ISIS: Apocalypse Now?

The actual number of ISIS fighters is relatively small, but their achievements have been nothing short of spectacular

THE SUDDEN emergence of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria, also known as IS) as a force to be reckoned with in the Arab Middle East is the latest alarming development in a region awash in violence.

Since mid-June, ISIS forces have seized control of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city and as much as one-third of the country's territory, while American-equipped Iraqi forces collapsed and fled, leaving behind vast quantities of advanced weapons. In late August, ISIS forces in Syria took control of the Tabqa air force base in Raqqa province, confirming its dominance in northeastern Syria. The boundary between Syria and Iraq, entities established in the aftermath of World War I, has now effectively been erased and an Islamic caliphate based on the most extreme and controversial interpretations of Islamic law has been proclaimed in its stead.

RODI SAID / REUTERS

Yazidi refugees flee for their lives from Islamic State forces near the Syrian border, August 11

The list of ISIS's nightmarish acts is long and chilling: Genocide against the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq; brutal persecution of native Christian communities in both Syria and Iraq, including crucifixions, beheadings, rape and enslavement of women, and forced conversions; mass executions of Iraqi and Syrian soldiers; and the execution of hundreds of members of a Syrian tribe that resisted its conquest.

The horrific videoed beheading of American journalist James Foley was only the latest manifestation of ISIS's apocalyptic vision of the future. In its regional capital in Syria, Raqqa, it practices what the Palestinian-American analyst Hussein Ibish describes as "thorough-going totalitarianism."

Who and what is ISIS, this hybrid terrorist state-like organization? The primary context of its emergence is the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq following the American invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the bloody civil war in Syria these last three-plus years. As a study by the Washington Institute's Aaron Zeilin shows, ISIS was first established as the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006, emerging from the Iraqi franchise of al-Qaida. In 2007-8, the Iraqi Sunni insurgency lost steam as Iraq's Sunni tribes turned against them, with the promise of having their needs addressed by the Iraqi authorities.

The initial Arab Spring civil uprisings in 2011 led a number of analysts to proclaim the demise of jihadi Islam as a major force in the region. But this turns out to have been premature. The Syrian uprising against the Assad regime turned steadily more violent and increasingly sectarian with the rebels dominated by radical Sunni Islamist groups, led by Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaida franchise) and supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Assad's Alawite-dominated regime was backed by crucial support from the Shi'ite camp – Lebanon's Hezbollah, Shi'ite Iran and Iraqi Shi'ite militias with the support of authoritarian Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki (who has just been replaced, to Washington's relief, as it seeks to build a more inclusive Iraqi government).

The Islamic State of Iraq, rebranded in April 2013 as ISIS, was ostensibly part of Jabhat al-Nusra. In fact, however, ISIS's head, a shadowy figure named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was making a power play to take over the organization and expand his reach into Syria. Eventually, this morphed into a full-fledged violent conflict between the two organizations with ISIS gaining the upper hand.

A fair amount is now known about ISIS's structure and modus operandi. In Iraq, it benefitted from the Maliki government's increasing marginalization and persecution of the disenfranchised Sunni-Arab minority, wiping away the gains of 2007-8. For them, the Iraqi state and army was now the enemy. As The New York Times recently reported, ex-Baathi military commanders and bureaucrats came to play key roles in the building of a quasi-state in terms of weapons procurement, training and administration of areas under their control. In addition to the massive amounts of booty seized from the Iraqi and Syrian armies, its seizure of oil fields and its ability to market oil across smuggling routes enables it to earn $2 million a day, helping it to remain solvent.

An analysis of ISIS's own published documents by the Washington-based Institute of the Study of War concludes that ISIS has a disciplined military command and a unified, coherent leadership structure dedicated to pursuing a controlled military campaign in both Syria and Iraq in order to establish a trans-national emirate in the widest possible area.

The number of actual armed men is estimated to range between 7,000 and 10,000. But, between their terror tactics, alliances with local Sunni groups and sometimes cooperation with other Syrian insurgent factions, their achievements have been nothing short of spectacular. These, in turn, serve as a vital recruiting tool for disconsolate and alienated Sunni youth throughout the region and beyond. Indeed, many of its forces in Syria are of foreign origin, and not only Arab, also coming from Chechnya, European states and even the US.

At bottom, ISIS is the most extreme manifestation of the deep crisis facing the Arab body politic, one which will not be ameliorated anytime soon. In the meantime, Middle Eastern governments and Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish leaders are closely monitoring the fighting in Syria and Iraq, as well as the evolving American response. ■

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