

Is Islamic State Here to Stay?

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Summary

Despite advances by Iraqi government, Shi'a militia and Kurdish forces, Islamic State remains in robust control of most of its 'Caliphate' in Iraq and especially Syria, as well as steadily extending its influence via franchises in Africa and Asia. This briefing looks in greater depth at three reinforcing factors that underlie the persistent appeal of Islamic State: the effects of several decades of determined proselytising of the Wahhabi tradition; the relevance of marginalisation; and the determined promotion of the narrative that Islam is under attack from the West, with Islamic State in the vanguard of its defence. Even if Islamic State is contained or fragments, tackling these long-term drivers of radicalisation is a far more sustainable policy option than the foreign and

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sectarian military intervention that fuels the agenda and appeal of extremist groups.

The Persistence of Islamic State

Although Islamic State is currently under considerable pressure because of many hundreds of coalition air strikes every month, there is little evidence that its capabilities are being seriously limited. Tikrit has now been taken over by the Iraqi forces but Islamic State has made advances elsewhere, a few in Iraq and rather more in Syria, including a move into one of the largest Palestinian refugee camps on the outskirts of Damascus. It continues to gain followers from abroad, both in terms of as many as a thousand recruits a month but also through extreme Islamist groups pledging allegiance, notably in Libya, Egypt and Nigeria. The Director of the CIA, John Brennan, is reported to be overseeing a complete restructuring of the Agency to prepare it for a long term response to violent extremism.

Islamic State does have some immediate advantages in addition to recruits and external support, and these include paramilitary capabilities developed over three decades in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, Pakistan, and elsewhere. The current wave of reprisal acts by Shi'ite militias in Iraq against the Sunni minority will also increase support for the movement from within that minority. Furthermore, it controls substantial territory in its proto-Caliphate, giving it a degree of freedom of action even in the face of airstrikes.

The territorial control may be a short-lived advantage since that control may be so extreme that the population eventually turns against a movement that might originally have been seen as bringing order out of chaos. This fragmentation was the experience of the Taliban towards the end of the 1990s and, to some

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extent, of the short-lived Chechen Republic. It could be the same for Islamic State, but is unlikely to become apparent for several years rather than months.

The Wahhabi Tradition

One of the most noted Islamic scholars of the early 14th century was Ibn Taymiyyah. His most relevant belief in the current context was that Islam must remain true to the very earliest days of the faith in the 7th century CE. His thinking was further developed over 400 years later by Muhammad ibn Abdal-Wahhab in the 18th century in what is now Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism stems from his teachings and is the strongest religious orientation within present day Saudi Arabia, as well as the ideological inspiration for the expansion of Saudi control over most of Arabia. It can be described as a puritanical form of Salafi Islam in which Allah is at the centre of worship which eschews reverence to all others, practices an austere lifestyle and diminishes the status of women. Many Muslims would argue that this is not a true representation of the earliest days of Islam but Wahhabism does attract considerable support.

Wahhabism was deeply embedded in Saudi Arabia but it came even more to the fore after the Iranian Revolution in 1979-80, being seen as a crucial way of counteracting the revolutionary potential of a revitalised Shi'a Islam. From 1980 onwards, the vigorous export of the belief system was an important element in Saudi foreign policy, much aided by the considerable oil wealth of the Kingdom. Moreover, while not connected directly with US-Saudi relations, the support for Wahhabism was seen as a very valuable counter to revolutionary Iran, seen in Washington as the primary threat to US influence in the Middle East.

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During the 1980s and 1990s, much of the emphasis in exporting Wahhabism was directed at South Asia, especially Pakistan with vast numbers of madrassas (religious schools) supported. In the 1980s this was in parallel with US and Saudi support for the Mujahidin fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. While a minority of the original Mujahidin were fighting from religious rather than nationalist motives, that element grew after the Soviets withdrew, developing into the Taliban movement which drew heavily on young men with madrasa education.

Financial and other Saudi support for Wahhabism has continued unabated and extends across the Middle East, South Asia and into North Africa and the Balkans. It is by no means directly the basis for Islamic State. Indeed, the leadership of that movement may commonly regard the Saudi royal family as inadequate for the role of Guardian of the Two Holy Places. What it has done, though, is to greatly support a climate of Sunni thinking across the Middle East that would be regarded by most Muslims world-wide as being excessively puritanical and not true to the greater spirit of Islam. In the current context, this puritanical millenarianism helps underpin Islamic State thinking and translates into support especially from young men seeking a cause. In this sense it is of continuing help to the developing movement but, more importantly, this applies to any Islamist movement that may espouse violent opposition to western states, Israel and the corrupt leaders across most of the Middle East. It is not peculiar to Islamic State and is an outlook that could long outlast that movement.

