

## Blurring the Borders of Conflict: ISIS between Syria and Iraq

Konstantinos Zarras

As the Syrian civil war approaches the start of its fourth year, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is trying to establish the institutions of an Islamic state in areas under its control. At the end of February, ISIS imposed the *jizya*<sup>1</sup> tax on Christian residents of Al-Raqqa. ISIS has attempted to implement *dhimmi*<sup>2</sup> pacts with non-Muslims in Iraq as well.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout their modern existence as independent states, Syria and Iraq have been joined at the hip with regard to their fundamental national security issues. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003 and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 introduced new elements into the picture. Today, weak central governments in both countries are facing internal divisions, sectarian violence, and separatist challenges. The current relationship between Syria and Iraq revolves around a) the rapport between the regimes of Bashar al-Asad and Nuri al-Maliki, b) the growing regional influence of Sunni extremist groups and the Shi'i response, and c) the Kurdish factions' move towards political autonomy in both countries. These issues are interconnected and have a vital role in shaping the broader Middle Eastern security environment.

According to Barry Buzan and Ole Waever: "...threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones."<sup>4</sup> The historical background of Syrian-Iraqi relations suggests that geographical proximity is usually a recipe for conflict

---

<sup>1</sup> A poll, or per capita, tax imposed on non-Muslims residents.

<sup>2</sup> The term "dhimmi" refers to non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic state. A dhimmi pact includes the imposition of the jizya tax to non-Muslim residents in return for protection by Muslim authorities.

<sup>3</sup> Aymenn Jawad al Tamimi, "The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham's dhimmi pact for the Christians of Raqqa Province," *Syria Comment*, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/islamic-state-iraq-ash-shams-dhimmi-pact-christians-raqqa-province/>

<sup>4</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers, The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.4.

rather than cooperation. By the late-1960s, authoritarian regimes in Syria and Iraq had consolidated power, achieved a measure of internal stability and transformed themselves into actors capable of projecting regional influence.<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, the doctrine of pan-Arabism, a central feature of Ba‘th ideology in both states, did not foster greater cooperation between the two governments. In fact, despite the apparent similarities in their political organization and the cultural and ideological links they shared, Damascus and Baghdad have been long-standing rivals. Relations deteriorated even further after Syria backed the Islamic Republic of Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and established a strategic alliance with Tehran.

The Iraqi Ba‘thist regime was severely weakened by the 1990-1991 Gulf war and then eventually undone by the U.S. invasion in 2003. Following Saddam’s defeat and the dissolution of the ruling Ba‘thist institutions, Iraq was transformed from a regional power into a weak state. Today, the Shi‘i-dominated Maliki government is confronted with increasing levels of violence after a short period of relative stability. Iraqi society is divided along sectarian and ethnic lines; a de facto Kurdish state had been established in the north of the country and other areas have repeatedly descended into chaos. The recent deterioration of security is linked to the dissatisfaction of the Sunni community treatment by the Maliki government, which has created the conditions for the resurgence of *al-Qa‘ida* since July 2012.

Iraq has also been greatly affected by the intensification of the violence in Syria, which has spiraled into a catastrophic civil war and a regional sectarian conflict during the last three years. The Asad regime’s military has lost control over large swaths of territory, mainly in eastern and northern parts of the country. But the opposition remains deeply fragmented despite attempts to form a unified anti-government front, backed by global and regional powers. Jihadi-Salafist factions have taken advantage of the uprising and became the most efficient and organized forces on the ground. Moreover, al-Qa‘ida in Iraq entered the war in Syria in April 2013, where it was re-established as ISIS and launched a series of operations aiming at dominating the opposition and controlling a large area of Iraqi and Syrian territory. At the same time, the Syrian Kurdish community is establishing control over the Rojava – which consists of part of the Al Hasakah governorate and other northern areas of the country – in an attempt to create a new entity modeled on the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq.

