

The Islamic State – One Year On

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The Islamic State (IS) is now one year old! Since its proclamation in June 2014, the IS has passed through major turbulence – sometimes winning wars against Iraq and its allies and at times embracing defeats. Yet, it has well managed to survive the US airstrikes and Iran-supported Iraqi ground offensives, aimed at defeating, degrading or destroying it. The IS's territorial boundary has expanded off late after the takeover of Ramadi in Iraq and the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra in May 2015, while the loss of Tikrit last March and the defeat at Tal Abyad, a town in northern Syria, in mid-June at the hands of Kurdish forces added to its list of big military setbacks. Defying Western challenges, the IS has also successfully recruited, particularly through the effective use of social media, young fighters from more than 100 different countries of the world; and in the last one year its network of support and allegiance has spread out to Afghanistan in the East, to Nigeria in Southern Africa, and Egypt and Libya in Northern Africa.

Such developments, as rattling as they are, underscore a number of important points. Certainly, the IS can no longer be viewed as a passing phenomenon, an occurrence that would wither away someday. Rather, it has coalesced into a big entity with political, military and administrative control over almost half of Syria and Iraq. This entity looks certain to exist and may even expand in the future, unless it is coerced into total submission or at least denied a footprint in Iraq. In a similar way, the IS offers limited scope to entirely view it as a terrorist organization, despite its much condemned practices of suicide bombings, enslavement of non-Muslims, beheadings and other violations of human rights. It maintains an army capable of fighting both conventional and irregular warfare, has a hierarchical leadership structure with the caliph at the top that decides political issues within its territory, performs administrative tasks to facilitate day-to-day functions of people living on its territory and runs an oil economy that generates millions of dollars in revenues every month to support war efforts and to boost regular economic activities. In November 2014, the IS's Treasury Department minted and introduced its own currency to get rid of 'tyrannical monetary system' of the West. No known terrorist organization has ever possessed such essential state-like attributes.

Two serious questions are sure to peek into the minds of analysts and the general public alike: What has sustained the IS in the last one year, even in the face of tough military actions by the US-led international coalition and Iran-supported Shiite militia groups? And what does the survival and possible future expansion of the IS mean for the Middle East and the whole world, particularly the West? At a minimum, the IS, as it is apparent, has initiated the first step to redefine the post-World War I colonial political map of the Middle East and rebuild a new regional order with Islamic values and principles at its core, and subsequently to challenge the Western world, primarily in ideological terms. The challenge to the West promises a fierce clash between Islamic universalism and eurocentrism, a concept that underpins the West's claim to global superiority and dominance.

What Sustains the Islamic State?

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the IS on 29 June 2014. The proclamation was viewed with much dismay and no greetings, even by the majority of Muslims. The West, the Arab and the Muslim states mostly saw it as an anachronistic development, as a threat to the regional, if not the global, status quo. Al-Baghdadi's official speech, delivered the same day the IS was proclaimed, declared the return of the '*khilafah*', reminiscent of the historical Islamic caliphates, the last being the Ottoman Empire-based caliphate abolished exactly 90 years ago in early March 1924. He also called on all Muslims (other than the Shiites whom the IS, like the Saudi Wahhabis, considers

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'heretics') to rally behind the IS flag to establish the *khilafah* (Islamic political and moral order). Shiite Iran and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia felt threatened alike, as the IS, as a Sunni militant group, already conquered vast swathes of Iraq and Syria and seemed to be poised to strike at other regional states to enlarge its territorial expanse and jurisdiction.

The looming IS threats soon drew fire from three different sources – domestic, regional and global. The US-trained and equipped Iraqi army put up the initial resistance to what was then known as the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) but soon melted away in the face of the IS's summer 2014 blitzkrieg. That brought in the Shiite militia groups to counter and drive IS fighters away from conquered Iraqi territories, giving the fight a sectarian character. Post-Saddam Iraq's principal regional ally Iran made no mistake to dispatch arms and fighters, with top Iranian leaders publicly declaring their firm support for Iraq to beat back the IS. President Barack Obama declared a 'perpetual war' on the IS in early September 2014 to 'degrade and ultimately destroy' it without clearly elaborating how the IS had threatened the Americans and the American homeland. Why then is the IS growing bigger and surviving as a colossal entity?

What perhaps accounts more for the IS's continued existence is not its superior military skills to seize territories and fend off counter-offensives but the very weaknesses in the military strategies of Iraq and its allies, particularly the US. The Obama administration came forward with a half-hearted air campaign strategy with no commitment to deploy ground troops. Until now the US has limited its actions to an 'advise-and-assist' military role in the fight against the IS. The Iraqi military officials see the US air support as erratic and lawmakers accuse Washington of doing more for the Kurdish regional government at the cost of the rest of Iraq. There are controversies over the effectiveness of US air operations to track down and incapacitate the IS fighters as well. Senator John McCain revealed after the fall of Ramadi that two-thirds of US air force pilots return without dropping any ordnance on the IS military targets. He blamed slow decision-making up the chain of command. The Iraqis now view neighboring Iran as a more reliable partner. It is an open secret that the Iran-backed Shiite militia groups, such as the Badr Organization and the Kataib Hezbollah, are leading the charge to recapture IS-controlled Iraqi territories including Ramadi, with Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders advising and fighting on the front lines.

