The Collapse of the Islamic State: What Comes Next?

November 18, 2017

Overview

▶ 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 functioning territorial entity. It has lost almost all of its territories, including its "capital cities" of Mosul and Raqqah, 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 smuggling[1]). 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. 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**

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[1] 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.

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 deadlier). 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 Raqqah 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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Section A: The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State

**The Islamic State at the height of its success: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gives a sermon in the Great Mosque in Mosul (the Mosque of al-Nuri) six days after declaring the Caliphate
(YouTube, July 5, 2014)**

Right: Blowing up the Great Mosque in Mosul during the final conquest of the city (Bawaba al-Ein, June 21, 2017). Left: Aerial photograph of the ruins of the mosque (al-Sumaria, June 21, 2017).

Part One – Stages in the Collapse of the Islamic State

The establishment of the Islamic State and its expansion, summer 2014

▶ **On June 29, 2014**, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani **declared the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the territories conquered by ISIS in Syria and Iraq**. The **Caliphate was headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**. According to the announcement, instead of "the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria"[2] its name would be the **Islamic State, which had established the Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq**.[3] On July 5, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a sermon in the Great Mosque in Mosul. The sermon was devoted to disseminating the idea of the Caliphate, presenting the importance of jihad as the path chosen for Islam's takeover of the world, and to strengthening his personal status.

> **The Islamic State reached the height of its expansion in the summer of 2014**. The symbol of its success was the takeover of **Mosul, Iraq**, which was accomplished relatively easily and without significant opposition from the Iraqi army (June 10, 2014). At around the same time towns and villages were conquered in Iraq's Anbar Province and in the Euphrates valley, in the northern part of Iraq and north of Baghdad. **In the summer of 2014 ISIS controlled about one third of Iraq's territory and between one quarter and one third of Syria, and its forces even threatened Baghdad**. In that large territory, which stretched from the outskirts of Baghdad to the outskirts of Aleppo, there were between five and six million inhabitants. There were also **oil and gas fields**, which provided ISIS's main source of income (and turned it into **the richest terrorist organization** in the world). **The Islamic State strived to continue its expansion to other areas in Greater Syria, the Middle East, North Africa, southern Europe and Southeast Asia** (see map).

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[2] The Arabic acronym is DAESH. ISIS in English.

[3] In this report the term "**the Islamic State**" will refer to **the territorial dimension and governance of the territories controlled by ISIS**. The term "**ISIS**" will refer to **the organization and its operatives** in the territories of the Islamic State and elsewhere. In ITIC assessment, ISIS, as a terrorist organization, **will continue to exist** after the collapse of the Islamic State, **this document will refer to the era after the fall of the Islamic State, not after the fall of ISIS**.

The Islamic State (the "Caliphate State") established by ISIS in the summer of 2014 in vast areas of Iraq and Syria. It stretched from Mosul in Iraq and Jarabulus in Syria in the north, to Fallujah and al-Rutbah in Iraq in the south; from al-Bab on the outskirts of Aleppo to the cities of Baiji and Tikrit (north of Baghdad) in the east. The map was published on various forums in August 2014 (alplatformmedia.com; hanein.info).

The Islamic State's vision of expansion

Right: The vision of the Islamic State' expansion. The modern names of the states have been replaced by Islamic names. Left: The map of the Caliphate in English and to the right a picture of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (hanein.info). Spain (Andalusia) and Greece were also part of the vision.

▶ **The expansion of the Islamic State was initially barely noticed by and had no response from the United States and the international community**. However its dramatic successes in the summer of 2014, especially the conquest of Mosul, **brought the threat of ISIS to global attention, as well as the realization that its potential for damage was greater than that of al-Qaeda**. For that reason an American-led international coalition was formed.

▶ **On September 20, 2014, President Obama announced a comprehensive campaign against ISIS**, with the participation of the United States and the coalition countries, to degrade and ultimately destroy it. The campaign consisted of **continuous coalition aerial strikes** and American assistance to from local forces, without, however, a significant American presence on the ground in Syria or Iraq (the Achilles' heel that harmed the campaign's effectiveness and prevented the United States from making political capital).

