



The Collapse of the Islamic State: What Comes Next?

November 18, 2017

Overview¹

- ▶ On June 29, 2014, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In the summer of 2014, at the height of its expansion, **the Islamic State's territory covered about a third of Iraq and between a quarter and a third of Syria.**
- ▶ That large expanse, from the outskirts of Baghdad to the outskirts of Aleppo, was home to between five and six million people and had a physical infrastructure that included oil and gas fields, dams, bridges, power stations and grain stores. At the height of its power (the second half of 2014), the oil and gas fields provided ISIS with an income of several million dollars a day. **ISIS, which overnight had become the richest terrorist organization in the world, sought to take control of more territories in Iraq and Syria, the Middle East and around the globe.**
- ▶ In response to ISIS's dramatic territorial gains in the summer of 2014, **an American-led international coalition was formed** to combat the organization (September 2014). One year later (September 2015) **Russia began military intervention in Syria**, initially to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime and later to support the regime in fighting ISIS and other rebel organizations, referred to as "terrorist organizations" (among them the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham, affiliated with al-Qaeda). **ISIS found itself under increasing military pressure from the superpowers** (the United States and Russia), **Iran and Iranian-backed forces** (Hezbollah and Shi'ite militias), **and local armies and militias** (the Syrian and Iraqi armies, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurds and on occasion other rebel organizations).

ISIS's expansion in Iraq and Syria was halted during the first half of 2015. A continuous campaign has been waged against the Islamic State for two and a half years and is about to be completed (November 2017). On the ground, the Islamic State no longer exists as a

¹ The English translation will soon be completed and posted to the ITIC website.

functioning territorial entity. It has lost almost all of its territories, including its "capital cities" of Mosul and Raqqa, as well as its core territories along the Euphrates in Iraq and Syria. Its leadership and weapons were severely hit, both in ground fighting and by the intensive aerial attacks carried out by Russia and the coalition countries. Its governmental institutions have been destroyed and it has lost its economic assets (especially the oil and gas fields). **Apparently, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's vision of an Islamic Caliphate has come to an end, at least for the time being, although ISIS still maintains a presence in Syria and Iraq, and will continue to exist.**

► This study examines the main stages in the collapse of the Islamic State and the reasons behind it, and **tries to evaluate what the character of the ISIS's post-Islamic State and activities will be. The key questions and possible answers are the following:**

- ◆ **Will ISIS continue to exist after the collapse of the Islamic State?** In ITIC assessment, **ISIS will exist but will change its character and the modus operandi of its activities.** It will change from an organization which controlled extensive territories and administrated the local inhabitants to **what it was before, that is, a terrorist-guerrilla organization unconnected to a territorial base.** Once it collapses, in all probability **ISIS will reorganize, applying lessons learned from the failure of the establishment of the Islamic State.** During that time the organization will try **to continue carrying out terrorist-guerrilla attacks and eventually to upgrade them to prove it still exists as a leading jihadist organization.** Its main targets will probably be the Iraqi army, the Syrian army, the Russian and American presences in Syria and Iraq, and governmental targets in Iraq and Syria, Shi'ite-Alawite targets and targets affiliated Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and Iraq. **ISIS's activities may prove troublesome for the various forces operating in Syria and Lebanon, but will most likely not pose a strategic regional or international threat,** as the Islamic State did at the height of its expansion.

- ◆ **Will the provinces ISIS established beyond Syria and Iraq survive?**

- In ITIC assessment **the model of the Islamic State lost its attraction and it is doubtful whether an attempt will be made to repeat it, at least in the foreseeable future.** However, **the concept of jihad against the "infidels" wherever they are found still exists and will lead to the continued existence of most (if not all) of ISIS's provinces. That will motivate operatives in the**

various provinces to continue fighting, possibly in collaboration with local al-Qaeda networks. The chances of survival and the degree of success of ISIS's activities in the various provinces will depend on four key factors: the **political and societal conditions** in each country; the **balance of forces** between ISIS operatives and the various local regimes' military and security forces; the **ability of ISIS operatives** who fought in Syria and Iraq **to return to their home countries**; and the **strength of the al-Qaeda branch** operating in the country of the Islamic State province.

