

THE RISE AND DEMISE OF THE IS CALIPHATE

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At the end of 2014, some unexpected news about the “Islamic State” (IS) made headlines: *al-Quds al-Arabi* reported that a newly created IS military-police department in Raqqa had arrested fighters who had refused to go to battle in Kobani,¹ and the *Financial Times* reported the execution of 100 foreign fighters and the arrest of another 400 trying to flee the war zone.² Spoiled by its initial success, IS has now suffered some serious military setbacks in Baiji, Sinjar, Kobani, Tikrit and other towns in Iraq and Syria. In this article, I argue that these events are signs of the decline of an organization that has passed the zenith of its power. IS has overreached politically, militarily, and ideologically by proclaiming the renaissance of the Islamic caliphate, by declaring a territorial state to be the nucleus of an eschatological and universal Islamic empire, and by denouncing everybody who does not follow its extremist religious doctrine as an apostate. The loss of territory and centralized command, however, will most probably not mark the group’s end; rather it will cause IS to resort to a strategy of terrorist warfare — as it has already done in some attacks in Western capitals — and will lead to its metastasis into countries like Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Pakistan and Egypt.

IS is part of the jihadist branch of Salafism, a broad movement of fundamentalist Muslims who pretend to imitate the life cycle of the prophet Muhammad in a literal way and claim to be restoring authentic Islamic rule. IS has tried to expedite the arrival of this utopia through jihad by armed struggle and through the proclamation in June 2014 of a caliphate. In doing so, it has topped its rivals, such as al-Qaeda, on the Salafi and jihadist spectrum by claiming absolute authority and demanding outright obedience from every Muslim. According to its own understanding, whoever refuses to pay homage to the caliph is an apostate (*murtadd*) and can be murdered. Its surprising territorial expansion in Iraq and Syria in summer 2014 and its tremendous spoils of war, which included advanced military equipment and treasuries, seemed to confirm its religious narrative of undertaking an eschatological mission, as depicted in its glossy magazine *Dabiq*: “The signs of victory have appeared.”³ It is this conjunction of military success and religious salvation that attracted new warriors, who, in a dynamic of self-fulfilling prophecy, further accelerated the IS’s rapid expansion in summer 2014. And it is precisely this narrative of imminent victory that will ultimately lead to its demise — when its territo-

rial rule falters and its followers become disenchanted with its supposedly divine mission and view it simply as a “caliph without clothes.”⁴ In order to understand this dynamic, it is crucial to analyze the interdependency between political-military success and religious self-imagination.

This article describes the Islamic State’s emergence and ascent out of the Iraqi al-Qaeda-franchise, as well as its Islamist ideology. The group’s strong religious narrative of jihad in the sense of “holy war” has attracted young followers from all over the world for whom the group’s religious symbolism provides a collective identity and a mission of salvation. What is needed to combat IS and its radical Salafi narrative is not a new “War on Terror,” but rather a comprehensive strategy to counter its apocalyptic vision through the creation of reliable state institutions that restore trust in the here and now.

AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ

In modern Iraqi history, struggles for power and participation have often been framed in ethnic, sectarian and tribal terms. Under the surface of secular nationalism, the Iraqi Baath regime exacerbated divisions in a society whose identity-based communities were deeply alienated from one another. The 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein — who had privileged the Sunni Arab community and his own Tikriti tribe in particular — by the U.S.-led “Coalition of the Willing” and the subsequent formation of governments dominated by the Shiite majority heightened tensions between the two groups. The U.S. occupying power accelerated the breakdown of the Iraqi state. It did not prevent the plundering and destruction of ministries and weapon depots during the anarchic phase that followed the regime’s removal from

power, and in May 2003, Civilian Administrator Paul Bremer dissolved both the Baath party, which had ruled the country for decades, and the Iraqi Army.

Plagued by a political vacuum, the country became the arena of a regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as of a Sunni-Shia proxy war.⁵ It was in this context that radical Sunni jihadist militias started an uprising against the allied forces and the “Safawi” rule, as they termed the Shia-dominated Iraqi government.⁶ Jamaat al-Tauhid wa-l-Jihad, which had been expelled from Afghanistan in 2001 and became al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004, was one of these militias. It was able to obtain a large supply of weapons and explosives as well as to recruit a huge number of angry young Sunni men who resented having lost their privileged position in Iraq. Their leader, the Jordanian Afghanistan veteran Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, ramped up the brutality of the jihadists’ fight. In May 2004, he presented the global media with a video in which he himself beheaded American businessman Nicholas Berg as revenge for the recently revealed torture practices of U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison.⁷ Murders staged for the world media remain the trademark of his movement up to today.