▶ **The American campaign helped curb the Islamic State's expansion** between the second half of 2014 and April 2015. The most significant achievement for the coalition and local forces was **the success of the Kurdish YPG forces**. After four months of hard fighting, on January 26, 2015, they retook control of the city of **Kobanî (Ein al-Arab) and the surrounding area** near the Turkish border. In the meantime ISIS failed to extend the borders of the Islamic State to new regions in central and southern Syria (the most important of which were the city of **Deir al-Zor and its surroundings**, where enclaves controlled by the Syrian forces remained). In **northern and western Iraq** as well, ISIS attacks were repelled. In **Anbar Province** ISIS did not succeed in wiping out pockets of resistance, and **north of Baghdad** ISIS failed in its attempts to take control of **the oil city of Baiji and the city of Samara**.

Kurdish fighters celebrate the conquest of Kobanî
(Twitter account of Ardeshir Zarezadeh, January 26, 2015).

Stages in the collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq

▶ After halting the expansion of the Islamic State, the Iraqi security forces, with the support of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias and Sunni militias, and with aerial support from the United States and the coalition countries, **initiated a campaign against ISIS**. Its objective was **to retake the territories that had fallen to the Islamic State**. **Therefore ISIS was obliged to focus on defensive strategy and its attacks were local and insignificant**. **The Iraqi campaign has been ongoing for the past two and a half years, and has consisted of four stages**:

◆ **The First Stage – The conquest of the cities of Tikrit and Baiji north of Baghdad (April to October 2015)**: After halting the expansion of the Islamic State, the Iraqi forces, with support of Shi'ite militias and American aerial support went from defensive strategy to a continuous offensive. **In April 2015 Tikrit was taken** from ISIS after a

month of fighting. **The conquest of Tikrit marked the beginning of success for the offensive strategy**. The conquest of Tikrit pushed ISIS away from Baghdad and brought the Iraqi forces closer to ISIS's "capital city" of Mosul. In October 2015 the oil city of Baiji, halfway between Baghdad and Mosul, was also liberated. However, despite those successes, **the Iraqi regime decided to complete clearing ISIS out of Sunni Anbar Province to ensure the home front west of Baghdad**, and only afterwards to turn to its main objective, **the conquest of Mosul**.

Families return to Tikrit after the liberation
(Twitter account of omar ayad@omar_ayad5, April 8 and 9, 2015)

◆ **The Second Stage – Clearing ISIS out of Anbar Province, including the liberation of symbolically important Fallujah, and lifting the threat on Baghdad (April to June, 2016)**: The Iraqi security forces, with the support of Sunni and Shi'ite militias, and with aerial support from the United States and the coalition countries, liberated **Fallujah, the Sunni-jihadist Islam stronghold, and the symbol of resistance to the United States and the Shi'ite regime in Baghdad**. Other cities along the Euphrates were liberated, among them **Hīt, al-Rutbah and Haditha, pushing ISIS operatives into the rural and desert regions in the western part of Anbar Province**. The conquest of a substantial portion of the Sunni Anbar Province tore away ISIS's strongholds within the Sunni population, which were there during the fighting against the United States. The coalition and Iraqi forces then **turned their attention to Mosul, ISIS's "capital city," to strike a blow to the heart of the Islamic State**.

Right: Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi declares the liberation of Fallujah (al-Iraqiya TV, June 26, 2016). Left: The Iraqi army patrols the ruins of Fallujah (al-Arabiya, June 26, 2017).

The city of al-Rutbah after the liberation from ISIS (al-Alam, May 17, 2017).

◆ **The Third Stage – The campaign to liberate Mosul (October 17, 2016 to July 9, 2017):** Mosul, home to about a million inhabitants, is the city where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Caliphate. **ISIS considered Mosul as having military, administrative and symbolic importance. The size and crowding of the city, in addition to the determined fighting waged by ISIS operatives, made it difficult to fight and lengthened the time needed to liberate it**. The 5,000 to 6,000 ISIS operatives in Mosul used **urban warfare tactics**, such as hit and run attacks, sniper fire, placing IEDs, and **made massive use of suicide bombers and car bombs**. Of all the campaigns to expel ISIS from its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, **the campaign for Mosul was the most difficult, and lasted for more than eight months**. Most of the fighting was waged by the Iraqi army and its special forces (about 30,000 soldiers supported by Shi'ite militias) with American air support. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias played a secondary role in the conquest of Mosul.

