

The Islamic State and Its Viability

Written by Mohammed Nuruzzaman

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MOHAMMED NURUZZAMAN, OCT 19 2014

The rise of the Islamic State (IS), previously called the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) or the ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), is more than an explosive event in the traditionally volatile Middle East region. Proclaimed on 29 June 2014, the IS, which captured and now controls huge swathes of territories straddling northwestern Iraq and eastern Syria, is in a state of war against the whole world. The self-styled caliph of the IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, made his first official speech the same day. He divided the whole world into two camps – ‘the camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of *kufr* (disbelief) and hypocrisy’ [1]. He put the Muslims and the mujahidin in the first camp; the Jews, the crusaders, and their allies (meaning America’s Arab allies), and the rest of the nations (including Shiite apostates in Iran and elsewhere) fill the second camp.

This new division of the world strictly on religious lines, coupled with IS’s lightning military offensives and rapid victories over the US-trained and equipped Iraqi defense forces, soon rang alarm bells of serious proportions in Tehran, Riyadh, and Washington, unleashing diplomatic realignments across the region and coordinated military actions to halt advances by IS militants. Erstwhile bitter rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia are closing their ranks to face the common IS threat (Reuters, 2014); Iran and the US are engaged in ‘give and take’ talks over the nuclear issue to devise a common strategy to stop the IS (CNBC, 2014a); and President Obama has forged a military coalition, consisting of Gulf Arab allies and some European states, to ‘degrade and destroy’ the IS (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2014a).

Surprisingly, the IS, despite mounting military pressures and financial sanctions (*The Huffington Post*, 2014a), continues to launch relentless military offensives to capture more urban centers and territories both in Iraq and Syria. But can it survive the US-led air strikes, and Iran-supported counter-attacks (Brannen, 2014) by the Iraqi and Syrian armies? This article cross-checks the military, economic, and political viability of the IS in long-term perspectives. It concludes that the IS is a reality and it is here to stay, whether we like it or not. Moreover, the IS looks to have set for gradual expansion of its territorial boundaries to ultimately redraw the political map of the Middle East.

What Explains the Rise of the IS?

Academics and journalists alike take the position that the former Nouri al-Maliki government was primarily culpable for the rise of the IS, while the sectarianism-driven civil war in Syria fed into the process (Phillips, 2014; *Kayaoğlu*, 2014). That the al-Maliki government was divisive, did not pursue the right policies to integrate the minority Sunnis in his government, and failed to create a sense of Iraqi national identity are true. But they fall short of accounting for the violent outbreak of armed conflict and capture of territories by the IS. Discriminatory socio-economic and political policies based on sectarian paranoia are nothing new in Iraq or, for that matter, in other Arab states in the Gulf (Nasr, 2007). The late Saddam Hussein’s anti-Shiites and anti-Kurds policies galvanized resistance to his regime, but not on such a dangerous scale as we currently see in Iraq. The Sunni-dominated regimes in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are also known for their anti-Shiite policies, but there is no IS-type violence brewing up there.

The Syrian civil war drew groups of so-called moderate and al-Qaeda fighters with political and financial backings from regional and global actors to topple President Bashar Al-Assad. It definitely created the ripe situations for the jihadists to train new recruits and master fighting skills, but a sudden turn to establish an Islamic caliphate by the IS, an al-Qaeda offshoot, taking advantage of a bloody civil war sounds somewhat anachronistic. In fact, there are other

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deeply rooted factors behind the emergence of the IS.

The rise of the IS boils down to the long lineage of Islamic movements for the revival of Muslim power and glory, lost after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire following WWI and the formal abolition of the Islamic Caliphate in 1924. The Islamists see historical conspiracies and secret dealings by the European powers, such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, to dominate and keep the Muslims under control. As for the actual decline of Muslim power, many scholars have identified deviation from *Sharia* (Qur'anic laws) as the principal reason, and a return to *Sharia*, they argue, is the only way to revive the glorious past, restore global leadership, and lead the world. This is the basic premise of operations by movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world, Jamaat-e-Islami in South Asia, and al-Qaeda on a global scale (Akberzade, 2012). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's IS, like its parent organization al-Qaeda, is also squarely premised on the same ground – a return to *Sharia* and the re-establishment of Islam as a global force. The mayhem in Iraq following the 2003 US invasion, the internecine Shiite-Sunni sectarian war, the al-Maliki government's anti-Sunni policies, and the Syrian civil war played contributory roles behind what is now the IS.