Furthermore, AQI typically exhibits an extreme hatred of Shiites, whom it pejoratively describes as “rejectionists” (*rafida*). This disobedience makes them apostates and thus legitimate targets for murder, according to the group’s ideology.⁸ AQI carried out numerous “martyr operations” and other bombing attacks against Shiite religious processions, shrines and residential areas, killing tens of thousands of civilians and ultimately igniting a sectarian civil war in 2006. Although Zarqawi was assassinated on June 7, 2006, in a U.S. air

strike, the allied forces were only able to force al-Qaeda to go underground with the help of Sunni tribal fighters from the Awakening Movement (al-Sahwa) in 2008. The terror campaign subsequently subsided, but it did not come to a complete end.⁹

In January 2006, AQI merged with some minor jihadist groups to become the Mujahidin Shura Council, which then became the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyya) on October 15, 2006. After the assassination of ISI's top leaders, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayub al-Masri, by a joint U.S.-Iraqi military operation on April 18, 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took over. He recruited people who had formerly been high-ranking commanders in Saddam Hussein's security apparatus, especially the Republican Guards, for top positions, and he restructured ISI into a cohesive, disciplined and flexible organization capable of waging a sustained terror campaign.¹⁰ According to Athil al-Nujaifi, the governor of Mosul, ISI ran an oil-smuggling network right under the nose of the U.S. occupiers and the Iraqi state. It established strong links within the police and the army and blackmailed "taxes" from Mosul's traders. It was with this income that it financed its advance into Syria.¹¹

SALAFISM AND THE ARAB SPRING

The Arab Spring of 2011 created new room to maneuver for Salafism and jihadism; secular authoritarian regimes were overthrown or significantly weakened by popular protest movements and left a vacuum of power and meaning. In most of the protest countries, moderate, reform-oriented Islamists filled this gap, winning many early parliamentary elections — for example, in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco. Riding on this Islamic wave, fundamentalist Salafis, who had previously

been quietist, started to openly demand the Islamization of society and the creation of an Islamic state. At the end of 2011, Syria became the main arena of this new trend as its uprising escalated into an increasingly sectarian civil war.¹²

In their behavior and their "striving in the way of God" (*jihad fi sabili-llah*), the adherents of Salafism try to imitate the life cycle of Prophet Muhammad. He started out as a preacher in Mecca (610–622) practicing the Islamic calling (*al-da`wa al-Islamiyya*). In a second phase, he and his early Islamic community broke with the polytheists of Mecca through *hijra* in 622. As emigrants (*muhajirun*), they allied with their companions (*ansar*) in Medina. Muhammad established an Islamic state in Medina, which was then defended and expanded through contracts and military campaigns.

Like Muhammad, the Salafi movements of today are adapting their political strategy to changing circumstances: Under authoritarian rule they generally remain quietist and only try to proselytize through grassroots efforts (*dawa*), as Muhammad did in his first prophetic phase in Mecca. Emigration and segregation from the infidels (*hijra*) represent a further form of *jihad*, according to the Salafi interpretation. In the same way that Muhammad left the city of Mecca, they believe that the Muslims of today should practice *hijra*, break with their apostate surroundings and emigrate to the abode of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) in order to strengthen the Islamic community (*umma*). Since the Arab Spring, an increasing number of formerly quietist *dawa* Salafis are now, like the later prophet-turned-statesman Muhammad, making political demands for an Islamic state. The radical jihadi Salafis of al-Qaeda and IS have even proclaimed military jihad

against the rule of the infidels, as Muhammad supposedly did in his last decade.

GREATER SYRIA

All these different forms of jihad can be observed among the Salafis of Syria. Before the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, their political ambitions were suppressed under Bashar al-Assad; they basically undertook apolitical missionary work (*dawa*).¹³ The number of Salafis making political demands within Syria was small as most of the others had escaped abroad. During the Syrian uprising, however, their

ideology regarding the suppression of the Sunni community by an apostate Nusayri (Alawite) regime found many

supporters.¹⁴ The movement gained momentum and began militarizing and radicalizing the uprising, demanding the creation of an Islamic state ruled exclusively by sharia law. Many pious financiers from the conservative Gulf monarchies were willing to donate money for this jihad, and Syria soon became the most popular battlefield of global jihadism. In addition to veterans from the battlefields of Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Iraq and Libya, the uprising in Syria also attracted new jihadi fighters (*mujahidin*), especially from Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey and Europe.¹⁵ This is because the Syrian civil war has received a great deal of media attention worldwide, and gaining access through Turkey and other neighboring countries is relatively easy.

For jihadists, the popular uprising against the authoritarian regime of Bashar

al-Assad is secondary, the democratization of Syria, irrelevant. For them, the current territory of Syria represents much more a place of religious salvation. The interim goal is the liberation of Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*, including Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and parts of southern Turkey) as the nucleus of an Islamic empire. Historic Sham has a special salvation-associated meaning for Muslims and is of great symbolic importance. Jerusalem (al-Quds), with the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount, is the third-holiest place in Islam. Damascus,

the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750), is also connected to eschatological expectations; Isa bin

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Maryam (Jesus) will reportedly appear at the white minaret of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and head the apocalyptic final wars (*malahim*) that will foreshadow Judgment Day. Many Islamist militias like the Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahli-l-Sham, Supporting Front for the Residents of Greater Syria), use the term Sham instead of the word for the modern state, Syria (*Suriya*), in their names.¹⁶