Right: Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi (center) visits Mosul (al-Sumaria, July 9, 2017). Left: The extensive destruction to Mosul (al-Alam, July 10, 2017).

◆ **The Fourth Stage – Clearing out the remaining local ISIS enclaves in northern and western Iraq (August to October 5, 2017)**: The liberation of Mosul prepared the ground for clearing the ISIS presence from various regions in northern and western Iraq. On September 1, 2017 the Iraqi forces completed **the liberation of Tel Afar and its surroundings**. **That left ISIS with an enclave in eastern Iraq in the city of Hawija, south of Mosul**. The Iraqi forces with the support of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias **took control of the Hawija region on October 5, 2017**, after two weeks of fighting. From Hawija the campaign was turned to the western part of Anbar Province near the Syrian border, whose takeover would put an end to the Islamic State in Iraq.

Iraqi security forces in the city of Tel Afar (al-Sumaria, September 2, 2017).

◆ **The Fifth Stage – Destroying the remnants of the Islamic State in the west of Anbar Province (November 2017)**: After the conquest of Hawija the Iraqis announced they would turn their efforts to taking **control of the cities of al-Qa'im and Ra'wa**, ISIS's last strongholds in the western part of Anbar Province, near the Iraqi-Syrian border. On November 4, 2017, **the Iraqis regained control over al-Qa'im** and the

surrounding territory. They liberated the town of Rumana and dozens of villages in the area, and turned to **the liberation of the Ra'wa region**. **The conquest of Ra'wa was completed on November 17, 2017, putting an end to the existence of the Islamic State in Iraq**.

Iraqi forces en route to the city of al-Qa'im, the last important foothold in Iraq (YouTube, November 3, 2017).

Stages in the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria

▶ Until September **2015 the Syrian regime was defending itself against the rebel organizations and fighting for its survival**. The Syrian forces and their allies (Iran and Hezbollah) **were struggling and could not give strategic priority to the Islamic State, which had established itself in the eastern and northern parts of the country** (the core of its rule was in al-Raqqah and the Euphrates Valley). Thus the **campaign against the Islamic State was delayed until the strategic situation changed**.

On September 30, 2015, a new chapter began in the Syrian civil war, when Russia started active military intervention in support of the Syrian regime. Its support consisted mainly of massive aerial strikes (including the use of strategic bombers and cruise missiles), and of deploying military experts to the Syrian army. Their initial intention was **to support the Syrian regime** and **remove the threats posed by the rebel organizations**, especially in northwestern Syria (Latakia, Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Idlib). As opposed to the American-led coalition, **the Russians did not limit themselves to fighting ISIS**, but fought against some **of the rebel organizations**, defining them as "terrorist organizations" (such as the

Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham, affiliated with al-Qaeda). In retrospect, **Russian intervention had local and regional strategic importance, and made a decisive contribution to destroying the heart of ISIS's control in the Euphrates valley and the collapse of the Islamic State**.

Right: One of the strategic bombers that participated in the attack on Deir al-Zor and Idlib. Left: attacks on ISIS targets in the Deir al-Zor region (website of the Russian ministry of defense, September 26, 2017).

Russian cruise missiles attack ISIS targets in the region of the city of Akerbat, east of Hama (Facebook page of the Russian ministry of defense, June 23, 2017)

▶ **When the Russians started their aerial attacks they did not endanger ISIS or disrupt the conduct of the Islamic State**. However, at the time the Islamic State was not an immediate threat to the Syrian regime. **The Islamic State's turn to be attacked would come later**, at the beginning of 2017, **after the liberation of Aleppo** (September to December 2016). After the immediate threat to the Syrian regime was removed, **Syria, Russia and Iran turned their attention to the eastern part of the country**. In addition to pressure from the Syrian regime and its allies, **the Islamic State was under pressure from the Kurdish forces**, which were assisted by American aerial support and the deployment of advisors and weapons.