---

<sup>5</sup> Eyal Zisser, *Asad’s Legacy: Syria in Transition*, (New York, New York University Press, 2001); *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, eds., Raymond Hinnebusch, Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

Hence, the governments of Iraq and Syria no longer hold monopolies on force in their sovereign territories. Communal cleavages have become a dominant feature of their social morphology. As a consequence, both countries have turned into zones of political disunity and violence. The growing mutual spillover of violence between Syria and Iraq has been highlighted by the U.N. Special Representative for Iraq, Martin Kobler, who issued a warning to the U.N. Security Council in July 2013 about the “merging” of the two battlefields.<sup>6</sup> ISIS has played a major role in this development. Its entry into the Syrian war, however, has also provoked reactions and further complicated the already intricate network of relationships and rivalries among the opposition groups.

ISIS’s area of activity straddles the Iraqi-Syrian border, covering the region stretching from the Sunni-majority territories of Iraq – the Anbar and Nineveh provinces in particular– through the Euphrates basin to Al Raqqa in Syria, and the surrounding areas of Aleppo and Idlib and into Turkey. It has also recently expanded its operations into Lebanon, claiming responsibility for a suicide bombing in a stronghold of Hizballah in southern Beirut.<sup>7</sup> Unlike other Jihadi-Salafist groups, ISIS aims not only at defeating the *kuffar* (infidel) regional powers but also at creating an Islamic caliphate, as outlined in its April 2013 declaration.<sup>8</sup>

The group is a direct descendant of al-Qa‘ida in Iraq, which changed its name several times since its establishment in 2004. After a period of decline between 2007 and 2012 owing to the actions of the *Sahwa* tribal-based movement, the organization managed to regain its operational capabilities. The year 2011 marked a favorable turning point, thanks to the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq in combination with a changing Iraqi political landscape. The Shi‘i regime in Baghdad was beginning to generate resentment among the Sunni communities, and an anti-government protest movement was initiated in 2012 as a reaction to the marginalization of Sunni politicians and the promotion of a sectarian pro-Shi‘i agenda by Maliki. The violent suppression of the protests further aggravated an already tense atmosphere and created favorable conditions for a series of violent new operations by al-Qa‘ida in Iraq. From mid-2012 to mid-2013, the group carried out a year-long campaign, dubbed “*Breaking the Walls*” (*Tahtim al-Judran*), which involved a series of bombings,

---

<sup>6</sup> Briefing of SRSG for Iraq, Martin Kobler, to UN Security Council, New York, July 16, 2013, [http://unamission.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=s-pvl\\_IaW8%3D&tabid=2792&mid=5079&language=en-US](http://unamission.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=s-pvl_IaW8%3D&tabid=2792&mid=5079&language=en-US)

<sup>7</sup> *The Daily Star*, 5 January 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jan-04/243122-isis-claims-responsibility-for-car-bomb-in-beirut-southern-suburbs.ashx#axzz2sGePOyEo>

<sup>8</sup> Brian Fishman, “Welcome to the Islamic State of Syria”, *Foreign Policy*, April 10, 2013. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/10/welcome\\_islamic\\_state\\_syria\\_al\\_qaeda](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/10/welcome_islamic_state_syria_al_qaeda)

including vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attacks, and prison breaks throughout the country.<sup>9</sup> ISIS's increasing capabilities have been on display during its ongoing second operational campaign, named "*Soldier's Harvest*" (*Hasad al Junud*), which aims to establish control over a contiguous swath of Iraqi and Syrian territory.<sup>10</sup>

Among the Syrian opposition groups, ISIS managed to assume a leading role in a relatively short time. This was partly a result of its guerilla experience, its knowledge of the eastern part of the country, and an existing network of local jihadists.<sup>11</sup> Owing to its experience with asymmetric warfare, the group has intensified its operations against the Asad regime and introduced more sophisticated bombing attacks. But ISIS's ambitions go further than defeating the government forces. After it gained control over certain parts of Syria, such as the provincial capital of Al Raqqa, the organization has been trying to establish institutions of a proto-state. ISIS has instituted laws, opened *shari'a* courts, provided law enforcement, imposed the jizya tax on non-Muslim residents, controlled the distribution and price of food, and promoted its own educational activities. It funds its activities through private Gulf donations, an extensive extortion network, and the exploitation of oil fields under its control in northeastern Syria. ISIS's ambitious transnational project aims at creating the core of a future Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