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did not want to miss out on this symbol-rich location. In summer 2011, he sent the Syrian Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani as his envoy to the new jihad front to form the nucleus of the Syrian al-Qaeda franchise, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN, the Supporting Front). This expansion followed a well-established salvation narrative within the AQI. Long before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, in a letter to Osama bin Laden written in January

2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had already anticipated Sham as the battlefield of “true” jihad:

We know from God’s religion that the true, decisive battle between infidelity and Islam is in this land, i.e., in [Greater] Syria and its surroundings. Therefore, we must spare no effort and strive urgently to establish a foothold in this land. Perhaps God may cause something to happen thereafter.¹⁷

Referring to a religious tradition (*hadith*) of Muhammad as transmitted by Abu Hurayra, Zarqawi interpreted his struggle in Iraq as an anticipation of Armageddon: “The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify — by Allah’s permission — until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.” Dabiq, a village north of Aleppo in which the decisive battle against the Western powers is supposed to take place, will then open the way for the conquest of Constantinople and Rome. This is what IS now predicts in its colorful magazine of the same name, *Dabiq*.¹⁸

ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND SHAM

The Nusra Front concealed its identity as the Syrian franchise of al-Qaeda. It gained a reputation because it tipped the balance of power from the regime towards the opposition forces in early 2012 as a result of its suicide attacks and combat experience. When the United States listed it as a terrorist organization in December 2012, even the moderate Syrian militias strongly opposed the decision. Less than half a year later, its political affiliation became all too obvious. In April 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) entered into the Syrian civil war, and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the group’s amalgamation with the Nusra Front — in fact, its

own offspring — to become The Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi-l-Iraq wa-l-Sham), or ISIS.¹⁹ However, Al-Jawlani immediately denied the fusion;²⁰ on May 23, the head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, demanded that Baghdadi withdraw back into Iraqi territory. A rift between ISIS and its parent organization ensued, leading to competition for fighters, sources and legitimacy, and even to an outright war. Foreign volunteers and a younger generation of jihadists felt particularly drawn to the uncompromising ISIS approach. The group started attacking competing groups, which Baghdadi accused of apostasy (*ridda*), with great brutality: car bombs, suicide attacks and the assassination of their leaders.²¹ In the first half of 2014 alone, 6,000 people died in battles between ISIS and other opposition groups in Syria such as the Nusra Front, the Islamic Front (an alliance of several Salafi militias) and the Free Syrian Army.²² ISIS has repeatedly been able to recapture lost territory and to expand — often without a fight, as many fighters from other militias have deserted to it.²³ The Syrian campaign has also been economically successful for ISIS; the Syrian oil fields around Deir al-Zor have made possible the sale of oil to Bashar al-Assad’s regime, to Turkey and, since July 2014, to Iraq.

The expansion into Syria was accompanied by Baghdadi’s increasingly undisguised claim to be the supreme and only legitimate representative of the jihad in Iraq and Sham. His long-standing plan to establish a caliphate, however, required a transnational territory, for which the power vacuum in Iraq offered an opportunity. ISIS profited from a deep resentment among the Sunni Arabs against Shia majority rule, especially the increasingly discriminatory sectarian policies of Prime

Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and a power vacuum after the dead heat in the parliamentary elections in April 2014. Many Iraqis, irrespective of sectarian affiliation, complained of the increasingly authoritarian rule of al-Maliki, rampant corruption, a lack of security, and the insufficient provision of electricity, water and other state services. Parallel to the uprisings of the Arab Spring, there had been protests in the predominantly Sunni provinces since 2011. The violent actions of the Iraqi security forces against the protest camps in April and December 2013 aggravated confessional sentiments. In January 2014, following a violent crackdown on a protest camp in Ramadi, there was an armed uprising in which ISIS also took part.

Even if no one had expected such a massive move on the part of the jihadists, the Iraq offensive of June 2014 was not a complete surprise. ISIS already had a foot in the door when it overran the Iraqi security forces' positions. It launched a surprise attack and took over several Iraqi cities, including Mosul and Tikrit, within just a few days, before advancing to the outskirts of Baghdad. The Iraqi army and security forces, though superior in number and weaponry, fled haphazardly. Thirty thousands soldiers deserted in the face of a militia with an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 fighters. As the latter advanced, they destroyed security facilities and symbols of the Iraqi state and plundered depots containing modern U.S. weaponry. Now, for the first time, jihadists were in control of a cross-border territory in the heartland of early Islam. On June 29, ISIS announced the formation of a transnational entity infinite in its claim to territory and power: the Islamic State.