▶ The campaign against the Islamic State in northern and eastern Syria lasted **about a year and a half, and was intensified and accelerated during the last half year. It had four major stages**:

◆ **The First Stage – Syrian army conquest of the Palmyra region (March 2016 to March 2017)**: During March 2016 the area around Palmyra was conquered by the Syrian army and its supporters, with Russian aerial support. **That gave the Syrian army, for the first time, a significant foothold in eastern Syria, and a good position from which to continue exerting pressure on ISIS's core territories in the Deir al-Zor and the Euphrates valley**. However, at that time, the Syrian regime had not yet **included Palmyra in its set of strategic priorities, or realized the advantages of the conquest of Palmyra, and would wait until Aleppo and the region around it had been captured** (end of December 2016). ISIS fully exploited the low level of priority given to Palmyra by the Syrians and Russians at the time. On December 10, 2016, while the Syrian army was completing its takeover of Aleppo, **ISIS staged a surprise attack and reconquered Palmyra and the surrounding** territory (December 10, 2016). It was an exceptional military initiative for ISIS, which had been on strategic defensive. Palmyra and the surrounding area were liberated only on March 2, 2017, a year after its first liberation, when the Syrian forces could turn their attention to taking control of ISIS strongholds in the Euphrates valley.

Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassem al-Freij (red circle) during a visit to the ancient city of Palmyra after its liberation from ISIS (Syrian TV, March 4, 2017).

Right: Syrian helicopters again land at the airfield in Palmyra. Left: The destruction of Palmyra after the occupation (Syrian TV, March 28, 2016).

◆ **Stage Two – Conquest of Islamic State territories west of the Euphrates by the SDF forces[4]** as well as by **the Turkish army and rebel organizations supported by Turkey (June 2016 to February 2017)**: Stage Two began with the conquest of Manbij by SDF forces (west of the Euphrates, about 35 kilometers south of the Syrian-Turkish border). Later other key cities west of the Euphrates were liberated. They included **Jarabulus** (liberated by the Turkish army and rebel organizations under its sponsorship); **al-Ra'i** (by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in collaboration with the Turkish army) and **al-Bab** (by the FSA in collaboration with the Turkish army). The fall of al-Bab **marked the end of a campaign that had lasted eight and a half months, during which the Islamic State lost territories it had controlled west of the Euphrates**. The Turkish army and the Turkish-sponsored rebel organizations **took control of 52 kilometers along the Syrian-Turkish border**, from Jarabulus to A'zaz. As a result **ISIS lost all its strongholds along the Syrian-Turkish border and a hard blow was dealt to the logistics channel from ISIS's core territories in the Islamic State to the outside world**.

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[4] A Kurdish-dominated Kurdish-Arab force, supported by the United States.

Liberation of the key cities west of the Euphrates: Jarabulus, Manbij, al-Bab and al-Ra'i (Google Maps)

Right: Turkish tanks and commando forces en route to the city of al-Bab (Milliyet.com.tr, February 15, 2017). Left: Turkish army artillery attacks ISIS positions in the city of Jarabulus (Twitter account of al-Anadolu News, August 23, 2016).

◆ **Stage Three – The SDF conquest of al-Raqqah, ISIS's "capital city" in Syria (July to October 2017)**: Kurdish-dominated SDF forces, with American aerial support, **liberated al-Raqqah after four months of hard fighting**. The city suffered massive destruction. The conquest of al-Raqqah was a severe blow to ISIS, both in practical terms and to its image, because it had been its "capital" in Syria as well as the ISIS leadership's main command center. The conquest of al-Raqqah after the conquest of Mosul marked **the collapse of ISIS's two centers of control in Syria and Iraq**. In addition, **the conquest of al-Raqqah gave the SDF a forward position from which to continue advancing down the Euphrates valley**, the heart of the Islamic State's rule, towards Deir al-Zor on the eastern side of the Euphrates.

Right: The massive destruction of the city of al-Raqqah. Left: Landmines ISIS manufactured and spread around the city (Twitter account of RaqqaSL@بصمت تذبح الرقة , October 16, 2017).