In his first speech at the Grand Mosque in Mosul soon after the proclamation of the IS, al-Baghdadi emphasized the need for establishing the *Sharia* and specifically said, "The establishment of a caliphate is an obligation. The religion cannot be in place unless the *Sharia* is established" (Al Jazeera, 2014a). And his division of the world, already mentioned in the introductory section, into the two opposing camps of Muslims and non-Muslims, implied a fight between the two camps, which is presumably being fought in Iraq and Syria currently. He wound up his speech with a clarion call to all Muslims to unite under the IS flag. The call for Muslim unity to uphold the IS has been mostly greeted with condemnations worldwide, barrages of air strikes by the US and allies, and ground military actions to finish off al-Baghdadi's IS.

Cross-checking the IS's Viability

The IS's rapid territorial gains in Iraq have brought it an unprecedented opportunity to declare itself a state. It is not, however, a state as it is understood in Western political parlance – a state with the four basic elements of territory, population, government, and sovereignty. The Westphalian system of states, that dates back to 1648, survives on the principles of autonomy and sovereignty for a people with a fixed territory. The IS, based on the idea of *khilafah* (Islamic political system), does not fit this category. Under the *khilafah*, all Muslims are members of a single community of believers called *ummah*, share a common feeling of solidarity called *assabiya*, and are ruled by a single caliph. The IS currently lacks all these qualities, though it aspires to establish a *khilafah* eventually.

The first issue of *Dabiq*, IS's official mouthpiece, mentioned above, carries the cover story 'The Return of Khilafah' and declares that "The time has come for the Ummah of Muhammad (sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew" (p. 7). This call resonates well with the feelings and aspirations of many young Muslims across the world who are flocking to join the IS fighting group. This is, however, the second time that a *khilafah* has been declared after the demolition of the Ottoman Empire. In 1924, Sherif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca, a descendent of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), proclaimed himself the caliph of all Muslims. He was later defeated by King Abdulaziz Al-Saud who, after conquering most of the Arabian Peninsula, founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Al-Baghdadi's IS may be viewed as a *de facto* state, at best, with territorial control from Syria's al-Raqqah province, to Mosul in northern Iraq, to Fallujah and Abu Ghraib in central Iraq – an area roughly equal to the size of Belgium; some eight million people live in IS territory (BBC, 2014a), it has a small army of up to 31,000 troops (BBC, 2014b), and provides a loose form of governance. There is no international recognition for the IS, nor has the IS sought such recognition. Basically, the IS remains an extra-legal reality on the ground with question marks on its future political, military, and economic survival.

Political Viability

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The biggest crisis the IS faces is the crisis of political legitimacy. Caliph al-Baghdadi's call on Muslims to join and support the IS has drawn fire from multiple jihadist organizations. Previously, al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri condemned the IS's brutal war tactics and its war on other rebel groups in Syria. Al-Zawahiri also formally disavowed IS in February this year. But he has neither publicly condemned nor stood by the declaration of Khilafah by al-Baghdadi. The Islamic Front, a loose alliance of rebel groups seeking to overthrow the Bashar Al-Assad government and establish Islamic rule in Syria, has rejected the declaration branding it as divisive and lacking any legitimacy (Al Jazeera, 2014b). At the same time, several al-Qaeda allies have broken ranks and declared allegiance to the IS. A section of the AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) led by the cleric Mamoun Hatem has openly pledged loyalty to the IS; the Afghan jihadi group Hezb-e-Islami was the next to support the IS; Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, an Egyptian jihadi group, maintains ties with the IS; Libyan jihadists grouped under the banner of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya are loyal to the IS (Berger, 2014). So increasingly the IS is expanding its network of allies and supporters posing a direct challenge to al-Qaeda and al-Zawahiri's leadership.