A key explanation for the successful military offensive is the mobility of

the group's fighters and its "shock and awe" tactics.²⁴ The militia attacked with some suicide bombers, then broke through the front lines on pick-ups and looted Humvees and started a guerrilla war while "sleeper cells" in the hinterlands simultaneously carried out bomb attacks. They separated border guards, police and soldiers according to their sectarian affiliation: Sunnis were "forgiven" if they joined ISIS; Shiites and members of other minorities were murdered by the thousands.²⁵ Propaganda videos on the Internet showed the brutal mass execution of captives by mass shooting and sadistically slow beheading, both of which were intended to intimidate the soldiers and cause panic among them. Furthermore, ISIS generated massive revenues from Mafia-like sources. It confiscated the property of the state and of civil servants, as well as that of minorities who had been driven out or even massacred — such as the Christians of Mosul, the Yazidis and other minorities — as spoils of war (*ghanima*). By smuggling oil, extorting ransom for hostages, robbing banks and selling counterfeit cigarettes, pharmaceuticals, cell phones, foreign passports and plundered goods such as antiquities, it generated extensive income. This made possible good pay for its fighters, the distribution of rewards, and bribes for potential allies among the tribes to win their loyalty.²⁶

THE PROCLAMATION OF THE CALIPHATE

On June 29, 2014, the first day of the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, ISIS surprised the global public with a further coup. Together with the declaration of the "Islamic State," the group's speaker, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, announced that the Shura Council of ISIS had designated

its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the new caliph. All Muslims were to pledge their obedience (*baia*) to him.²⁷ His civil name is Ibrahim bin Awwad bin Ibrahim al-Badri al-Hashimi al-Husseini al-Qurashi al-Samarrai. It indicates, in addition to his origins in Samarra, his supposed descent from the Quraish tribe, which is a condition for the office of caliph according to classical teachings; from the clan of the Prophet, Banu Hashim; and even directly from Muhammad through his grandson Hussein.

On the first Friday of Ramadan, July 4, 2014, the “Commander of the Faithful”

(*Amir al-Mu-
minin*) Caliph Ibrahim, as he was now officially designated, held his first, carefully arranged, Friday sermon

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in Mosul’s Great Mosque.²⁸ Because of a war injury suffered in the jihad battle, he ascended to the pulpit with a limp. There, he first cleaned his mouth with a twig, a devout gesture among Salafis, before putting into his mouth the verses of the Quran — “God’s words” — with which he strengthened his address, delivered in classical high Arabic. He was dressed in a black turban and cloak, as was Muhammad, supposedly, when he recaptured Mecca in the year 630.²⁹ On the whole, he presented himself humbly as an equal among equals who had taken on the heavy burden of the caliph. “Obey me, as I obey God and his messenger. If I do not obey God and his messenger, you do not have to obey me.” With this rhetorical phrase, which he took from Abu Bakr’s inaugural speech as the First Caliph in 632, he distanced

himself from the power-hungry despots of the region. Implicitly, however, he also indicated that he would no longer accept any other political or religious authority’s orders — especially not those of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Caliph Ibrahim declared that it was the individual duty of every Muslim around the world to undertake the *hijra* (emigration) to the abode of Islam, explicitly calling on Islamic legal professionals and judges, engineers, administrators and doctors to help in building the new state. Tens of thousands of Muslims have so far followed this order

and joined the Islamic State. The CIA estimated the number of fighters at 20,000–31,000 in September 2014,³⁰ ap-

proximately 15,000 of them foreign fighters from more than 80 different countries.³¹

In the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria, IS has taken on ever more functions of a modern, bureaucratic state. It operates ministries and various executive organs; imposes taxes and customs duties; distributes food; controls prices; passes draconian court verdicts; maintains information offices and a secret service; and establishes a capital, Raqqa, complete with a flag that resembles the Prophet’s, a hymn, and even coins.³² Yet, the group’s understanding of the caliphate clearly transgresses the authority and capacity of a nation-state.

First, the caliphate transcends existing nation-states and aims to unite all Muslim territories under its rule. This is why the Islamic State in Iraq and in Sham (ISIS) rebranded itself the Islamic State without

any territorial limitations. The new caliphate is purposely keeping its borders vague; it wants to expand its territory. Furthermore, the protagonists are not concerned about diplomatic recognition. According to their understanding, those Muslim territories that pay homage to the caliph will become provinces (*wilayat*) of the Islamic State; gaining recognition from “infidel” states is explicitly not an aim. The man-made colonial borders of the existing nation-states are irrelevant and should be demolished. At the border between Syria and Iraq, IS fighters have celebrated this symbolically by destroying some border fortifications and proclaiming “the end of Sykes-Picot.”³³ Tearing their identity papers to shreds and then burning them is an initiation rite that IS fighters play out in Internet videos as they abandon their former citizenship and become part of the new community of believers.

Second, the caliph claims supreme religious authority over all Muslims through the implementation of sharia, God’s law — with violence if necessary. Adnani stated in his announcement of the caliphate:

We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of khilafah [caliphate], it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the khalifah [caliph] Ibrahim and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations becomes void by the expansion of the khilafah’s authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.³⁴

Clearly, the self-declared caliphate is above all a self-authorization to exercise autocratic rule. Whoever does not acknowledge and obey the caliph, according to the undisguised threat in practically all IS statements, is an apostate. That Baghdadi

has taken on the honorific name of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, could be a reminder of the latter’s internal wars. Many tribes that had joined forces with Prophet Muhammad and pledged him their loyalty viewed the political alliance as being dissolved after his death. Abu Bakr and the young Islamic community, however, understood the *baia* as applying to the Islamic community as a whole. These tribes were thus seen as disobedient; they had renounced the Islamic community (*ridda*) and thus become apostates, who were then fought and defeated. According to this radical understanding, the declaration of the caliphate is in fact a license to kill those Muslims who do not submit to its rule.