◆ **Stage Four – The conquest of the Euphrates valley and the destruction of the Islamic State in Syria (March to November 2017)**: The end of the campaign to liberate Aleppo allowed the Syrian forces, with massive Russian air support, **to transfer strategic-military pressure to the core of the Islamic State in the Euphrates valley**. Their first objective was the city of Deir al-Zor, where the Syrian forces united with a besieged Syrian force. The Syrian forces took control of the city and reactivated the military airport south of the city. **Syrian forces, with Hezbollah and Shi'ite militia forces, advanced down the Euphrates and took control of the city of al-Mayadeen**, southeast of Deir al-Zor (October 14,2017). From al-Mayadeen they continued to **Abu Kamal, the last Islamic State stronghold in Syria**, and joined Iraqi forced on the other side of the border. As of November 9, 2017, there has been fighting in **Abu Kamal**, whose **conquest will put and end to the Islamic State in Syria**.

Kalibr cruise missile fired by Russian forces at an ISIS target in Deir al-Zor. Left: Missile strike on ISIS targets in the Deir al-Zor region (Facebook page of the Russian ministry of defense, September 14, 2017)

Some of the many weapons belonging to ISIS seized in al-Mayadeen
(Twitter account of Sana, October 19, 2017)

The end of taking control of the Islamic State's core area in the Euphrates valley: a Syrian force
arriving on the Iraqi border joins an Iraqi army force, which includes an Iranian-backed Shi'ite
militia (Twitter account of the Syrian army military information, November 8, 2017). The center
flag is the flag of Syria, under it is the flag of the Harakat al-Nujaba ("Movement of the Nobles"),
a Iraqi-sponsored Shi'ite militia operating in the Baghdad region.

Part Two – Why Did the Islamic State Collapse?

In ITIC assessment, the collapse of the Islamic State was a function of three main factors: **ISIS's military capability was clearly inferior to the forces of its many enemies, it lost popular support, and it had an ideological vision that could not be realized in reality:**

ISIS's military inferiority

▸ During 2014 and the first half of 2015 ISIS was victorious over the Syrian and Iraqi armies, which at the time had low military competence. The victories were achieved by **a relatively small number of operatives** (about several hundred), **who carried out surprise attacks,** riding in ATVs (Toyotas for the most part). At the time they made extensive use of guerrilla tactics. However, as the campaign lengthened, ISIS's **military inferiority became apparent,**

specifically manpower, weapons and logistics, as compared to the regular armies and various organizations fighting against ISIS.

▶ **At the height of ISIS's power** (2014 to 2015), **there were about 30,000 ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq, almost half of them foreign fighters**. They were spread out in many combat zones throughout the Islamic State. The coalitions formed to fight ISIS had local, regional and international fighters, leading to ISIS's prominent military inferiority.

▶ **The forces fighting ISIS included**:

◆ **The Syrian and Iraq armies**, which underwent reorganization during the past two years which raised their military competence, with support from Russia (the Syrian army) and the United States and the coalition (the Iraqi army).

◆ **Local forces, which included the Kurdish SDF in Syria**, backed by the **United States** (the role of the Peshmerga, the Kurdish forces in Iraq, was insignificant); **Lebanese Hezbollah and Shi'ite militias in Iraq and Syria**, backed by **Iran**; and **rebel organizations** (i.e., the Free Syrian Army) in northern Syria, backed by **Turkey**.

◆ **The two superpowers, the United States and Russia, individually waged aerial campaigns against ISIS and at the same time supported the local forces** they supported with weapons and advisors. (Russia also operates against other jihadist rebel organizations, especially the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham affiliated with al-Qaeda). **ISIS had no response to counter the massive ongoing aerial attacks directed against it**.

