ISIS Success in Iraq and Syria: Strategic Ramifications
Kobi Michael and Udi Dekel

The takeover of northern and northwest Iraq by the ISIS organization (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), following its seizure of northeastern Syria, is further evidence of the growing strength of al-Qaeda and its affiliates as they advance towards establishment of a regional Islamic caliphate. It represents another stage in the takeover by radical jihadists exploiting the weaknesses of the central governments of weak or failing states. Seizing large territorial tracts, ISIS has gained control of infrastructures, weapons arsenals, energy sources, and bank funds, while at the same time mercilessly slaughtering members of other armies, ethnic groups, and tribes. Against this background, it draws encouragement from its cumulative achievements and the ineffectiveness displayed by the international community.

The Disappearance of Borders
The desire to do away with the borders established by the colonial powers in the Sykes-Picot agreement represents the opposition in principle by ISIS to the existence of nation states and its hope to establish a *sharia*-based Islamic caliphate. For its part, Iran wants to establish a Shiite crescent, which would also transcend national borders. This clash of interests makes the Sunni-Shiite conflict the most significant and lethal vector in the region, as in the early days of Islam.

The Sunni attack has resulted in the disappearance of the Syrian-Iraqi border; Hizbollah's involvement in Syria, backed by massive aid from Iran, has all but erased the Syrian-Lebanese border. The victory in Iraq has provided a tailwind for ISIS forces in Syria and strengthened their hold on the country's eastern sector. Captured US weapons, especially anti-tank missiles and armored vehicles, are being moved to Syria. Despite the division of ISIS forces, it is only a matter of time before the organization gears up for an attack on southern Syria and the capital city of Damascus.

Iran's involvement in Iraq is liable to result in the blurring of the border between central Iraq and southern Iran. Both extremist camps believe that their vision will prevail only if borders are erased and the region is reconfigured as a single political and religious entity.

Jordan: The Last Stronghold

If the recent events spill over into Jordan and ISIS forms strongholds in the Hashemite kingdom (particularly given the dire economic and demographic situation resulting from the influx of some one million Syrian and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees), Jordan is liable to be engulfed in chaos with the survival of the kingdom threatened. Jordan is confronting a growing number of cells of jihadist organizations infiltrating the state under the guise of refugees and through assistance and supply channels in the country to the rebels in Syria.

The commander of ISIS forces in Mosul has threatened explicitly to invade Jordan and eliminate King Abdullah. Although Saudi Arabia announced that if necessary it would dispatch tanks to defend Jordan, Amman cannot rely on Saudi military aid alone. It needs immediate assistance in order to improve its intelligence and operational capabilities to secure its borders with Syria and Iraq; it also needs economic help and a steady supply of oil. Furthermore, Jordan needs a clear strategic military ally. Although it cannot admit it openly, its only practical strategic military ally is apparently Israel. But above all, Jordan must receive financial and humanitarian aid to handle the tremendous influx of refugees.

A Test for US Strategy

In his speech at West Point, President Obama said, "today's principal threat no longer comes from a centralized al-Qaeda leadership. Instead it comes from decentralized al-Qaeda affiliates and extremists." He suggested allocating resources to train and build the capabilities of partner countries facing jihadist extremists on the front lines. The strategy of leaving Iraq was based on constructing professional Iraqi military and security forces. In Syria, the administration formulated a strategy that focused on limited assistance to the more moderate opposition forces and building a trained guerrilla army to fight Hizbollah, Assad's army in Syria, and al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremists. This strategy collapsed in both Syria and Iraq. In Syria, the Free Syrian Army disintegrated in the face of Islamic forces, especially ISIS and Jabhat a-Nusra, and it became clear that the FSA was incapable of forming an alternative to the Assad regime. In Iraq, the military was defeated in a single stroke and ousted from the north and west of the country, despite its US training and equipment.

Therefore, the US strategy of constructing partners and training and equipping them accordingly does not meet the test of reality. This failure joins the erosion of US deterrence after President Obama – despite his explicit threat were chemical weapons to be used in Syria – chose not to act militarily. These factors add to the frustration of the traditional US allies in the Middle East, and their concern that they will be abandoned if push comes to shove.

