

The Islamic State: From Insurgency to Caliphate and Back

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In June and July 2016, gains by coalition¹ forces fighting against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria prompted a wave of commentary about what will come the "day after," in the post-Islamic State period.² These discussions focused on (1) the feasibility of reuniting Iraq, and (2) the possibility of dividing Syria into federated autonomous zones or, alternatively, creating spheres of influence for the international and regional powers involved in the Syrian war.³ The coalition's much heralded success in using targeted killings to eliminate the IS senior leadership – for example, Abu Omar al-Shishani, the IS Minister of War, was reportedly killed in March 2016⁴ – contributed to the conventional wisdom that the Islamic State's days were numbered. However, following a wave of deadly

¹ There are currently 66 participants in the coalition, including Afghanistan, Albania, the Arab League, Australia, Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, the European Union, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malaysia, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, Panama, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Somalia, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States. See: Kathleen J. McInnis, "[Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State](#)," U.S. Congressional Research Service 7-5700, April 13, 2016.

² For example, see: Maj. Gen. Eric T. Olson, "[When the Islamic State is Gone, What Comes Next?](#)," Warontherocks.com, August 9, 2016; Zachary Laub, "[Does Iraq Have a Plan for After the Islamic State?: Interview with Ned Parker](#)," Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), July 12, 2016; Laura Rozen, "[Planning for the 'day after' Mosul](#)," *Al Monitor*, July 21, 2016; Erica Brosnan, "[After defeating Islamic State, officials must focus on stabilizing Iraq, experts say](#)," *Washington Times*, July 24, 2016; Paul Iddon, "[Dealing with ISIS after the demise of the Caliphate](#)," *Rudaw*, July 17, 2016.

³ Josh Rogin, "[Obama's Syria plan teams up American and Russian forces](#)," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2016; Abdulrahman Al Rashed, "[Dividing Syria is a Difficult Mission](#)," *as-Sharq al-Awsat* (English), August 2, 2016; Sami Kleib, "[Illusions of the departure of Assad and the division of Syria fall](#)," *as-Safir* (Arabic), August 1, 2016.

⁴ Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "[Abu Omar al Shishani killed south of Mosul, Islamic State says](#)," *The Long War Journal*, July 13, 2016; Stephen Kalin, "[Islamic State says 'minister of war' Shishani killed](#)," *Reuters*, July 14, 2016.

mass terrorist attacks during Ramadan,⁵ it seems premature to prepare the Islamic State's eulogy.

For much of 2016, the Islamic State has found itself on the defensive. The coalition's air strikes frustrated IS's war machine, and localized coalition allies on the ground were able to uncover weaknesses, thinning out the IS's reservoir of available manpower that had fed its success fighting as a highly mobile insurgency. The air strikes also reduced the amount of territory under its control and damaged its ability to govern, which were the principal manifestations of its sovereignty.

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) liberated the cities of Ramadi in January 2016 and Fallujah in June. In between, regime forces in Syria recaptured Palmyra in March 2016, further strengthening the perception that the Islamic State is losing ground. This string of victories against major IS strongholds created a sense that the coalition was laying the groundwork for the Islamic State's ultimate defeat. To this end, severing the Islamic State's corridor from the Syrian town of Raqqa to the Turkish border – the IS's most valuable supply line and transit point for foreign fighters – would facilitate recapturing Raqqa, the IS's capital, and eventually lead to the conquest of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, something that would constitute a final blow to IS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Islamic State emerged in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003-American led invasion. It began as part of *al-Qa'ida's* struggle against U.S. and the Sunni-Shi'i conflict in Iraq, and was later built on the chronic weakness of the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus. The de-legitimization of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes and the concomitant weakening of their armed forces provided the IS with a golden opportunity that it quickly seized. Thanks to the poor performance of the Iraqi military in Mosul in June 2014 and the grinding siege warfare between the Syrian Arab Army and rebel forces in the central cities of Syria, an immense swathe of territory between Baghdad and Damascus was abandoned to the Islamic State. Hence, a new security environment emerged, not only in the Levant, but throughout the region, forcing states like Saudi Arabia, Shi'i Iran, and Turkey, international powers, and numerous communities – e.g. the 'Alawis, Druze, Kurds, and Ezidis – to reassess their policies and actions.

The Islamic State, befitting an organization that relies on religious fervor and ideological purity, imprudently opened several military fronts at the same time.

⁵ Carlo Munoz, "[Islamic State unleashes barrage of bloodshed amid string of battlefield defeats](#)," *Washington Times*, July 5, 2016; Brian Michael Jenkins, "[Is the Surge in Terrorist Attacks Coincidence or Coordinated Campaign?](#)" *The Hill*, July 11, 2016; Clinton Watts, "[Horrific ISIS Attacks During Ramadan Disguise a Retreating and Fracturing Terrorist Group](#)," *Huffington Post*, July 6, 2016.

In challenging all of its enemies at once, it jeopardized its long-term survival. Its spokesmen and leaders are well-aware of the deteriorating situation they are facing; confirmation of this awareness can be found in the organization's propaganda. After enjoying battlefield success for much of 2014 and early 2015, the IS's chief spokesperson and operational chief, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, issued an audio-recording on May 21, 2016,⁶ describing the Caliphate as under siege. His words were echoed in the Arabic-language weekly for IS fighters, *al-Naba*,⁷ which cast doubt on the future of the organization.