- **How will the Islamic State influence ISIS's Sinai Province?** The Sinai Province, which operates in a territory where Egyptian governance is weak, will in all likelihood **continue to pose difficult problems for the Egyptian security forces**. In ITIC assessment ISIS's Sinai Province **will try to foster cooperation with jihadist operatives inside Egypt itself, with ISIS operatives in Libya and with jihadist operatives in the Gaza Strip** in order to replace its lost connection to the Islamic State. At the same time **the Sinai Province will look for alternative sources of funding** (such as bank robberies and smuggling²). The lack of a significant al-Qaeda presence in the Sinai Peninsula may also support the existence of the Islamic State's Sinai Province in the future. Even after the collapse of the Islamic State, the **Sinai Province will in all probability continue its campaign against Egyptian security forces**. It may even **increase its activities and their complexity to show it is still a factor to be reckoned with**. At the same time, ISIS's Sinai Province may also **continue its sporadic attacks on Israel** (rocket fire, border attacks, showcase attacks).

- ◆ **Will ISIS move its leadership and central presence and activities from Iraq and Syria to another country? Most likely it will not, for the following reasons:** even after the collapse of the Islamic State, the central regimes in Baghdad and Damascus will continue to be weak and the Sunni-Shi'ite schism will remain strong. Unless that situation changes, **ISIS will prefer to continue its activities in Syria and Iraq, in the heart of the Middle East, to moving to another country** despite the blow it suffered.

² On October 16, 2017, Islamic State's Sinai Province operatives robbed the branch of the Egyptian National Bank in El-Arish. The Egyptian media reported that they took 17 million Egyptian pounds (about \$1 million). Criminal activity is liable to be the direction taken by the Sinai Province and other ISIS provinces.

In addition, moving ISIS and the Islamic State's leadership and senior operatives to the periphery of the Middle East or even beyond will **expose ISIS as a failure and lessen its chances of rehabilitating itself and returning to its status as a leading jihadist organization**. In addition, in ITIC assessment **it will be difficult for ISIS to get a strong foothold in its other provinces, to say nothing to repeating the attempt to establish an Islamic State, because that will mean attacks from local and international forces** (the failure of ISIS's territorial expanse in the Sirte region in Libya showed how difficult that would be).

◆ **What kind of terrorism will ISIS initiate abroad after the collapse of the Islamic State?**

- The collapse of the Islamic State may cause **a significant decline of ISIS's operational capabilities to plan and direct terrorist attacks abroad** (attacks which are complex and more deadly). There are **a number of reasons** for that: the loss of operatives who directed attacks abroad, at both the command and operational level; the loss of headquarters, mainly in Raqqa where external attacks were planned and directed; the defection of many foreign fighters who held key positions in planning and directing such attacks; and in addition, in ITIC assessment **ISIS's focus will be on rehabilitating the organization**. The ITIC assumes that at a time when ISIS is fighting for the survival of its core states, it will not give high preference to carrying out complex attacks abroad, **although it may plan isolated "revenge attacks" for the collapse of the Islamic State**.
- However, only a small number of attacks carried out by ISIS abroad were planned by ISIS headquarters in Syria, and they were preceded by operational, logistic and intelligence preparations. **Most of the attacks in the West were ISIS-inspired, carried out for the most part by individuals who identified ideologically with ISIS and its propaganda**. In some cases the individuals underwent rapid radicalization and decided to carry out attacks without the involvement of ISIS's headquarters. In ITIC assessment, although the idea of an Islamic State was severely damaged, and despite blow to ISIS's effective propaganda machine, **ISIS-inspired attacks will not come to an end and in the short term may increase** (to avenge the collapse of the Islamic State). In the future, the extent of ISIS-inspired attacks will be influenced both by the societal

and political conditions in the various countries, by ISIS's ability to reposition itself as an important jihadist organization in Iraq and Syria, and by its to rehabilitate its propaganda machine.