Marginalisation

The issue of socio-economic marginalisation across North Africa and the Middle East was explored in a recent ORG briefing and in earlier ORG analyses that

examined factors underlying the Arab Awakening. Pointing to the fact that Tunisia provides one of the largest numbers of Jihadist recruits relative to its population, in spite of being in the process of a democratic transition, the argument was made that this stemmed in part from the marginalisation of so many Tunisians, not least in relation to a 30% unemployment rate for graduates.

The wider issue here is that the problem of majority marginalisation extends well beyond Tunisia to encompass a number of countries across the region, especially those without significant oil export income. They include Jordan, Morocco and especially Egypt, and marginalisation was one of the main factors, along with anger at autocracy, that fuelled the Awakening itself. If the Awakening had presaged a region-wide transition to more democratic governance and if that transition had brought in policies designed to counter marginalisation, then the prospects for extreme movements such as Islamic State might have been severely damaged. That has not happened, making it easy for the Islamist proselytisers to claim that only their violent approach will work.

As with the enhancement of the Wahhabi worldview, such marginalisation is not the fundamental reason for the rise of Islamic State, yet it is a sustained advantage for the movement. It may not even be a matter of relative deprivation, but more relative exclusion which is the issue. As long as it persists it will be an aid to the development of extreme responses, whether taking the form of Islamic State or a successor movement.

Islam under Attack

Finally there is the issue of Islamic State presenting itself as the guardian of Islam under attack, principally from the West and Israel. This reaches into a much deeper belief that the most significant period of Islamic history was the Baghdad-centred Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE) and that even the much more recent Ottoman Caliphate (1362-1924 CE) exemplified a relative decline. It comes to the fore with what is seen as the deliberate breakup of the Arab Islamic world by France and Britain after 1918, the rise of Zionism and its sustained support by the United States, the overthrow or isolation of democratic, Islamist or nationalist regimes, and the corrupting of autocratic heads of state across the region to bring them into the Western fold.

While there may be truth in aspects of these narratives, they cannot be solely responsible for the state of the Middle East, yet this is the claim repeatedly made. Where it has a particular resonance is in the context of the repeated western interventions and regime terminations of recent years, stretching well beyond the Middle East but essentially contained to Muslim-majority states. They include Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya as well as recent action against Syria and, yet again, Iraq, but also extend to drone, special forces and other interventions to defend more secular, pro-Western regimes in Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, Mali and Nigeria, however poor or exclusive their governance.

This recent narrative is reasonably powerful in its own right but is even more effective when located in the broader historical narrative of the retreat of Islam and the imperative need to defend it in the present day. It appears to have significant mobilising potential among Muslim populations in European states, particularly among those who feel themselves marginalised because of their religion, ethnicity or identity.

Conclusion

Once again, this narrative of Islam under attack does not provide the reason for Islamic State's recent success but along with Wahhabism and marginalisation it does help explain the more general attraction of the movement.

Islamic State does, though, have some notable weaknesses, starting with the brutality of many of its actions that are detested by so many Sunni Muslims, let alone local religious minorities and the wider international community. Also, unlike in the wider Syrian conflict, the formal coalition of states opposing it is extensive and, more importantly, both Iran and Russia have substantial concerns – Iran because of Islamic State's deep antagonism to Shi'a Islam and Russia because of its own radical Islamist elements such as the Caucasus Emirate. Saudi Arabia and most Gulf Arab monarchies are also increasingly concerned about the threat to themselves from violent extremist groups like Islamic State. Furthermore, the control of territory may only be a short-term advantage and the likelihood of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi reaching out to the Iraqi Sunni community could substantially reduce support in Iraq.

The key point, though, is that major elements of the current environment in the region favour recourse to extreme Islamist attitudes. Even if Islamic State declines in the coming months and years, those elements will remain as long as current trends in economic exclusion, sectarian education, corrupt and autocratic governance, and external military intervention continue to dominate the Greater Middle East.

Just four years ago there was a widespread assumption that al-Qaida was in terminal decline and, with it, the problem of extreme Islamist movements. That has turned out to have been wishful thinking, indicating a need for a much more rounded analysis of the factors aiding the growth and potential of Islamic State.

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