Outside the mainstream jihadi organizations, many Sunni religious scholars have denounced the IS. Qatar-based Egyptian Sunni leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi views the declaration of *khilafah* as a violation of Islamic law. He opined that the declaration was a misstep aimed to damage the cause of the Sunnis in Iraq and Syria. The Jordanian Salafi leader Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi labeled the IS group as 'deviant', a group out to damage the image of Islam (Al Jazeera, 2014c). Muslim religious leaders and scholars from different world regions, including the grand mufti of Egypt Sheikh Shawqi Allam and the mufti of Jerusalem and All of Palestine Sheikh Muhammad Ahmad Hussein, issued an open letter to al-Baghdadi in late September and unequivocally denounced the IS as "un-Islamic" (*The Huffington Post*, 2014b).

The political legitimacy crisis put aside, at the practical level, there is a dearth of information on the political structures and processes of the IS; there hardly exists any information on the administrative management and political institutions building by the IS to run state affairs. Even though the IS is not a state in the Westphalian sense, it cannot avoid building capacities in the areas of taxation, administration of justice, adjudication of disputes, and the creation of security provisions for the eight million people who live on its territory, willingly or under force. IS's official publication *Dabiq* carries no comprehensive stories on these important issues, though there are sporadic references to administrative and security issues at the local tribal council level. Issue number one of *Dabiq* (p. 13), after referring to a meeting with tribal representatives in Halab region in Syria, reports the benefits and services the IS provides to its people. [2] These include the return of property rights to their legal owners, spending money to provide people with required services, promotion of security for people under IS's control, ensuring food security for the people, a strict check on crimes, and the promotion of ties between the IS and its people.

Apparently the IS is active at the grass-roots, community level to look after the needs and services of people under its authority, but more complex issues of monetary management, justice system, administrative set-up, state institutions building, etc. seem to remain unaddressed. Lack of state capacity building in all these areas means a serious challenge to the political viability of the IS.

Military Viability

If political viability of the IS is in obscurity, its military survival is more or less secure. With some 30,000 battle-hardened, ruthless fighters and huge quantities of captured sophisticated weapons from the Iraqi and Syrian armies, the IS is so far proving itself militarily unbeatable. The tightening grip on Kobane, a Kurdish town on the Syria-Turkey border, countless air strikes to blunt IS fighters' advance notwithstanding, attests to this point. In the Iraqi province of Anbar, the IS fighters are reported to have scored a number of military victories between 1-7 October. A blog post by the Institute for the Study of War reports that most of the territory from Qaim on the Syrian border to Abu Ghraib, a town close to Baghdad International Airport, is now controlled by the IS fighters. This critical gain poses serious threats to Iraqi army supply lines and reinforcements in Anbar (Squires and Petrocine, 2014).

Behind the audacious military advances by the IS, there are two factors in play – the jihadi zeal of the IS fighters, and a defective US strategy to confront the IS. The IS fighters are fearless, driven, according to their belief, by a religious cause to fight and defeat the infidels, the enemies of Islam. They are ready to fight and die until the IS becomes a

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reality globally. The second issue of their magazine *Dabiq* refers to the story of the ark of Noah, which he, under God's instructions, made to avoid the cataclysmic flood that swiped away the disbelievers. Drawing on this story, the IS has developed its operational motto: "It's either the Islamic State or the flood". An extra boost for IS fighters' morale comes from unbelievable military successes of the Muslim armies against the Persian and Byzantine empires in the early period of Islam, to which the IS-controlled Al Hayat Media Center and website often refer to. In the Battle of Qadisiyyah, fought in 636, the Arab army of 30,000 men forced a crushing defeat on the Persian army of 200,000 fighters. Such stories well feed into the indomitable courage of the IS fighters to face their enemies.

The spirit of the IS fighters outmatches that of the Iraqi and Syrian armies and their supporters – Iran and the US-led coalition. While Iran is deeply involved in the fight against the IS, President Obama's two-pronged strategy of air operations and arming IS's opponents, according to critics, will fail to yield the desired results. In his speech to the American nation on 10 September 2014, Obama identified the IS as a threat to the broader Middle East region and loosely connected the threat to American security. "If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region — including to the United States", he emphasized. [3]

The critical question is how realistic is the president's strategy of air campaign against the IS. Obama may have been encouraged by the successes of NATO's 78-day strategic air campaign against the Serbian forces in the 1999 Kosovo War or the long air operations to topple the Muammar Gaddafi government in 2011, but the IS is a different enemy in terms of fighting skills, battlefield brutality, and possession of modern weaponry. The IS militants have also seen the inability of the Israeli air force to destroy Hamas military personnel and capacities in the latest war on Gaza fought during last July and August. Israel's air operations against Hamas, codenamed 'Operation Protective Edge', have clearly failed to destroy Hamas military might in Gaza, an area 41 miles long and eight miles wide (Haas, 2014). Contrarily, after the war, Hamas has emerged more popular and may emerge more powerful in future.