Iran has, of course, its own reasons to fight against the IS militants. Iranians of every rank and file – the reformists and the conservatives, the liberals and the hardliners – see the IS as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic itself and the so-called Shiite Crescent stretching from Beirut to Tehran via Damascus and Baghdad. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif underscored this point during his August 2014 visit to Iraq when he said: 'Iran regards Iraqi security as its own'. The Revolutionary Guards have defended its involvements in Iraq and Syria as a defensive and preemptive action on the ground that: "If we do not fight them [the IS and other Sunni rebels] in Damascus, we have to fight them back in the streets of Tehran". In effect, it sounds like an extended concept of security justified on the claim that Iran's real security lies in defending Iraq and Syria. In a recent interview with IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and a Revolutionary Guards veteran, identified three red lines in dealing with the IS in Iraq: threats against Baghdad, attack on the Shiite holy shrines, and any IS advance towards the Iranian borders.

Iran's involvements in Iraq are likely to further intensify if the IS crosses the red lines, but Tehran has limits to its own power: it is reeling under crippling Western sanctions with the Rouhani government trying to negotiate a way out of the decade-old nuclear standoff with the US; the Iranian armed forces are stretched too thin in Syria as well as in Iraq; and the recent emergence of a Saudi-led Sunni alliance to fight the Iran-backed Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen.

What is more alarming for Tehran is the evolving Sunni view of Shiite Iran. Most Sunnis in the Gulf Arab states view Iran's role as promoting a Shiite agenda in Iraq, Syria and Yemen that further constrains Iran's anti-IS role. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies save Oman project Iran and its allies as sources of grave threats, threats that are considered more perilous than the IS –the jihadist group allegedly created and funded by US friends and allies in the Middle East as a counterweight to Hezbollah. The Gulf monarchies are so preoccupied with Iran's recent surge in influence in Iraq and Syria that they are now openly cooperating and coordinating actions with Israel to thwart Iran's rise as the dominant regional power believed to be sealed by a possible nuclear agreement with the US by the end of June 2015.

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A nuclear deal or not, the US remains Iran's "number one enemy" and the deep scars in Iran – US relations developed over the last nearly four decades are unlikely to be removed so soon. This is what gives the IS an extra respite to maneuver more effectively to face the US-led coalition and Iran to destroy it.

For its part, the IS has proved itself militarily resilient, politically viable and economically manageable. The IS fighters are brutal and fearless, highly skilled in battlefield tactical maneuverings, follow the US army's combined arms doctrine that integrates the use of light, medium and heavy weapons, and fight the enemies with sophisticated weapons captured from the enemies. A former American Special Forces officer has said this of the IS fighters: "They're just better fighters. They have fire discipline... They keep moving. The Iraqis do none of these things". Politically, the IS maintains tight grip over conquered territories. People living on IS territories either welcome it gladly or are silenced to challenge it openly. So far no report of popular rebellion against the IS has emerged, stories of extortions and fearmongering by the IS forces notwithstanding. On the economic front, the captured Syrian and Iraqi oil fields are producing the necessary lifeblood for the survival of the IS. It sells oil in the black markets and its customers include the Syrian government and a bevy of regional merchants who bring in some \$90 million for the IS every month. All these portend little realistic hope for destroying the IS anytime soon.

What does the Existence of the IS mean?

The survival of the IS has significant consequences for the Middle East and for the world at large. To begin with, the IS is unfolding as a direct threat to the political map of the Middle East drawn up by Britain and France after World War I. Its territories straddle the borders of Iraq and Syria and thus partially negate the creation of a half dozen states, modeled on the state-centric European political order and on the Ottoman Arab territories in the Middle East (the Levant, Jordan, Iraq, and Palestine). Britain and France secretly negotiated the Sykes – Picot Agreement of May 1916, three years before World War I had ended, to establish their colonial footprints in the heart of the Arab world. Jordan and Iraq (then called Transjordan) as well as Palestine went under British control while Lebanon and Syria were awarded to France.

The Versailles Treaty of 1919 formally accorded legitimacy to these conspiratorial divisions of Arab territories by two European powers. Britain also reneged on its promise made to Hussein bin Ali, Sherif and Emir of Mecca (1908 – 1924) who had supported British war efforts against the Ottoman Turks in exchange for recognition of an independent Arab state covering territories from Aleppo in Syria to Aden in Yemen. The Arabs were further disappointed by the Balfour Declaration of June 1917 that promised British support for the creation of a Jewish 'homeland' (not a Jewish state) in Palestine.

