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Behind the ISIS Smokescreen

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The horrifying scenes filmed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and released to the international media are giving new meaning to the terms “extremism” and “brutality.” Compared with ISIS’s cruelty, the massacres occurring elsewhere in the world seem relatively tolerable. Countries and terrorist organizations involved in murder and terror campaigns, such as the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, the ayatollahs’ regime in Iran, Hizbollah, Hamas, and even factions allied with Al Qaeda, are being considered as possibly legitimate partners in the war against ISIS.

The formation of a broad international coalition comprised of about 40 Western and Arab countries, with varying levels of involvement, is indicative of ISIS’s success in positioning itself as a global threat. This coalition is already operating in Iraq and Syria, mainly through aerial attacks and providing aid to the forces fighting on the ground. In Iraq, its activity is well defined due to the clear distinction between friend and foe. The situation in Syria, on the other hand, is more complex, since massively attacking the Salafi-Jihadist organizations including ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Jabhat al-Nusra, may contribute to the survival of the Assad regime, therefore contradicting the essence of coalition formed against those organizations. These organizations, especially Jabhat al-Nusra and its partners from the “Khorasan Army” directed by the Al Qaeda headquarters,

have consolidated their position in Syria, gaining control of extensive areas and using them to prepare attacks in neighboring countries and the West.

In this context, a September 28 statement by Jabhat al-Nusra leader Mohammed al-Julani, condemning the coalition attacks in Syria, should be noted, as he referred to them as “a Western crusade against Islam.” Al-Julani also threatened that the attacks would have severe consequences, hinting at possible retaliation in Western countries. Later, threats were also reiterated by Al Qaeda’s partners in Hejaz and the Maghreb’s spokesmen.

In addition to attacking the West, Al-Julani was critical of ISIS, therefore giving rise to doubt as to feasibility of reconciliation and rapprochement between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, Al Qaeda. The poisonous verbal exchanges between ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his spokesmen on the one hand and Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Julani’s patron, on the other, have for months been accompanied by battles between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra over control of large areas in Syria. Recently, however, senior religious figures in the global jihad camp have appealed to al-Baghdadi, asking him to avoid a *fitna* (internal discord), considered a grave sin in Islam. This appeal was designed to test the possibility of an alliance against what they consider a “total war” declared by the West against Islam.

The main obstacle in the way of an alliance between the jihadist organizations is al-Baghdadi’s provocative step of appointing himself as Caliph, placing him above all other Muslim leaders, regardless of their identity, including heads of state, and of course leaders of the other Salafi-Jihadist organizations. This self-appointment may prevent willful cooperation with other leaders. Nevertheless, the possibility of ad hoc cooperation between field operatives belonging to Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in Syria or other countries cannot be ruled out. In Lebanon, for example, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS operatives cooperated in fighting against Hezbollah and the Lebanese military in the Aarsal area where three of the captured Lebanese soldiers were executed: two beheaded by ISIS and one shot to death by Jabhat al-Nusra.

Al-Zawahiri, whose status as leader of Al Qaeda and the global jihad movement has been severely challenged by al-Baghdadi’s actions, is striving to leverage international focus on ISIS in order to divert attention from his organization’s preparations to take advantage

of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of this year. Al Qaeda, whose operatives have acquired combat experience in Pakistan and Afghanistan, together with the Taliban and other local forces, had also used the Syrian theater to identify and recruit new volunteers with suitable credentials, in order to expand its manpower and train operatives for future operations. That was apparently, the purpose of the “Khorasan Army,” whose existence and objectives were recently unveiled, following the bombardment of its camp in Syria.

These preparations are also reflected in the establishment of the “Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent” (AQIS) organization, whose founding was announced by al-Zawhiri at the beginning of September this year. The declared purpose of the organization is to reinforce jihadist activity in Pakistan, India, Burma, and Bangladesh. According to both official reports from Pakistan and the organization’s own announcements – despite different versions of the degree of success – the new organization has already tried to carry out an ambitious and daring attack designed to damage a Pakistani warship and to attack an American destroyer. Action on this scale, had it succeeded as planned, would have caused great damage and cost many lives, in addition to harming the prestige of the fleets of the targeted countries. Furthermore, the planning of such attacks indicates that Al Qaeda is not resting on its laurels, and refutes the assessments by senior American administration officials that Al Qaeda is a spent force.

Although the world’s attention is focused on the effort to stop ISIS, it is clear that at least at the current stage of the conflict, the countries in the coalition are reluctant to conduct ground operations on the scale needed to completely eliminate ISIS’s grip in Iraq and Syria.

The results of the global campaign against ISIS will directly affect the fate of various minorities in the Middle East, the lives of hundreds of thousands of refugees forced to abandon their areas of residence, and the stability of regimes in the region. At the same time, it is clear that there will also be consequences regarding Al Qaeda’s ability to resume its key role in global terrorism.

It stands to reason that a considerable proportion of the cadres of fighters on the various jihad fronts around the world, headed by those currently in Syria and Iraq may eventually

choose to join Al Qaeda. This is particularly an option if ISIS proves unable to fulfill its pretentious promises to institute an Islamic Caliphate. Some are liable to find a new home in Al Qaeda in order to fulfil their militant aspirations and desire to take part in the global jihad. It is also quite clear that Al Qaeda is preparing for a renewal of its activity under the smokescreen of the terror inflicted by ISIS that is blinding the world . Thus the West is liable to find itself again facing an enemy it had already considered past its peak.

Israel is not currently a top priority for Al Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, or even for ISIS. Yet in light of the situation described above, and since these organizations regard Israel as a partner in the Western coalition, they may choose to undertake action against it at an earlier stage than originally planned stage. Despite this risk, it is best for Israel to avoid initiating premature military measures against them, as long as it is not forced into an operation in order to thwart direct action against it. Israel should leave this task to the unprecedented broad-based international coalition assembled against these organizations, while still contributing to the success of the mission assuming neither a high profile nor a leading role.

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