Former and current US defense and security officials have cast doubt about the success of Obama's anti-IS strategy. Robert Gates, former Secretary of Defense, said on ABC's *This Week* in mid-September that the president's goal to 'degrade and destroy' the IS was a 'very ambitious goal'. 'A realistic objective', he believes, is 'to try and push them out of Iraq and deny them a permanent foothold some place' (Press TV, 2014a). The poor performance of airstrikes on IS fighters and military facilities also led Obama to admit that the US intelligence officials underestimated the IS and overestimated the capacity of the Iraqi defense forces to fend off the IS militants (Fox News, 2014). Additionally, Obama's plan to train and equip the moderate Syrian forces to combat the IS forces has so far been a non-starter. Back in early September, the AFP (2014) circulated a story that the IS had signed a 'non-aggression' pact with moderate and Islamist rebels not to attack each other until the fall of the Bashar Al-Assad government. It simply undercut the success potential of Obama's anti-IS strategy further.

In a realistic analysis, the critical factors that eat into the success of Obama's current anti-IS strategy include the president's unwillingness to commit US ground troops required to drive out and regain territories from IS fighters, the reluctance of allies to offer boots on the ground to stave off the IS military onslaught, the capacity of the IS to turn odd situations to its favor, and so on. In the absence of a credible military strategy involving ground and air operations, the IS is most likely to broaden its military march and score more victories.

Economic Viability

Economically, the IS seems to be placed in a comfortable zone. It is believed to control assets worth US \$2 billion and has sizable cash reserves primarily accumulating from oil revenues in Iraq and Syria (CNBC, 2014b). Currently, the IS controls eight oil and gas fields in eastern Syria that produce between 300,000 and 700,000 barrels of oil a day. The IS sells heavy oil at a much reduced rate of \$26 to \$35 a barrel to Iraqi, Lebanese, and Turkish businessmen (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2014b). In the Iraqi territories under IS control, the picture is more the same. The June blitzkrieg ended up with the acquisition of seven Iraqi oil fields, with a production capacity of 80,000 barrels of oil a day, by the IS. The potential daily income from these oil fields amounts to \$8.4 million a day. Furthermore, the IS controls government food silos in northern and northwestern Iraq – the wheat producing belt of the country (Press TV, 2014b).

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The implications are clear. The IS has a sustainable economy at its disposal to mitigate the pressures of global economic sanctions. That is likely to give it an opportunity fund its continuous military operations and to win the support of its eight million Iraqis and Syrians by not taxing them too much. The IS may even dispense quality social and security services to the people to promote its image and neutralize internal opposition or rebellion. The provision of food security, the IS enjoys, further promises it a tranquil social order, at least for the time being.

Conclusion

The discussion and analysis in this short article underscore three important points: a) The IS is an outcome of complex factors ranging from pan-Islamic political movements to revive the *khilafah* to contemporary domestic and international policies in Iraq and the Middle East. b) In the past few months, the IS has emerged strong; it is a reality with its own territories carved out of Iraq and Syria. The failure of the US-led coalition and regional states to seriously weaken the IS may put more territories under its control. c) The IS operates from a strong military and economic base that apparently guarantees its survival on a long-term basis, though it has yet to deal with challenges to its political viability. The long-term survival of the IS means a new Middle East, a Middle East with redrawn state boundaries.

Notes

1. See the first issue of *Dabiq*, the official magazine of the IS, published in the Arabic month of Ramadan, 1435(H), at: https://ia902500.us.archive.org/24/items/dbq01_desktop_en/dbq01_desktop_en.pdf; accessed: 5 October 2014.
2. See, *Dabiq*, Issue No. 2, accessed at: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-2e280b3.pdf>, 04 October 2014.
3. Transcript of President Obama's speech can be accessed at: <http://www.npr.org/2014/09/10/347515100/transcript-president-obama-on-how-u-s-will-address-islamic-state>, 10 September 2014.

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