MEI@ND
www.mei.org.in
Middle East Institute @ New Delhi
...for Openness and Credibility

COMMENTARY

No.212 Thursday, 14 August 2014

ISIS:
Global Islamic Caliphate or Islamic Mini-State in Iraq?

Yezid Sayigh
Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

In announcing the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the areas of Iraq and Syria it controls on 30 June and calling on Muslims everywhere to vow allegiance to its self-styled caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) displayed global ambitions. Whether these are real or not, many outsiders assume that its appeal extends far beyond the borders of Iraq. But in fact ISIS is following a well-worn path for taking power and consolidating it in the limited geographical space of a single nation-state where its true social base lies.

This constrains ISIS's hope of gaining significantly broader strategic depth, and belies its claims of representing a universal Muslim community, let alone of exercising meaningful authority over them. Despite the spectacular drama of its swift advances in Iraq in June, reality is more pragmatic: ISIS advanced in its own "natural" habitat, whose outer boundaries it has already reached. Iraq is where ISIS survived after the defeat of the Sunni insurgency in 2006-2008 and subsequently revived, and where the fate of its Islamic state will be decided.

Two analogies help understand what ISIS can and cannot do, and the limitations of its caliphate. First, the experience of Al-Qaeda, ISIS's mother organization, in Afghanistan reveals that no matter how powerful a transnational ideology, movements espousing it must still dig deep roots in local society if they are to survive and thrive. Al-Qaeda appealed to alienated Muslim youth worldwide, but in Afghanistan it had to attach itself to an indigenous armed movement, the Taliban, that was completely embedded in local Pashtun society. Consequently, Al-Qaeda was forced out with relative ease by the US invasion in late 2001, but not the Taliban.

Only in Iraq does ISIS resemble the Taliban. In Syria, in contrast, ISIS resembles al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. To be sure, there is considerable cross-border overlap: ISIS can and probably will take root in Syria, much as a sister Taliban emerged in the northern provinces of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. But neither Taliban movement has been unable to extend beyond its local social base into other parts of the two countries, despite the presence of other Islamist and jihadist groups. For ISIS, the implication is that its Iraqi base remains the critical core; if pressed, ISIS will prioritize consolidating it.

The appeal of ISIS to Sunnis of the wider Levant is limited by the narrowness of its potential social base. This is especially true in Lebanon, where the multi-confessional nature of Lebanese society and its class structure limit the pool of potential jihadist recruits to certain low-income or marginalized sectors of the Sunni community. ISIS can gain recruits only by attracting adherents away from other Salafist groups, as it has done in Syria.

In Jordan, ISIS may attract followers among the large underclass that is heavily concentrated in the Amman-Zarqa metropolitan area. But recruitment for jihad has already been high for many years—to fight in Iraq after 2003, and then in Syria after 2011—and so the level of mobilization will not rise much now. More significant is the appearance of the first jihadists among East Bank Jordanians, reflecting the extent to which years of neo-liberal policies pursued with the blessing of the royal court having eroded its longstanding social support base. But this remains a fringe phenomenon.

Even in Syria, where ISIS first seized extensive territory and asserted its authority over a significant number of people in 2013, it remains an outside force whose local commanders are almost entirely non-Syrians—Iraqis and other Arabs, and non-Arabs. It success there is mainly due to the weak cohesion of competing Syrian rebel groups, enabling it to capture their strongholds and border crossings in Raqqa and Deir az-Zor.

To the extent that ISIS has acquired a social base in Syria, this is largely limited to the northeast, where local Sunni clans and sub-clans have pursued longstanding rivalries between them by aligning with ISIS or its adversaries—including the Assad regime and al-Qaeda-affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—for advantage. Where these alliances of convenience are insufficient or absent, ISIS has bolstered its social control with direct coercion or with mass expulsion of uncooperative clans and villages.

