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ISIS: The Real Threat

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In recent months the Islamic State (IS; formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS) has managed to position itself as the most significant threat to regional stability in the Middle East. The organization has become a reviled global term, a synonym for extremism and a symbol of unbridled slaughter. The mass executions carried out by IS in Iraq and Syria, documented and distributed en masse for all to see, reflect the shock and awe strategy used by IS in the areas it has captured. In addition, its threats to conquer other Middle East states have resounded widely, giving it the media status of a global power in the making. In this way, IS has made itself the de facto replacement of al-Qaeda as the jihadist terror organization endangering world peace.

In light of these developments, this article examines whether IS is indeed a rising Islamic jihadist force about to seize control of several countries in this region as part of its plan to establish an Islamic caliphate, or whether it is an organization with limited means and abilities, whose pretensions exceed its real strength and are derived from the world view of its leader.

The brutal actions of IS in Syria and Iraq are nothing new for those following its evil deeds since it announced its establishment some eighteen months ago. However, for the last two months the organization's name has been mentioned repeatedly by world leaders as a significant threat, particularly since in recent months ISIS has conquered large swathes of Iraq and also threatened to attack and capture Baghdad, on its way to taking control of all of Iraq. These moves were accompanied by killing sprees that were extraordinary in their scope and cruelty, and that in recent weeks reached new depths with the mass slaughter of the defenseless Yazidi minority.

Without minimizing the achievements of IS, it appears that the secret of its power rests primarily on the weakness of its enemies. So far, IS has made territorial gains only in Iraq and in limited areas of Syria, two failed states whose central governments suffer from a lack of legitimacy among their citizens and ineffective control of large parts of their territory. The Iraqi army has proven a spiritless failure, while in Syria the army is mainly engaged in maintaining the survival of the regime in the country's principal cities. This

power vacuum lets IS operate with relative freedom in outlying regions and towns. Yet while in the areas it has conquered IS has apparently encountered so little opposition due to its policy of coercion and terror against the local populations, in the long run it is actually this policy that could spur many to resist it. Most Sunni Muslims are not interested in the extreme interpretations of IS, but at this stage have no choice but to obey the organization, if only for the sake of appearances. Should IS try to extend its conquests to areas of Iraq where there is an established Shiite population, such as the capital Baghdad or the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, it may well encounter a fighting population protected by an Iranian military force and deeper involvement of Western countries, as happened when it threatened to penetrate the heart of the Kurdish region of Iraq. A similar response is expected to happen if IS dares to confront Jordan or Turkey. For that reason, its threats to make similar advances against other countries of the region – Jordan, Lebanon, and certainly Iran and Turkey – are weak.

In fact, the main danger posed by IS does not concern the integrity of countries in the region, but its ability both to channel money and advanced weapons to terror organizations active in the region, and to make the territory it controls, which connects western Iraq with northern and eastern Syria, an impervious haven. This could serve as a base for promoting subversive activity and spreading terror, which in turn would increase regional instability. An area of this sort controlled by an extremist, messianic organization such as IS will enable jihadist Salafist terror groups from all over the world to find refuge, and use it as their base for further terror activity. It will provide training, with people and weapons moving freely in and out, and will turn the al-Qaeda dream of two decades ago into the nightmare reality of this decade.

ISIS has managed to distinguish itself from other global jihadist movements that still support al-Qaeda in the bitter conflict between al-Zawahiri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. By crowning himself caliph, Baghdadi labels anyone who does not recognize his new title and fails to obey him as a heretic. Thus it appears that in its ongoing activity in areas it has captured, IS has given new meaning to the term extremism, and this – ironically – casts al-Qaeda, the IS former patron and current enemy, in a relatively pragmatic light. IS fighters have crossed red lines and raised the already high threshold of brutality formerly pitched by al-Qaeda and its affiliates to new heights. This could become the norm in future conflicts, not only with IS but also with other terrorist organizations inspired by its methods, which at this stage appear to be successful. The thousands of young Muslims from all over the world, including Western citizens, who are present in war-torn areas in Syria and move between Syria and Iraq and participate in horrific acts in both these arenas are being indoctrinated and are acquiring battle experience and skills in terrorist and guerilla warfare, which could be translated into terrorist activity in their countries of origin. Therefore, special attention should be paid to the “evil spirit” and message that IS

is spreading among its actual and potential supporters. They could continue causing harm even after the organization is ultimately blocked by stronger forces.

It appears that the fears recently expressed by the leaders of Britain, the US, and France about the export of terror from the Middle East to their own countries has a solid base. Even if IS, as expected, is confronted effectively in Iraq and Syria by stronger and better organized forces, the phenomenon of global jihad, whose main proponents until now were al-Qaeda and its affiliates and are now IS and its affiliates, will presumably continue to be strengthened by a new generation of jihadis. Their goal is to revive the international terror system that was to a large extent thwarted over the years since the September 11 attacks in the United States. It is inconceivable that thousands of young people from Western countries who are participating in the battles in Syria and Iraq will not return to their countries of origin and try to spread the militant jihadist Salafist indoctrination they have received. They stand to use their experience in terror attacks in Western cities, whether as part of IS or al-Qaeda, or by setting up independent terror networks or even acting alone. Therefore, the broad international coalition of countries that were called on belatedly to take action against the terror of al-Qaeda and its affiliates following the shock of 9/11 should now wake up in time to stop the IS phenomenon in its infancy, before they are obliged to do so under the threat of terror in their own cities.