Yet while IS pretends to be undertaking an Islamic salvation mission, its claims and demands go beyond the political rule and religious authority of the classical caliphate. IS resembles an apocalyptic sect that considers itself a chosen vanguard to establish global Islamic rule. The militants’ zeal is fueled by the religious conviction that they are preparing for an apocalyptic battle, “al-Malhama al-Kubra, the grand battle prior to the Hour,”³⁵ between the true believers and their enemies. This fantasy of participating in a salvation mission in combination with the group’s military victories to date, has, as noted above, attracted many foreign fighters, who have strengthened the Islamic State and enabled its expansionist war. The restoration of the caliphate has set the stage for IS’s divine mission. The cycle of success has thus far been interpreted as evidence that “the signs of victory have appeared,”³⁶ and this has in turn generated the euphoria of victory.

THE CALIPHATE’S DEMISE

It is this combination of hard and soft power that has enabled the new caliphate

to expand its territory and obtain the support of its devotees. Yet the Islamic State has probably already reached the peak of its power and is thus now in decline.³⁷ Meanwhile, many of the factors that led to its success — the rapid territorial expansion, the seizure of significant spoils of war, the terrorizing and intimidating of opponents, and the claiming of victory due to divine predetermination — are now working against the caliphate. Territorial rule has made it vulnerable to outside attack; its shrinking wealth is limiting its attractiveness; those who have been terrorized are now united in their desire for revenge; and the narrative of an imminent victory is being undermined by a series of defeats. It is very likely that these factors will contribute to its downfall as a territorial entity in the near future.

To date, IS has only been able to establish itself in those peripheral areas of the civil-war-weakened states of Syria and Iraq that were already outside of or only feebly within state control. The tearing down of the “Sykes-Picot border” between Syria and Iraq, a media success, was thus more for show. In the meantime, IS fighters have come up against the core regions held by Syrian and Iraqi regular troops and by the Kurdish Peshmerga and the People’s Protection Units (YPG, Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) fighters. The states on the caliphate’s immediate wish list — Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon — are undertaking extensive measures to defend their territories. The Iraqi state has regrouped its security forces, mobilized huge contingents of volunteers, and started a counteroffensive to liberate the occupied territories.

IS may now realize that it is much easier to erode an existing state order through terrorist attacks than to rule a territorial entity. Conquering a territory the

size of Great Britain was a significant victory for the self-declared state. However, controlling a population and providing it with services ties up resources and personnel. Furthermore, defending a “state” that is malign to all those surrounding it is a tremendous challenge. IS has now entered into classical warfare, in which the established armies of nation-states are superior in the long run because they are integrated into an international weapons-supply system and into alliances between states. After a period of blind panic and confusion, most states and nonstate actors in the region have now recognized the common threat emanating from the caliphate and have started mobilizing to counter it. Since August 2014, at the request of the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, an ever-growing alliance of Western and Arab states has joined the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, in order to fight IS in Iraq and Syria. Sixty countries have joined the alliance and its combat operations. Ironically, it seems that Caliph Ibrahim has succeeded in uniting the Sunni Arab regimes in a battle against the biggest common threat they have faced in years. Even the cooperation of former enemies such as the United States and Iran to combat the joint threat is currently an option.

The Saudi kingdom, the ideological trailblazer and global patron of Salafism, has joined the battle against IS, as the latter has become the greatest challenge to its ontological insecurity in decades.³⁸ The self-declared caliph derives his legitimacy from the same religious worldview as the ruling Saudi family — Wahhabi Salafism — according to which the caliph is higher in rank than the Saudi king, merely the “Custodian of the Two Holy Sites.” Even more threatening, (1) leading Saudi commentators have praised IS as a Sunni

force that is breaking the Shia crescent; (2) many jihadist volunteers hail from Saudi Arabia and may return one day; and (3) IS still enjoys a positive reputation among the country's youth.³⁹ The regime thus has good reason to join the battle against IS and to discredit its caliph. Grand Mufti Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaikh has described IS and al-Qaeda as “the primary enemy of Islam.”⁴⁰

As the success of the IS military campaign abates, the spoils of war are no longer abundant. The group's income from oil smuggling has decreased due to bombardment of its improvised refineries. Ransom payments from kidnappings and income from the selling of antiquities have also fallen off. IS is thus much more dependent on pressing the local population for further subsidies. Islamic taxes and tolls such as *jizya* (a tax imposed on non-Muslims) and *zakat* (obligatory alms) provide some additional funds, but they alienate the locals when enforced.⁴¹ The policing capacity of IS is declining; fighters are now needed at the front line, and local opponents may soon have the opportunity to revolt against the caliph's rule.