◆ **How will the return of the foreign fighters influence terrorism in their own countries?**

- Several thousand foreign fighters have already returned home and thousands more are waiting for the opportunity to leave Syria and Iraq. **It is reasonable to assume that their involvement and influence on terrorism in their own countries will increase as their numbers increase. Their return can be expected to pose difficult security problems for local governments.** The fighters are trained and experienced, and during the fighting were brainwashed with Salafi jihadist ideology.

- The foreign fighters are liable to join local Salafi jihadist networks and **encourage Islamist extremism and terrorism.** Some of them may return home with wives and children who were brainwashed by Islamic State ideology, and witnessed the atrocities carried out in Syria and Iraq. **Those children may be the foundation for a new generation of ISIS supporters in Western countries and elsewhere.** However, it is still difficult to estimate how many of the fighters who return from Syria and Iraq will continue to follow ISIS ideology, and how many of them will be motivated to carry out terrorist attacks in their home countries in ISIS's name.

◆ **How will the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate influence ISIS's relations with al-Qaeda?** Its collapse will show **that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's concept of establishing the Islamic State "here and now" was mistaken, and that Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Osama bin Laden before him, were correct when they objected to the establishment of an Islamic State that controlled territory.** Given that and the weakening of ISIS, **the charged relations between ISIS and al-Qaeda may change.** The changes may take place in Syria and Iraq as well as in ISIS's provinces in other countries. **ISIS operatives may return and join al-Qaeda, the organization from which ISIS sprang, or one of the other forces, to present a united front of jihadist organizations.** It is also possible that even if ISIS operatives preserve its separate

organizational frameworks, **there will be local collaboration between ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq as well as in ISIS provinces in other countries.**

◆ **What will be the local, regional and international influence of the collapse of the Islamic State?**

- **The United States:** In ITIC assessment **the United States will not go far beyond achieving its strategic objective of eliminating the Islamic State and weakening ISIS.** As opposed to Russia and Iran, which will seek to make political-strategic capital from their support of the Syrian regime, **the United States will be satisfied with achieving its declared objective and not seek a meaningful military presence or invest significant economic resources in Syria.** One of the reasons for that is **American awareness that the genuine influence of the Syrian regime on most of the rebel organizations and on future developments in Syria will be very small.** An open question is **what American policy will be towards the Kurds in Syria, who proved themselves as trustworthy allies and made a great contribution to the collapse of the Islamic State.** American support for the region controlled by the Kurds in northeastern Syria will lead to difficulties in American-Turkish relations, while abandoning the Kurds in Syria **will expose the United States as an unreliable ally and harm its regional standing.**

- **Russia:** The collapse of the Islamic State and the following rout of the rebel forces from the region of Idlib **may motivate the Russians to limit their forces in Syria after the victory over the terrorist organizations.** According to reports in the Russian media, Russia is currently examining the possibility of withdrawing some of its forces (articles published in the Russian daily Kommersant and the TASS news Agency, October 30, 2017). However, even if the Russians do reduce their forces in Syria, **they will still continue to secure their strategic interests and seek to maintain the great influence they acquired with the Syrian regime during the Syrian civil war. That may create friction between Russia and Iran, which seeks a dominant position in Syria and to pursue its own strategic interests.**

Iran: Iran will probably view the collapse of the Islamic State **as an opportunity to increase its influence in Syria and Iraq.** That will enable Iran **to promote its**

strategic goal of creating an Iranian-Shi'ite sphere of influence from Iran to Lebanon (and in addition, **Yemen**). In general, Iran will not use its own military forces within the sphere of influence but will rather **operate through Shi'ite proxies to secure its local interests in each country**. Such a sphere of influence will make **Iran the leading regional power in the Middle East and weaken the influence of its enemies and rivals, including the United States and the Sunni Arab states**. **Regarding Israel, Iran will seek to create an active terrorist front in the Golan Heights** by handling Shi'ite (Hezbollah), Palestinian and Druze proxies against Israel.

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