Nevertheless, on the ground, the coalition's war against the IS is still a piecemeal affair. The slow pace of advancement by the Iraqi, Syrian, and Kurdish forces underscore the challenge of recapturing IS-controlled territory. In each battle, the attacking force met little concentrated IS resistance to precision air strikes and cautious counter-insurgency tactics. But there is little doubt that the battles to conquer the cities of Raqqa and Mosul will be slow, drawn-out affairs that are likely to exact a heavy price from coalition forces, regardless of the outcome.

To be sure, conquering the Islamic State's capital won't signal IS's end. The coalition's forces do not possess enough manpower and resources to hold the vast desert expanses in Iraq and Syria, and it is unclear what kind of system of government and ideology would succeed the IS in the Sunni communities scattered throughout these areas. In al-Adnani's late May audio-recording he warned the U.S. not to make the mistake of thinking that the elimination of the group's leader or the loss of territory would herald the end of the Islamic State.⁸ In his eyes, returning to the desert and renewing the IS insurgency against its infidel "enemies, near (*al-'adu al-karib*) and far (*al-'adu al-ba'id*)," would constitute a return to its roots and would allow it to renew itself. Regardless of whether this is mere propaganda for the dedicated followers of its apocalyptic vision or a realistic prognosis, events in Egypt suggest it should be taken seriously. The Egyptian army has struggled to eradicate the IS in Sinai, suggesting a similar campaign in the deserts of Iraq and Syria would be protracted and extremely difficult.

The battle to "liberate" Fallujah revealed the ISF's dependence on Shi'i militias, highlighting the ethno-sectarian nature of the war against the Islamic State. The Shi'i militias murdered Sunnis from Fallujah and looted the city, exploiting the operation to settle sectarian scores. Rather than a positive step on the road to

⁴ See: The Mujahid Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani ash-Shami, "[That They Live By Proof \(Arabic\)](#),"; this statement stands in contrast to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's June 2014 declaration of the beginning of a "new era." Al-Baghdadi's last audio-recording message was in December 2015.

⁷ For full text issues of the Arabic language, *al-Naba*, see Aaron Y. Zelin's *Jihadology* archive, [here](#).

⁸ The Mujahid Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani ash-Shami, "[That They Live By Proof \(English\)](#)," p. 5.

stabilizing the Iraqi state, it was a bitter reminder that in practice the Iraqi regime relies extensively on its Shi'i ethnic-religious majority and identifies the Sunni part of its society as an avowed enemy. The same ethno-sectarian dynamics apply to the Kurdish victories, and to those of Bashar al-Asad's Syrian Arab army as well, fueling and sustaining Kurdish-Arab animosity in addition to Sunni-Shi'i hostility. *Ta'ifiyah* (sectarianism) is a major element of the Iraqi and Syrian experience, overshadowing domestic political disputes and undermining social solidarity throughout the Fertile Crescent.

The key question moving forward, therefore, is who will assume control of "Sunnistan," the Sunni areas that will be putatively liberated from Islamic State control? In a Middle East riven by conflict and instability, is it possible to come to an agreement that divides territorial control between Sunnis and Shi'is? This challenge looms even larger in the absence of financial resources to renew ruined cities and resettle displaced persons, and without an ideological alternative to supplant the teachings of the Islamic State that have taken root among many Sunni Muslims.

The asymmetric balance of power between the large and well-equipped coalition forces and the smaller, guerrilla forces of the Islamic State raises an important structural paradox that often goes unmentioned in discussions about the war against the Islamic State: Why have the vastly superior coalition forces not defeated the Islamic State in one overwhelming and concentrated offensive? One part of the answer is that for many of the parties participating in the war, defeating the Islamic State was never their top priority, as more vital interests took precedent. For example, Turkey was more focused on defeating the Asad regime and containing Kurdish autonomy; the Saudis were more intent on preventing Iran from achieving hegemony from the shores of the Persian Gulf to the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea; Russia was more interested in regaining its regional and international influence than defeating the Islamic State, while the U.S. seemed more interested in limiting its direct participation in another Middle East war. In short, the Islamic State was never the most serious threat to many of the regional and international actors participating in the war to defeat the Islamic State. This dynamic perpetuated the war, deepened the lines of conflict, and increased bloodshed.

Furthermore, the Islamic State has succeeded in creating the image of a powerful enterprise that can sow fear and anxiety in the hearts of its enemies in the region and the world. It took Salafism out of the seminary and created a Salafi-Jihadi identity that has become a source of self-empowerment for angry and alienated young Muslims everywhere. Even if the Islamic State is headed towards military defeat, its belief-system has taken root and will be hard to erase by the dint of

sheer military power. As the Islamic State loses its territorial caliphate, it likely to revert back to its beginning as an insurgency; concurrently, it will continue its transition to a virtual caliphate that supports and inspires underground Salafi-Jihadi terrorist networks across the globe.

The Islamic State is a symptom of the collapse of the territorial nation-states of Syria and Iraq. The ethno-sectarian divisions that were held in check by state institutions exploded when those institutions eroded, allowing the Islamic State to establish itself, raise its flag, shatter borders (*kasr al-hudud*), and transform extant Sunni-Shi'i tensions into sectarian war. Hence, what is needed is a comprehensive political solution. One that is acceptable to all of the parties, and one that can introduce a coherent and attractive ideological alternative to the Islamic State that provides frustrated young people with a glimmer of hope. In the meantime, it seems premature to assess the legacy of the Islamic State; its followers still cast a long shadow across the region and beyond.

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