

V. Op-Ed

The IS-Caliphate: What Should Be Done to Prevent it from Spinning out of Control?

by Philipp Holtmann

Last year in an Op-Ed in *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. 7, No. 3, 2013) I suggested three possible future scenarios for the Syrian civil war. The worst scenario depicted the emergence of a “*Jihadi Super-region from the Euphrates to the Nile and all along the North African Coast and an Extremely Hot Cold War in the Middle East.*” The announcement of a Caliphate by the Islamic State connecting large parts of Syria and Iraq and the enthusiasm with which it was received by many fellow jihadists in the Muslim world has opened the doors for this worst case. IS envisions a Jihadi empire whose ambitions are ultimately global: not only Middle Eastern borders, but all other states and ideologies, are to be crushed in its vision. The West and the rest of the world cannot stand idly by and watch events unfold in the hope that the Islamic State will implode under the weight of its own contradictions.

At the moment the IS-caliphate is like a large honey-pot for global Jihadists: thousands of them from all five continents have, according to IS, been heeding the call of the new caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In the case of the Islamic State, a policy of containment rather than one of arming often dubious allies and providing them with air support might turn out to be the best option. If IS is allowed to spread beyond parts of Syria and Iraq, the task of degrading and defeating it will become very costly indeed.

What we have seen so far is that IS has mastered “Blitzkrieg” tactics. Proof for this is the extremely quick rise of IS since 2013. Portraying itself as the saviour of Sunnis from the Syrian and Iraqi regimes and capitalising on the civil war in Syria, IS has catapulted itself to the position of the leading insurgent organisation in the region, despite numbering not more than 20,000 to 30,000 fighters according to one recent US intelligence estimate. Online IS has shown itself to be at least as savvy as on the ground; it has mastered the art of psychological warfare through social media, e.g. under the Twitter-hashtag “AllEyesOnISIS” and the “One Billion Muslim Campaign to Support IS”.

IS has sidelined al-Qaeda by being more extreme and more global. It is, as one TV commentator put it: “the son of al-Qaeda on testosterone.” The promise to bring back the glory of the Islamic empire has ignited an ideological wildfire that may continue burning, even if a lucky strike by the “Coalition of the Willing” knocks out IS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Such a hit – as proven by previous killings of top jihadist leaders—might create a black hole that could be filled by an even more extreme person. Other jihadist factions, among them the Syrian “Islamic Front” and the al-Qaeda allied “al-Nusra Front,” might be joining or might be waiting in order to portray themselves as “moderates” in IS’ place. Moreover, as a martyr, al-Baghdadi might enjoy a second life among followers who venerate him and his ideas after his death, turning him into a post-mortem leader with a greater than life charisma. Al-Baghdadi apparently sees himself as a messianic preparer. Some Muslim traditions (*ahadith*) have it that the establishment of a caliphate in the Levant will be ushering in the return of the Mahdi—according to Islamic prophesy the rightly guided redeemer of Islam, who will return together with Jesus near the end of times. The Mahdi’s task is to rid the world of evil, establish Islam on earth (the last caliphate) and prepare for Judgment Day.

Today, the reach of the Islamic State already goes beyond the Euphrates valley. IS exerts a considerable level of ideological-strategic guidance (“virtual leadership”) over its followers via the Internet. For example, Algerian terrorists calling themselves “Soldiers of the Caliphate”—former members of al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb—pledged allegiance to IS and claimed to act on orders of “our leader Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi” when they gruesomely murdered their French hostage Hervé Gourdel. Shortly before, on 21 September 2014, IS-spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, had called upon IS cells worldwide to attack Westerners. IS has extended its strategy from fighting the near enemy (the Shiite dominated Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian regimes) to fighting both the near and the far enemies: the “West” and all member states of the “Coalition of the Willing”. IS volunteers, inspired by ultra-takfiri [calling enemies apostates] and violent apocalyptic fantasies, are likely to bring their struggle to Europe, possibly trying to recruit susceptible members of Muslim diasporas for their cause.

IS commits unspeakable war crimes, crimes against humanity, crimes against women; it engages in genocidal policies against religious and ethnic minorities. Yet we have to remember that IS is not the only actor in the Syrian-Iraqi civil war landscape, committing gross human rights violations and mass atrocities using similar tactics (collective punishment, mass executions, beheadings, torture). The world’s reaction to these crimes has been lukewarm and divided so far. Until recently, the U.S. and some other NATO states have been involved in arms and money transfers by Gulf States to Syrian opposition forces, which contain hardcore jihadist factions, some of them connected to IS. Turkey and some other states in the neighbourhood have even covertly supported IS forerunner “Islamic State in Iraq and the Greater Syria” (ISIS) by buying cheap oil from it and from other jihadist factions which took control of oil fields. Some European oil companies, with the knowledge of European governments and with an eye on Russian energy supply bottlenecks in the coming winter, have also been buying oil through stooges at dumping prices.

A comprehensive strategy for combating IS requires several elements. The oil fields, IS main source of revenue, must be recaptured, and, until then, international companies should be prohibited to buy their crude oil through middlemen. The Assad regime’s indifferent slaughter of its own citizens and the Iraqi regime’s discrimination of Sunnis have facilitated the large-scale mobilisation and integration of Jihadi fighters into IS-ranks, and both regimes (Assad’s and al-Baghdadi’s) must be held accountable. A coalition that exerts effective political pressure should include not only pro-Western states, but also allies of both Syria and Iraq. A decisive defense plan to safeguard religious and ethnic minorities against IS attacks is urgently needed. Regional actors, such as the Kurdish Peshmerga, should be strengthened without infuriating Turkey, who is afraid of Kurdish separatist aspirations. And finally, a critical task of the West is to communicate with Muslim opinion leaders. 120 Muslim scholars have recently signed an open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS, refuting his theological claims point-by-point. We must remember that hundreds of millions of Muslims do not share IS’s ideology. They should be encouraged and enabled to stand up against Jihadi extremists and challenge the so-called “Islamic State”. Only through a multi-dimensional counterterrorism strategy – beyond bombing and supplying weapons – will the international community prevent the IS nightmare from spinning out of control.

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