The introduction of a rigid sharia law, with draconian corporal punishments for everyday pleasures such as listening to music or smoking, as well as the demolition of places of worship and ancient archaeological sites, has alienated parts of the population. It is not just persecuted minorities such as the Christians, Shiites, Kurds, Turkmen and Yazidis who are now fighting the caliphate, but also many Sunnis. The strategy of terrorizing competing militias and population groups has fueled a passion for revenge, with competing groups in Syria and Iraq awaiting their satisfaction.⁴² The same strategy of surprise attacks at different places to expand the front line

and constantly changing tactics, which facilitated the speed and intensity of the ISIS assault on Iraq and Syria in summer 2014, is now being used by the group's opponents. Meanwhile, the countering alliance has put IS under massive pressure through a defensive war in which it has lost most of its capacity to impose a military agenda. The IS strategy has changed from hit-and-run to run and hide.

The bombardment of IS positions by the U.S. Air Force and other Western, Arab and Iranian armies as well as their support to the Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces has helped stop and even reverse the IS military expansion in Iraq and Syria. Kobani (Ain al-Arab), a Kurdish enclave on the Syrian-Turkish border, became the symbolic and fateful front line for keeping the narrative of the victorious “Islamic State” alive as of September 2014. However, IS failed to simply overrun the enclave as it had done in previous campaigns, becoming increasingly trapped in its own narrative of the universal caliphate and ultimately losing the battle for the town in January 2015. Since then, it has lost further territory in Syria and in Iraq.

The proclamation of the caliphate cannot distract from the new entity's massive legitimacy deficit, even in the eyes of many Salafis and jihadists who share its theological and ideological foundations. IS opponents reject the proclamation of the caliphate at this time in history and without consultation with the other *mujahidun*. They are now comparing IS with apostate sects from the early period of Islam. For example, the Islamic Front, the largest amalgamation of Syrian Salafis, as well as the al-Qaeda franchise Jabhat al-Nusra, equate IS with the Kharijites, early purists who left (*kharaja*) the community because they saw it as having deviated from pure Islam.⁴³

Last but not least, there are many reports of massive disciplinary problems inside IS. As mentioned above, “traitors” and defectors are being persecuted by a newly established military police and punished with prison and execution. The morale of fighters, it seems, has hit bottom.⁴⁴ This is evident in the group’s self-portrayal in *Dabiq* magazine, the rhetoric of which has turned from promises of imminent victory, to motivating slogans about a “challenge by God,” to open threats against traitors.⁴⁵ In a revealing article in *Dabiq*, no. 6, from the turn of the year 2014/2015, the field commander “Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir” provides dozens of exhortations to the fighters: “The weak fighter amongst them is equal in his share of ghanīmah [spoils of war] with the strong fighter amongst them.... Beware of letting the affection you have towards a relative or loved one turn you away from aiding Allah’s religion.... Be patient with your leader even if he has wronged you.”⁴⁶ The unspoken subtext reflects the massive problems with discipline and lack of motivation that have been supported by recent media reports.⁴⁷

The caliphate is struggling against these signs of demise by creating new putative “victories” — for instance, by publishing gruesome assassination videos, hijacking villages, destroying antiquities in museums and archeological sites and perpetrating “lone wolf” assassination attacks in Western capitals. The caliph has received oaths of obedience from several groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Algeria, and, most recently, from Boko Haram of Nigeria. However, none of these groups controls a noteworthy territory or can substantially help to defend IS against its opponents in Syria and Iraq. Although IS is trying to create new momentum for its success

story, these are signs more of desperation than of strategic gains.

AVOIDING ANOTHER CALIPHATE

A set of factors facilitated and fueled the shocking rise of the Islamic State. In Iraq after 2003 and in Syria after 2011, the state lost control of vast amounts of territory. This power vacuum and Sunni resentment over discrimination in these deeply divided societies fueled the rise of Salafi and jihadist militias. Even though these militias had much in common in terms of ideology and targets, they competed fiercely for territory, resources, combatants and legitimacy. It was in this context that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took the opportunity to proclaim a single “Islamic State” that was to unite all true believers under his command as the caliph. Even if this self-declared state is destroyed by the superior military power of the new U.S.-led alliance and the local armies, the determinants of its rapid rise will persist. Military intervention will not suffice to break this cycle; rather, a mid- to long-term strategy is needed:

- The home countries of jihadist fighters must prevent new recruits from joining the battlefield, and they need to provide an exit-strategy for those citizens who drop out of the jihad.⁴⁸ Otherwise, the only options left to these fighters will be to strive for paradise through martyrdom by killing as many “infidels” as possible or to move on to the next jihad, whether in Libya, Yemen or their own home countries.
- Western allies like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the UAE need to clearly distance themselves from the jihadist groups they have created and supported in the past. Many elites in the Arab Gulf

monarchies still have a shared concept of the enemy: Shiite Muslims, Iran, moderate Sunnis, Jews, crusaders, secularists and the Muslim Brotherhood — anyone who does not follow their interpretation of Islam. Sunni theologians from the Salafi branch should de-romanticize jihadist ideology and develop a theology that allows for a rational understanding of politics as an inclusive state order for all citizens.

- Jihadist militias have primarily taken hold in the deeply divided societies of the Middle East. These societies are in urgent need of legitimate and effective state institutions that provide their citizens with equal rights, participation, security, education and economic

development. Western countries should provide more effective state-building assistance. They should offer political, economic and cultural cooperation based on partnership, and not just emergency military intervention in the struggle against terrorism.

