

The Islamic State's Fortunes in Syria and Iraq

Dr. Imad K. Harb

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Since its meteoric rise in the middle of 2014, the self-described Islamic State, known also as ISIS, has achieved spectacular successes in Syria and Iraq. It now controls wide swathes of territory in both countries and is a serious security and military challenge. While fighting it should rightly not spare any locations or assets, defeating it in Iraq will be the decisive step in ending its presence in the Levant and its mythical vision of a virtuous caliphate. But the effort against the Islamic State in Mesopotamia should begin with re-constituting Iraqi state institutions, avoid the use of sectarian militias, and address antecedent conditions that have helped the millennial organization achieve its successes thus far.

The Islamic State in Syria

It would be folly to discount the successes that the Islamic State has achieved over the last year against the Syrian regime's forces and those of the Syrian opposition. Indeed, strategists estimate that the organization controls a large portion of Syria's territory, although much of that is uninhabited. Its latest exploit was the occupation of the historical city of Palmyra in the Syrian desert which could allow it to theoretically sweep the entire southeastern part of the country and end government control over the Iraqi-Syrian border altogether. It also controls some important urban centers in the north and northeast and is trying to expand against positions held by opposition moderates and Islamist factions in the north and south.



ISIS in Syria and Iraq

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However, the Islamic State's military position and advantage in Syria is under increasing pressure, less from regime forces than from the American-led international coalition's aircraft, other opposition groups, and Syrian Kurdish Popular Protection Units, aided as they are by Kurdish fighters from Iraq. Over the last two weeks, Islamic State forces have suffered an irreversible defeat in the town of Tal Abyad on the Syrian-Turkish border and are now scrambling to defend

their capital Raqqa to the south. Additionally, opposition moderates aided by Islamist factions also appear to have performed well in battles against IS fighters in the south and around the northern city of Aleppo, despite their continuing operations against the Syrian army.

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Iraq as Decisive Battleground

Like Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) before it, the Islamic State offers no inherent, legitimate, or convincing reason for success. Its early victory on the battlefield in northern Iraq in mid-2014 came about against a dispirited and inept Iraqi army lacking an *esprit de corps*, a professional cadre of officers loyal to the nation, and a clear mission of defense against usurpers of state authority. Few are the instances where a small ragtag insurgent outfit was able overnight to overcome hardened defenses, state-of-the-art weapons, and thousands of soldiers to come within a short distance of collapsing a political order as ISIS did then. Later ISIS victories north and west of the capital – in Beiji, Tikrit and Ramadi among others– came after other army units preferred to withdraw instead of mounting the required defense of population, territory, and economic assets.



ISIS fighters

Since the dismantling of the Ba`athist authoritarian edifice after the American invasion of 2003, Iraq's political class has not effectively concentrated on rebuilding state institutions, especially the army and security services, independently of the polarized sectarian environment in the country.

As an organization bent on destroying the modern nation-state system in the Levant and the Islamic world at large, Islamic State has an advantage over the weak and penetrated security institutions of the Iraqi state. Since the dismantling of the Ba`athist authoritarian edifice after the American invasion of 2003, Iraq's political class has not effectively concentrated on rebuilding state institutions, especially the army and security services, independently of the polarized sectarian environment in the country. Despite the public's approval of two constitutions and participation in seven parliamentary and municipal elections, the Iraqi state is still struggling to assert itself vis-à-vis self-interested political parties with militias – as the case is with Shi`ite parties – and centrifugal forces such as the Kurds.

Moreover, and besides being victim to corruption and nepotism, the Iraqi state today struggles to emerge amid conflicting visions for the country. As the Shi`a majority which controls state institutions finds its political expediency in maintaining a strong central government, the Kurds in the north and the Sunnis envision a weaker Baghdad in favor of more autonomy in a federal structure. In fact, the Kurds prefer a minimum of central authority in order to further develop the instruments of a hoped-for independence, which so far is subject to regional and international vetoes for fear of its domino effect in Turkey, Syria, and Iran.

As for the Sunnis, and despite their traditional reluctance to weaken centralized authority, they see themselves as partners in a Shi`ite-controlled political system that denies them equality in building the new nation-state. Not only do the Sunnis feel that the Shi`a have usurped state authority for themselves, but they see that their partners in the nation prefer to involve Iran in Iraq's domestic affairs, most importantly in the fight against the Islamic State. Iranian officers – including General Qassem Sulaimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps – play an essential role on the fronts of Salah Ed-Dine and Anbar Provinces and lead thousands of Iranian-trained and supplied Shi`ite Popular Mobilization troops, just as Baghdad refuses to adequately supply Sunni tribal fighters with weapons and logistical support to participate in the same battles.

Conclusion

Despite its spectacular victories since 2014, the Islamic State remains an aberration made possible by antecedent conditions that could with good effort, will, and purpose be eliminated to allow for the eventual defeat of the millennial organization. As conditions turn against the group in Syria and it tries to compensate by expanding its operations in Iraq, a coherent and committed Iraqi political leadership must work to strengthen Iraqi state institutions and improve governance to be able to counter the group's plans.

The Iraqi nation, led by a neutral state built on rationalized governance, should lead the fight against the Islamic State on its territory. Its re-constituted military and security institutions should have monopoly over the use of force and should deny militias the right to act independently of state institutions. With an inclusive and assertive state, Iraq can then count on regional and international assistance that could be crucial in securing a victory over an organization that serves no purpose besides spreading an extremist and nihilist ideology to the detriment of sustainable development and political and social progress.

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Images accessed June 28, 2015

Syria/Iraq/ISIS map

http://cdn.static-economist.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/original-size/images/print-edition/20140614_MAM914.png

ISIS fighters

<https://encrypted-tbn2.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQJXteNuHNU4Uzqcs04ujzr6FQBhYRu38yxov2M3SoUaPQmIDBwdQ>