The Syrian opposition factions, even those who share a similar worldview with ISIS, did not welcome the organization's claim to be the natural heir to the Syrian state. They have considerable reservations regarding its extreme *takfir*<sup>12</sup> rhetoric, the level of brutality employed in applying its authority, and its large contingent of leaders and fighters from outside of Syria. From the beginning of its involvement in Syria, ISIS developed an aggressive and arrogant attitude and behavior toward other groups. For example, it attempted to force al-Qa'ida's official Syria affiliate, *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN), into a subordinate merger. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS's *emir*, even ignored the mediation effort from the al-Qa'ida commander Ayman al-Zawahiri, who ruled in favor of Jabhat al-Nusra. The ISIS is also believed to be responsible for the assassination of al-Zawahiri's designated envoy to Syria at the end of February.

---

<sup>9</sup> Jessica D. Lewis, "Al Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent, The Breaking the Walls Campaign Part I", *Middle East Security Report* 14, Institute for the Study of War, September 2013.

<sup>10</sup> In the beginning of January 2014, ISIS managed to temporarily assume control over the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in the Anbar province of Iraq.

<sup>11</sup> Those connections were established after the military intervention of the US-led forces in Iraq in 2003, when there was a considerable influx of foreign fighters into Iraq through Syria. The Asad regime turned a blind eye to the flow of foreign jihadist fighters into Iraq. See: Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 7: 2, (June 2003), 44-56.

<sup>12</sup> The term *takfir* refers to the action of declaring a person or a groups of people as unbelievers (*kafir*). A *takfiri* is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of apostasy.

The ambiguous ISIS-JN relationship reflects the power struggle within the fragmented opposition and the localized nature of the Syrian war. During the last two months, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra forces have been fighting against each other in eastern and northern parts of Syria, while their branches in the Qalamoun area, for example, have joined forces to repel the Syrian regime's offensive. Alongside of ISIS's cooperation with other groups in military operations against Asad's military and the application of joint rule in certain towns and territory, rising tension within the opposition has culminated in internal conflict.<sup>13</sup> In the beginning of 2014, two newly organized coalitions – *Jaysh al-Mujahidin* and *Jabhat Thuwar Suriya* – were established to confront the ISIS. In addition, significant battles between ISIS and Kurdish YPG forces took place in the northeastern part of the country. Heavy casualties were registered on all sides. From this perspective, the ISIS's activity is making it easier for Asad to remain in power. It not only exacerbates the opposition's disunity, but also bolsters Asad's narrative portraying the Syrian rebellion as being driven by foreign terrorists.

ISIS's activity is having an enormous impact on both Iraq and Syria. At the regional level, it fuels sectarian violence and strengthens the jihadist movement. Taking advantage of the power vacuum that was created after the eruption of a full scale civil war in Syria, and the rise of communal violence in Iraq, ISIS has managed to exercise control and influence over swaths of territory in the Euphrates Valley and elsewhere. One may argue that ISIS's activity today is indirectly serving Asad's interests, but the organization nonetheless poses a substantial threat to regime stability in both Damascus and Baghdad. Therefore, the evolving role of ISIS in Syria and Iraq constitutes a crucial component in Fertile Crescent geopolitics.

*Dr. Konstantinos C. Zarras is a visiting scholar at the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies](#) at [Tel Aviv University](#). He received his PhD at the Department of International and European Studies at the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, Greece.*

**The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.**

**TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.**

---

<sup>13</sup> Before the eruption of the infighting between the extremist groups in January ISIS also cooperated with JN and Ahrar ash-Sham in Al Raqqa where a Sharia Committee was formed by members of the three groups. See: Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 15, (2014).

**To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.**

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at  
<http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to [listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il](mailto:listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il), with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."