations – particularly when Europe is faced with the massive flow of refugees, the United States is wary of any additional commitment in the Middle East, the Western coalition is stalled, and the Russian-Iranian coalition is occupied mainly with the question of the Assad regime's survival in Syria.

Israel has aerial reconnaissance capabilities and sophisticated cybernetic capabilities, as well as special forces of the highest quality. The ideological dimensions of the Islamic State and the content disseminated by its supporters on the social networks require the formation of a joint strategy by Israel and the countries with shared strategic interests to create cyber supremacy that will disrupt the Islamic State's ability to exploit the internet for the purpose of spreading dangerous messages. In addition, Israel is very familiar with the Middle East and can exert influence in this arena – assets likely to be extremely valuable to its allies in fighting the Islamic State.

In 2014 the Islamic State unexpectedly conquered northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria, and consolidated the caliphate as a highly appealing ideal for the Arab world and Muslims in general, and as a substantive Salafi jihadist threat to countries in the Middle East and beyond. The territorial expansion was halted in 2015, and two global coalitions were formed for the purpose of combating the Islamic State. Israel has an opportunity to contribute to this global struggle, with the goal that 2016 will mark the end of the Islamic State's geographical and ideological expansion.

Notes

1 Amos Yadlin, "ISIS no Existential Threat to Israel," *Ynet*, Israel Opinion, September 3, 2014, http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4567128,00.html.

2 Itai Asher, "Should Israel fear ISIS?" *Liberal*, September 15, 2014, http://goo.gl/iha7ic.

3 "President Obama: "We will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL," https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil.

4 "Two More Iranian Military Commanders Killed in Syria," *Fars News Iran*, October 13, 2015, http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940721001386.