

ISIS Caliphate forcing a rethink of the Middle East

By John Bruni

The recent declaration (June 29) of an Islamic Caliphate in the territories under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Levant) – ISIS, made headlines around the world.

The last time the Middle East was under the sway of historically significant Caliphates was in the 1200s during the Almohad and Abbasid dynasties, which reigned over the Middle East, North Africa and Andalusia (southern Spain). It was generally considered a time of enlightenment. A time where Muslims, Sunni and Shiite, Arabs and Persians were known for plumbing the depths of philosophy and science.

It is unlikely that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS leader and appointed ‘Caliph’, will be heir to this magnificent legacy.



By all accounts, the style of governance that ISIS will usher in for the people under their

control will be akin to the austere, illiberal arrangements that we witnessed in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (1996-2001). Hardly a great attractor for people wishing an alternate lifestyle to Western consumerism. But seen another way, the Caliphate’s existence gives more strategic thinking Sunnis in Syria and Iraq, a useful tool to focus the minds of Washington’s policy makers. Since the dethronement of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, American moves in the Middle East, conscious or not, have helped extend the reach of Iran. Iran’s strategic footprint grew because it faced no regional threats, courtesy of America’s removal of the Taliban along its eastern frontier and Saddam along its western frontier. This made it easier for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to reach out, train and arm sectarian confederates – Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, and Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, and in doing so, open up a proxy theatre to intimidate Iran’s greatest regional threat – Israel.



Current moves by the Obama administration to seek a form of rapprochement with the Iranian Shiite theocracy, a long time enemy of the US and the West (since 1979 Iranian Revolution) over its strategically ambiguous nuclear programme, signalled that the Persian Shiite state might be a more useful

and reliable long-term partner than the fragile and turbulent Sunni states of the Arab League. Washington, it appears, is looking for a strong, united regional state that may be willing to act on its behalf, or at the very least, not resist a continuing American presence in the critically important Gulf area.

But this strategy, like all previous ones, is fraught with risk.

An Iran led by Ayatollahs, might sense weakness in American overtures and seek to find ways to further rollback US influence in the Gulf by fuelling unrest that is perceived to be ‘uncontrollable’.



Israel, already discomforted by Obama's change in strategy regarding Iran, may attempt to find Sunni actors willing to rise up and challenge Shiite and confederate sectarian authorities (such as the Alawite elite in Syria), sowing even more discord and bloodshed in order for the Jewish state to keep at arm's length from regional turmoil. Saudi Arabia, the home of Muslim holy sites Mecca and Medina which are sacred to both Sunni and Shiite, feeling the winds of change and being the wealthiest of

the Arab states, may well go down a similar path, adding to a sense of impending existential crisis.

If the current state of affairs in Syria and Iraq are any indication, ISIS and its Caliphate will be a temporary phenomenon. Those Sunni Syrians and Iraqis who have thrown in their lot with this group, have done so pragmatically with the idea of using extremist foot soldiers in their midst to swing the local situation back in favour of the Sunnis in both states. When this objective is achieved and Sunni power is reconsolidated in Damascus and Baghdad, the Caliphate will be over and ISIS and its supporters will be thoroughly rooted out with extreme prejudice by a new crop of secular, undemocratic leaders. But this objective will not be achieved easily or quickly. And a lot of this end game will depend on the foreign actors heavily invested in their respective ambitions.

Iran will fight to retain its influence that still extends from Basra in southern Iraq to the Levant via its proxies – Hezbollah and Assad's Alawites in Syria. Russia is arming Iran, Syria, and the Shiite Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki in an effort to gain strategic space in an area traditionally the domain of American and Israeli hard power. Given the state of US-Russian relations over Crimea and eastern Ukraine, it is unlikely that Putin will pull back from this area anytime soon, adding a new and dangerous element to the contemporary Middle East.

Israel is openly backing Kurdish independence in Iraq (July 2), leading to its direct involvement in breaking up the Iraqi state into smaller, quarrelsome sectarian/ethnic fiefdoms, too weak to ever pose a serious threat to Tel Aviv or its interests. Ostensibly this is being done by using the Kurdish militia, the Peshmerga, as a bulwark against further ISIS gains. But like most actors in the Middle East, Israel thinks long-term about its strategic position and it fears the creation of strong reconsolidated Sunni-led Syria and Iraq, because this could pose sustained and coordinated conventional and unconventional threats to Israel proper.

Saudi Arabia on the other hand, fears losing its 'leadership' position in the Arab world to Persian Shiites. Post 1979 it fought hard to acquire the trust of Washington and with the problems besetting contemporary Egypt, the largest Arab state and the region's natural Arab leader, Riyadh assumed the leadership mantle by dearth of its oil wealth and its religious position, hosting the world's two most important holy sites in Islam. But, as Western countries seek to exploit fracking technologies to rehabilitate old domestic oil and gas fields, their dependence on, and need for, the Saudi monarchy as a 'steady partner' and globally critical supplier of oil, is diminishing. Furthermore, disappointed by the apparent 'double game' that elements within the Saudi monarchy have been playing against the West by supporting extremist Muslim individuals and organisations, Western capitals seem happy to walk away from a partner whose

government represents a 'schizophrenic persona' – both eager to please and cooperate, while at the same time happy to condemn and attack the West whenever the opportunity presents.

From an American perspective there will be few on the benches of the Democrats or Republicans, who will mourn the passing of the current strategic status quo in the Middle East. The Arab Spring of 2011 broke the back of some long-standing regional strongmen, creating strategic openings that, especially in the case of Libya, will take years to sort out. Further east, the Gulf State monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) remain strong so long as Iran and general political chaos can be kept in check. With the sole exception of the UAE, whose ability to navigate the turbulent waters of the Gulf is testimony to farsighted thinkers among the country's past and current leadership and advisory set, the reckoning that will visit the Arabian peninsula could see Riyadh and Tehran locked in their own regional version of 'Vietnam'/'Afghanistan' style conflicts that will destroy Wahhabism as an organising force in Saudi Arabia, and sweep away Shiite theocracy in Iran. What such a Middle East will look like is highly speculative. What cannot be guaranteed is 'democracy'. But a new regional order will be created out of 'blood and iron'.

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

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ISIS map

http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2014/06/11/article-2655310-1EAD995F00000578-553_634x414.jpg

Obama image

http://static.wixstatic.com/media/c28a64_fdca98fec2704d93bb9859d43755642d.jpg_srz_957_386_85_22_0.50_1.20_0.00_jpg_srz

Iran map

<http://www.lobelog.com/wp-content/uploads/Iran-Map-22-620x350.jpg>