This is where the second analogy comes in. ISIS resembles former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein most closely in its political and organization model and tactics, and in its social base. Both relied on a combination of a close-knit core of highly motivated and determined members, a relatively small and secretive military wing, and swift, decisive action to exploit their adversaries' weaknesses and exploit divisions among allies. Saddam and his fellow Tikritis used these methods to take power in alliance with other army officers in 1968 and then purged all but his inner core afterwards. ISIS has similarly used "kinetic energy" and putschist action since January 2014, and will eventually deal no less ruthlessly with its current allies in the Sunni insurgency.

More importantly, in marked contrast to other jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, which focus mainly on waging constant military action to "repel transgressors" [*dafa' al-sa'el*], ISIS is primarily invested in acting like a state—and in being seen as one. This is why it demands public vows of allegiance [*bay'ah*] to both caliphate and caliph and submission by all who come under their sway. This, too, encapsulates Saddam's strategy of seizing state power and then using it to assert social control and his exclusive power as sovereign. When faced with insurrection in southern Iraq in spring 1991, he responded not only with crushing military force, but also with swift restoration of public services and other manifestations of the central state.

ISIS backs the symbolic dimension with other forms of state-building. In Syria, it has devoted more attention—and generally done so more successfully—than most rival rebel groups to administering areas under its control, ensuring the supply of basic services and living needs, regulating prices, and transferring revenues from its oil exports and other income streams when needed. In Iraq, it has instead left these tasks to its Sunni coalition partners, while retaining overall command over politics, security, and the dispensation of justice in accordance with its perception of Sharia.

To legitimize itself ideologically and acquire leverage over its partners and competitors, ISIS calls Muslims to jihad, labels western governments "crusaders," and pledges to free Palestine. This again mimics Saddam, who appealed to pan-Arabism and the Gulf monarchies to support his war against revolutionary Islamist Iran in 1980, and in 1990 linked his invasion of Kuwait to the liberation of Palestine and evoked Islamic solidarity by having "Allahu Akbar" inscribed on the national flag.

But Saddam remained an Iraqi leader in the Iraqi setting, benefitting from the country's oil wealth to cement his rule internally but remaining bound by its limitations, especially its deep social cleavages and weak national identity. ISIS is even more dependent than he was on its societal balances and alliances within the narrower domestic demographic base of the Arab Sunnis of Iraq, a vulnerability that is not seriously compensated by its partial extension into Syria.

This is revealed by the differing approach taken by ISIS towards its Syrian and Iraqi provinces. When ISIS calls on Muslims worldwide to come to the Levant to wage jihad, it invites them to do so in Syria, not Iraq, even though it faces the prospect of a gathering counter-offensive by the Baghdad government with Iranian and U.S. support. On one hand this reflects the deep fragmentation of Syrian "rebel society," which has weakened its ability to resist penetration and domination by small contingents of determined foreign fighters.

On the other hand the social base of Iraq's Sunni insurgency is considerably more cohesive, and would probably resist subjugation by foreign jihadists far more vigorously and effectively. A Chechen fighter commands ISIS forces in Syria, for example, but could not do so in Iraq, where former Baathists and army officers, mainstream Islamists, and armed clans dominate local military councils and hold much of the ground.

ISIS is working actively to extend its hold in Syria, expelling all rival rebel factions from oil-rich Deir az-Zor province, poising to attack their strongholds to the northwest of Aleppo and in Idlib

province, and contesting the regime for major gas fields to the east of Homs. It already controls all the territory it envisaged bringing into its Islamic state in 2006. But the best prospect it can offer its constituency is a Sunni state even more landlocked than Iraq was under Saddam and severely lacking in secure access to oil markets and trade.

No matter how hostile the Arab Sunnis of Iraq are towards the Baghdad government, this is not what they envisage or seek. But unless Baghdad offers meaningful political reconciliation and reintegration, ISIS will use the opportunity to tighten and deepen its rule of its mini-Islamic state in much the way Saddam use the 1990-2013 sanctions regime to achieve total hegemony over Iraqi society.

Note: This article was originally published *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, *Beirut* and has been reproduced under arrangement. **Web Link**: http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/07/24/isis-global-islamic-caliphate-or-islamic-mini-state-in-iraq/hhuq

Dr. Yezid Sayigh, Senior Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut and a member of the International Advisory Board of MEI@ND. Email: ysayigh@carnegie-mec.org