▶ Despite ISIS's obvious military inferiority**, it did not enlist help from the rebel organizations in Syria, even from those close to them ideologically** (i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham, an offshoot of the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front). The rebel organizations, including the jihadist organizations, not only did not cooperate with ISIS in fighting the Syrian regime, **they occasionally clashed with them** and deflected their attention and efforts from fighting other enemies. The only support ISIS received during the years of fighting was from **foreign fighters who joined** the ranks of the organization, whether out of ideological reasons or for personal motives. However, the stream of foreign fighters dried up during the past year, after **ISIS lost its hold over the Turkish-Syrian border, and Turkey and the Western countries improved their preventive measures**. In recent months, as the dissolution of the Islamic State accelerates, **thousands of foreign fighters have returned to their home countries**.

▶ Another military reason for ISIS's failures was **the organization's being dragged into the static defense** of towns and cities within the Islamic State, **a kind of fighting in which ISIS did not have a military advantage over its enemies**. On the other hand, **there was a decrease in the number of guerrilla attacks, which characterized the organization at the beginning and which led to achievements, at a time when it was still a terrorist-guerrilla organization and did not have to defend the "state" it had established**. In ITIC assessment, getting bogged down in static fighting was **not a conscious strategic decision** but rather **a practical necessity**, chosen **to provide a response** to the heavy pressure it was facing on the various fronts.

▶ As the campaign against ISIS continued, its military failures **became more numerous**, eroding its military force was eroded and it could not regain its former momentum. **The aerial attacks, primarily those carried out by Russia**, pulverized its military infrastructure and facilities. **The fighting eventually exhausted the fighters, the command structure and the weapons stores**. ISIS's attempts to find alternatives to its thinning manpower by recruiting women and children did not solve the problem of the lack of trained and experienced fighters. **ISIS's ability to take weapons from its enemies or import them from abroad also lessened because of its military hardship and the loss of control over the Syrian-Turkish border**.

▶ ISIS's military failures led to **a decrease in the morale of its fighters**, who, as opposed to their determined fighting in Mosul, were not always willing to fight to the last man during the final stages of the campaign against ISIS (in certain instances they reached local agreements for evacuation, and in the case of al-Mayadeen they retreated with almost no significant fighting, abandoning a large quantity of weapons). The decrease in morale was mainly the result of **a series of defeats and the loss of income** (especially the loss of the oil and gas fields, which made it difficult to allot the necessary resources for maintaining and operating ISIS's military forces).

Erosion and loss of popular support

▶ When ISIS entered the Sunni towns and cities in Iraq, in most cases the local residents welcomed them. The main reason was **the Shi'ite-Sunni schism in Syria and Iraq**. The Sunni population felt deprived and threatened by **the post Saddam-Hussein Shi'ite regime in Iraq, and by the Alawite regime in Syria which was supported by Shi'ite Iran and its Shi'ite proxies**. However, **the support of the local population for ISIS gradually eroded**.

That was **the result of ISIS's brutal control of the population** (including public executions, detentions and torture) **as ISIS tried to enforce their extremist version of the Islamic Sharia on them.**

Right: A public whipping ordered by a Sharia court (alalam.ir). Left: A beheading ordered by a Sharia court (qanon302.net).

The execution of a child in the center of Raqqah on the grounds that he disparaged the prophet Muhammad (YouTube).

▶ **There were two other reasons for the erosion of local support for the Islamic State**:

◆ The **ongoing reduction of ISIS's income**, especially from the oil and gas fields, **made it difficult for the organization to allot the necessary resources for providing services to residents of the Islamic State** (priority was naturally given to the needs of ISIS's military force). **That eroded the relative advantage ISIS had in the areas under its control over the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus**.

◆ **The accelerated loss of territory, and the awareness that every city ISIS defended would eventually be destroyed, led local residents to flee and become less obedient** (even in Mosul, where ISIS waged determined fighting). However, ISIS's methods of enforcement and oppression were sufficiently effective, so that **we do not know of an instance of local rebellion**.

Therefore, **it is important to rebuild and rehabilitate** the cities and regions under ISIS's control that were destroyed in the fighting. A rapid, successful recovery and return to normal daily life, along with memories of ISIS's brutal rule, **may serve as a powerful antidote** to any ISIS attempt to retake the places from which it was expelled. **However, if rebuilding and rehabilitation are slow, and if the central governments ignore the inhabitants living in the peripheral areas, the frustration and anger of the local Sunni population may reawaken and create a convenient arena for ISIS to operate in once again**.