Without such measures, the deeply divided societies of the Middle East will remain hotbeds for radical movements like al-Qaeda or the “Islamic State,” which will easily attract a community of the globally disenfranchised and mobilize them with a new vision of salvation. Other self-styled “caliphs” may soon arise to resume the project of accomplishing the Prophet Muhammad’s “cycle of jihad” according to the Salafi doctrine.

¹ Umar al-Huwaydi, “Da’ish Is Founding a Military Police in the Syrian (Town of) Raqqa (Arabic),” *al-Quds al-Arabi*, December 16, 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=266115>.

² Erika Solomon, “ISIS Morale Falls as Momentum Slows and Casualties Mount,” *Financial Times*, December 19, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/f1705f00-85e6-11e4-a105-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=intl#axzz3OYeUSopK>.

³ Islamic State, ed., “The Return of Khilafah,” *Dabiq* 1, 1435, 9, <http://worldanalysis.net/14/search/Dabiq/>.

⁴ Stephan Rosiny, *The Caliph’s New Clothes: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*, vol. 6, GIGA Focus International English (Hamburg, 2014), http://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/gf_international_1406.pdf.

⁵ Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprising and the Rebirth of the Shi’a-Sunni Divide*, The Brookings Institution, 2013.

⁶ This pejorative term, referring to the Iranian Safawi dynasty (1501-1722), is used by many Sunni Arab Iraqis today to describe the alleged Iranian influence and to discredit their Shiite fellow citizens as “aliens.”

⁷ “‘Zarqawi’ Beheaded U.S. Man in Iraq,” BBC, May 13, 2004, sec. Middle East, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3712421.stm.

⁸ Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, “Zarqawi Letter: Coalition Provisional Authority English Translation of Terrorist Musab Al Zarqawi Letter Obtained by United States Government in Iraq,” January 2004, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/state/31694.htm>; and Nibras Kazimi, “Zarqawi’s Anti-Shi’a Legacy: Original or Borrowed?,” in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 4 (2006): 53-72.

⁹ For the chronological distribution of insurgent attacks, with a peak of more than 1,500 weekly attacks in 2006, see Danielle F. Jung et al., *Managing a Transnational Insurgency: The Islamic State of Iraq’s “Paper Trail,” 2005-2010*, ed. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Managing-a-Transnational-Insurgency-ISI-FINAL1.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ahmed S. Hashim, “The Islamic State: From Al-Qaeda Affiliate to Caliphate,” *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (2014): 69–83, doi:10.1111/mepo.12096.

¹¹ “Qissat taslim al-Musul ila ‘Da’ish’ (The story of the surrender of Mosul to ‘Da’ish),” *al-Hayat*, July 2, 2014.

¹² International Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report 131, (2012), [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle East North Africa/Iraq Syria Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle_East_North_Africa/Iraq_Syria_Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition).

¹³ Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria. The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Florian Bernhardt, “Diese dreckige, ungläubige kleine Sekte’. Der syrische Bürgerkrieg und der Hass auf die Alawiten,” *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, no. 1 (January 2013): 59-65.

¹⁵ For the Caucasian jihadists, see Emil A. Souleimanov, “Globalizing Jihad? North Caucasians in the Syrian Civil War,” *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (2014): 154-62, doi:10.1111/mepo.12090. For Turks fighting with ISIS, see Gunes Murat Tezcur and Sabri Ciftci, “Radical Turks. Why Turkish Citizens Are Joining ISIS,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 11, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142352/gunes-murat-tezcur-and-sabri-ciftci/radical-turks>. For a map showing the accumulated numbers of foreign fighters, see Swati Sharma, “Map: How the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Iraq and Syria Has Surged since October,” *Washington Post*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/01/27/map-how-the-flow-of-foreign-fighters-to-iraq-and-syria-has-surged-since-october/>.

¹⁶ Further militias of this kind are Ahrar al-Sham, Ansar al-Sham, Failaq al-Sham, Ghuraba’ al-Sham, Sham al-Islam Movement, Suqour al-Sham, and al-Jabha al-Shamiya.

¹⁷ Musab al-Zarqawi, “Zarqawi Letter: Coalition Provisional Authority English Translation of Terrorist Musab Al Zarqawi Letter Obtained by United States Government in Iraq.”

¹⁸ volumes of this English online magazine edited in 2014 are entitled “The Return of Khilafah” (vol. 1), “The Flood” (vol. 2), “A Call to Hijrah” (vol. 3), “The Failed Crusade” (vol. 4), “Remaining and Expanding” (vol. 5), and “al-Qa’idah of Waziristan, A Testimony from Within” (vol. 6). In 2015, vol. 7 (“From Hypocrisy to Apostasy. The Extinction of the Greyzone”) and vol. 8 (“Shari’ah Alone Will Rule Africa”) have been edited so far. In a very simplistic way, they illustrate the basic concepts of the new caliphate. The volumes are available at <http://worldanalysis.net/14/?s=Dabiq>.