President Obama ordered that up to 300 advisors be sent to Iraq, and the administration has started to examine other political options. Nonetheless, there is debate in the United States on military intervention in Iraq, particularly aerial activity and the use of special

forces, because of the US interest and commitment to prevent Iraq's fragmentation, with parts of it falling into the hands of extremist Islamic groups, both Sunni and Shiite. By themselves, aerial strikes are ineffective in stopping jihadist fighters not operating in organized military settings. Military experts in the United States considering the use of unmanned aerial vehicles and drones understand that these capabilities are not enough to stop jihadists and force them out of the cities. Therefore, military intervention would also have to include the use of special forces on the ground to oust jihadists from strategic locations (such as oil production plants and refineries), and to train, drill, and mentor Iraqi army forces.

This dead end leads to a confluence of interests between the United States and Iran. President Obama revealed that there are already talks between Iran and the United States over Iraq, and that the United States has called on Iran not to act in a way that would exacerbate ethnic tensions. According to Obama, Iran is in a position to play a positive role in establishing a multi-ethnic Iraqi unity government. It appears that the United States is concerned that Iran will seize the Shiite provinces of Iraq by means of the Revolutionary Guards and other proxies. (There is already evidence of the presence of the Revolutionary Guards in Iraqi cities; Iran has made pronouncements about its willingness to come to the aid of the Shiite populations in Iraq and defend the Shiite holy sites.) On the other hand, some claim that the United States must take advantage of the opportunity to strengthen the scope of shared interests with Iran, and are examining the possibility of political and even operational coordination with Iran to preserve Iraqi unity. Proponents of this view see success in coordination on a stable Iraq as a tool for achieving agreement on the nuclear issue (even though the United States takes pains to decouple the issue from other regional issues) and even promote a settlement in Syria. In such a scenario, Iran's regional influence would increase significantly, whereupon Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Gulf states, and Iranian enemies in the region would find themselves in a very worrisome position, with the United States hard pressed to reassure these states. In any case, strong political opposition to the image of Iran as an ally, from both within the United States and outside it, may be expected to emerge.

Implications for the Future
ISIS's military successes in Iraq and Syria demonstrate the changes occurring in the Middle East and provide motivation for radical elements to exploit these successes to expand the organization's regional influence. Several factors are at the base of the success of ISIS and other jihadist organizations: a) the structural and functional weaknesses of Arab nation states; b) the organizations' networked and decentralized structure, which makes it easier for them to operate, move, and sustain themselves in the region, and makes it more difficult for armies to confront; c) the ineffectiveness of the international community, first and foremost the United States, stemming from the lack of a solution and an unwillingness to become militarily involved; and d) the erosion of the United States' image as a superpower and its ability to resolve regional problems.

Furthermore, US allies in the region are increasingly worried that at a moment of truth, the United States will fail to stand by them.

With shockwaves crossing national borders, it seems that the nation most threatened at this point is Jordan, which is an easy hop, skip, and jump away from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the Sinai Peninsula, and the danger of the entire region being dragged into a widespread violent conflict. Therefore, what is needed now is a joint US-European effort (with low profile Israeli involvement) to strengthen Jordan both economically and militarily. In addition, the United States must strengthen the players identified as the moderate camp – the ones opposed to global jihad – while building channels of cooperation among them and willingness to help stabilize Iraq as a first step.

Israel must continue to prepare for a scenario in which recent events spill over into its borders. As such, it will have to prevent the penetration of influence by Islamist-jihadist elements and the construction of infrastructures within areas controlled by the PA and contribute to the effectiveness of the PA's governability, security, and economy.

The time may have come to prepare conceptually as well as practically for the formation of a new organizing principle of the Syrian-Iraqi region, whose main point would be the dissolution of existing nation states and the establishment of ethnic nations: Alawite in western Syria, Kurdish in northern Iraq and Syria, a Sunni nation in northwest Iraq and northeast Syria, and a Shiite state in central and southern Iraq. It may be that ethnic and religious divisions will prove to be more natural and stable than the current configuration.