The IS flatly rejects and wishes to erase the political borders delineated by the Sykes – Picot Agreement. It hopes to strengthen the declared caliphate by uniting all Sunni Muslims under its rule. Much of course depends on the IS's capacity to hold onto conquered territories and launch counter-offensives to capture more territories from Iraq, Syria and other neighboring states. The recent military victories in Iraq (Ramadi) and Syria (Palmyra) somewhat hint at IS's capacity to gradually achieve what it wishes for. If this were to happen, the IS also looks set to rewrite the history of the Middle East. The demolitions of non-Islamic cultural heritage sites by IS forces may be interpreted as a first step to its project of rewriting Middle East history. It is against idols in any form – statues, sculptures and engravings – and IS leaders justify the destruction of the idols by citing verses from the Holy Qur'an. Verse 120 in the Qur'an refers to the abolition of the idols as a 'righteous deed'. The so-called cultural heritage sites, according to the IS, serve a nationalist agenda that contradicts the guidance of Allah. This interpretation brings two points into focus: a) the IS stands to expunge non-Islamic parts of Middle East history, at least of the last almost one hundred years marked by European colonial penetrations and dominance; and b) it aims to de-link, if not totally cut off, the Islamic Middle East from the non-Islamic West which the IS views as the oppressors of the Muslims.

Viewed from the ideological terrain, the IS's existence and expansion poses much more formidable challenges to the West. Historically, Islam and the West have found themselves locked in battles over ideas and dominance, with each attempting to prevail over the other at different historical periods. The rise of the IS appears to be the latest round of ideational competitions between the two. The West has historically justified its prevalence over the non-West, more specifically the Middle East, by cherishing and promoting a unique claim to universalism rooted in the concept of

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eurocentrism. Briefly defined, eurocentrism is the ideological or politico-cultural project of the West that buttresses and sustains Western claim to global superiority and dominance. It articulates a hierarchical structure of power relationships, with the West exerting its hegemony over the rest of the world. Justifications for hegemony or dominance are presented by incarnating Western values of democracy, freedoms, human rights, liberal economic order etc., as universal values which are assumed to be applicable to all societies, regardless of cultural and racial differences between the West and the non-West.

The latest phase of eurocentrism saw its vulgar manifestations under the George W. Bush administration (2001 – 2009). President Bush and the neoconservatives rhetorically justified the 2003 invasion of Iraq in the name of promoting freedoms and human rights for all Iraqis, though the invasion eventually ended up producing complete disasters for Iraq and for the US. The debacle in Iraq has, in turn, sharpened attacks on eurocentrism both from within the West and the non-West. The IS is seen by many people, including President Obama, as an outcome of the invasion of and post-occupation fiasco in Iraq.

Islam's own version of universalism has long pitted itself against Western Eurocentric ideas and views. Islamic universalism centers round the idea of building and sustaining a universal moral order. The Muslim holy book, the Qur'an (verse 30:30), emphasizes the need to engage in universal morality and instructs all humans to follow the moral path. The creation of a universal moral order, according to Islam, is possible if humans uphold and promote such moral values as justice, equality, truthfulness, fairness, honesty and so on. These moral values apply to all humans, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or linguistic origins, and they can facilitate human interactions to establish a universal moral order. Based on the Qur'anic moral teachings, the Muslims, beginning in the first half of the seventh century, quickly extended the Islamic moral order (under different caliphates) to the Levant, Anatolia, North Africa and even to Spain and France in Europe. So Islam appeared on the World scene not merely as a religion; it symbolized three things: a new religion with mass appeal, a multi-ethnic super state controlled by Islamic religious laws and principles, and a new world order built on Islamic moral values.

From the mid-seventh century to the first quarter of the twentieth century, the Islamic moral order prevailed but the decline of the Ottoman Empire and its final invalidation in 1924 opened the door for European colonial control over the whole Middle East region. The US entered the fray after the discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf area in the 1930s. Islamic reactions to Western control and dominance, justified by cultural superiority flowing out from Eurocentric ideas and views, gradually radicalized many young Muslims from Hassan al-Banna to Sayyid Qutb to Osama bin Laden. The al-Qaeda network of bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, which initiated the ongoing armed clash between Islam and the West on September 11, 2001 to end Western domination over the Muslim Middle East, is a direct outgrowth of such radicalism. The IS, a breakaway al-Qaeda group, is the more radical, more violent Sunni militant group bent on eliminating Western footholds from the Middle East literally and practically. It shows no shortage of will and capacity to reestablish the caliphate not only to reintroduce the Islamic universal moral order but also to lead the world once again.

To sum up, the IS is a reality which may not be obliterated through military actions and strikes. Differences between regional states and the defects in the anti-IS coalition's military strategy largely keep the IS running and surviving. The existence of the IS points to a new Middle East – with the post-World War I political map gradually broken down – and the initiation of a long ideological conflict with the West. Secondly, Islam and the West present competing claims to universalism with both of them having one thing in common: the impulse to hold sway over the world. While the West seeks to achieve world dominance through the promotion of its own set of secular values centered on human rights, freedoms, democratic governance, free market economic system etc., Islam uses divinely bestowed values of justice, equality, honesty, integrity, truthfulness and so on to achieve the same. In other words, the West uses a secular path while Islam (or militant Sunni Islam) employs a religious path to reach the same goal. The more the IS grows bigger, the more the possibility of fierce ideological clashes with the West to extend the frontiers of Islamic universal moral order.

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