¹⁹ The text of the declaration was downloaded on July 15, 2014, from <http://www.bramjnet.com/vb3/showthread.php?t=1083163>, but the website has been shut down in the interim. See Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Nusra Front Emerge as Rebranded Single Entity,” *Long War Journal*, September 4, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/the_emir_of_al_qaeda.php.

²⁰ His speech was downloaded July 20, 2014, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eB3Afl3hgA, but the website is no longer online.

²¹ Cole Bunzel, “The Islamic State of Disunity: Jihadism Divided,” *Jihadica*, January 30, 2014, <http://www.jihadica.com/the-islamic-state-of-disunity-jihadism-divided/>.

²² Marlin Dick, “Islamist Militias Unite under ‘Code of Honor,’” *The Daily Star*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/May-19/256938-islamist-militias-unite-under-code-of-honor.ashx>.

²³ Hashim, “The Islamic State.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁵ In one incident alone, 1,500 soldiers and security force personnel from the former Camp Speicher military base in Salah al-Din were killed; see UNAMI (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq) and OHCHR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), *Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 6 July – 10 September 2014*, 2014, 6, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_OHCHR_POC_Report_FINAL_6July_10September2014.pdf.

²⁶ Louise Shelley, “Blood Money: How ISIS Makes Bank,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142403/louise-shelley/blood-money>; and Prem Mahadevan, *The Neo-Caliphate of the “Islamic State,”* CSS Analyses in Security Policy 166 (Zurich, 2014), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/CSSAnalyse166-EN.pdf>.

²⁷ See Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “ISIS Spokesman Declares Caliphate, Rebrands Group as ‘Islamic State,’” *SITE*, June 29, 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html>.

²⁸ For an English translation, see https://ia902501.us.archive.org/2/items/hym3_22aw/english.pdf.

²⁹ “al-Baghdadi labisa al-`amama al-sawda’ ta’assiyān bi-l-nabi (al-Baghdadi wore the black turban following

the example of the Prophet) (Arabic),” *Sabq* Online Newspaper, July 7, 2014, <http://sabq.org/sxfgde>.

³⁰ “CIA Triples Estimate of IS Numbers,” BBC News, September 12, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29169914>.

³¹ Reem Ahmed and Daniela Pisiou, *Foreign Fighters: An Overview of Existing Research and a Comparative Study of British and German Foreign Fighters*, Working Papers 8 (Hamburg, 2014), http://ifsh.de/file-ZEUS/pdf/ZEUS_WP_8.pdf; and Swati Sharma, Julie Tate, and Gene Thorp, “Airstrikes against Islamic State Do Not Seem to Have Affected Flow of Fighters to Syria,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/airstrikes-against-the-islamic-state-have-not-affected-flow-of-foreign-fighters-to-syria/2014/10/30/aa1f124a-603e-11e4-91f7-5d89b5e8c251_story.html?hpid=z1?v1.

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³³ See the English-language Internet video, *The End of Sykes Picot*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i357G1HuFcI>.

³⁴ See endnote 19.

³⁵ Islamic State The Call to Hijrah, *Dabiq* 3, 1435, 6, <http://worldanalysis.net/14/search/Dabiq/>.

³⁶ Islamic State, *Return of Khilafah*, 9.

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³⁹ Frederic Wehrey, “The Saudi Thermidor,” *Current History* (December 2014): 346–7.

⁴⁰ “Mufti al-Sa’udiyya: ‘Uduw al-Islam al-awwal af al ‘Da’ish’ wa ‘al-Qaeda,’” *Al-Hayat*, August 20, 2014.

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⁴² On February 23, 2014, a suicide attacker killed al-Qaeda veteran Abu Khalid al-Suri and several others in Aleppo; on May 16, 2014, IS militants beheaded the popular leader Muthanna Husain; and on September 9, 2014, it was most likely IS that incapacitated the rival militia Ahrar al-Sham by killing nearly its complete leadership.

⁴³ Radwan Mortada, “Black Flags at the Border: ISIS Betting on al-Talli Joining Its Ranks,” *Al Akhbar English*, December 29, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23056>.

⁴⁴ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “About 2000 People Killed by Islamic State since the Establishment of ‘Caliphate,’” December 28, 2014, <http://syriahr.com/en/2014/12/about-2000-people-killed-by-islamic-state-since-the-establishment-of-caliphate/>; and Solomon, “Isis Morale Falls as Momentum Slows and Casualties Mount.”

⁴⁵ Ghanem, “The Islamic State.”

⁴⁶ Abū Hamzah al-Muhājir, “Advice for the Soldiers of the Islamic State,” in *Al-Qa’idah of Waziristan, A Testimony from Within*, ed. Islamic State, *Dabiq* 6, 1435, 6–15, <http://worldanalysis.net/14/search/Dabiq/>.

⁴⁷ Maria Abi-Habib, “Splits in Islamic State Emerge as Its Ranks Expand,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-feels-growing-pains-1425903933>; and Liz Sly, “Islamic State Appears to Be Fraying from Within,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-islamic-state-is-fraying-from-within/2015/03/08/0003a2e0-c276-11e4-a188-8e4971d37a8d_story.html?tid=pm_pop.

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