An ideological vision impossible to realize

In ITIC assessment the seeds of the Islamic State's failure were planted in its Salafi jihadist ideology, which aspires to turn the clock back to the dawn of Islam. The Islamic State model, an imitation of the age of the first four Caliphs of Islamic, **cannot be implemented in modern times**, where the world's population is exposed to advanced technology, enormous amounts of available information and alternative ideologies. The Salafi jihadist organizations (mainly al-Qaeda) understood that and **did not try to realize their ideology by establishing an Islamic Caliphate(or Islamic State)**. To solve the fundamental problems of governance, **ISIS made an attempt to implement the Sharia** (Islamic religious law, as interpreted by the organization), **by means of brute force**. That created **a regime of terrorism and fear** in the Islamic State and **repelled the local inhabitants**.

▶ Moreover, ISIS's intransigent ideology and its openly brutal implementation of that ideology led ISIS to isolate itself from of **other rebel organizations and Arab-Muslim regimes ("the infidel regimes").** ISIS's terrorism, accompanied by media campaigns, **caused Iran and its axis, the United States and the West, and Russia to rise up against ISIS**. ISIS's lack of allies meant the Islamic State could not regain the momentum of the summer of 2014, and in the end that contributed to its downfall. On the other hand, **the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham, dominated by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Fateh al-Sham Front, understood the dangers of isolationism and sought to form alliances and collaboration agreements with other Islamic rebel organizations, not necessarily having Salafi jihadist nature**.

▶ **Note**: **Osama bin Laden, who understood the problems arising from the establishment of an Islamic state, did not declare the establishment of such a state**. On April 23, 2017, **his heir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current al-Qaeda leader**, issued a video in which he called on ISIS to learn its lesson, **abandon its territorial concept** and focus on guerrilla attacks to exhaust the enemy**. ISIS ignored the message** and to the end continued to adhere to its concept of the "Islamic State."

Part Three – The Current Picture of ISIS's Presence and Activity in Syria and Iraq

▶ During the first half of 2015 **ISIS's expansion was halted**. **Thus for the past two and a half years ISIS has been on the defensive, leading, in the end, to the fall of the Islamic State**. During that time ISIS lost key cities and vital spheres of influence and **found it hard to carry out strategic initiatives against its enemies** (the single exception was the area around Palmyra, where ISIS succeeded in regaining control for about a year). During 2017 ISIS's loss of territories and assets peaked. **Mosul** was conquered in June, **al-Raqqah** in October, and **the core of the Islamic State along the Euphrates** between March and November 2017. The conquest of **al-Mayadeen** and the upcoming fall of **Abu Kamal** mark **the end of the Islamic State in Syria**.

In effect, the Islamic State no longer exists as a whole, functioning territorial entity controlled by ISIS. Most of its territories have been conquered; its "capital cities" in Iraq and Syria (Mosul and al-Raqqah) fell to the Iraqi and SDF forces; ISIS's leading commanders and weapons were severely hurt by the fighting and the intensive aerial bombings of Russia and the international coalition; the governing mechanisms of the Islamic State were destroyed; and it lost its economic assets (mainly the oil and gas fields). **Thus it would seem that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's vision of an Islamic Caliphate has come to an end, at least for the present time, while ISIS's presence in Syria and Iraq still exists, and in ITIC assessment will continue to exist**.

▶ Although the Islamic State has collapsed, **isolated ISIS enclaves remain in Syria. The most prominent are the Army of Khaled Abu al-Walid in the Yarmouk Basin (the southern Golan Heights); the al-Yarmouk refugee camp and the city of Hajar Aswad south of Damascus; and the rural area northeast of Hama**. It is also possible that there are ISIS enclaves in other locations. They have been encircled by the Syrian forces and rebel

organizations, which will most likely make an effort to finish the job and uproot ISIS. Apparently **after the collapse of the Islamic State pressure will be increased on the enclaves and they will be forced either to surrender, to integrate into other rebel organizations or to escape to the desert region in eastern Syria**.

In all probability **ISIS operatives will locate themselves in the desert region east of Deir al-Zor and Abu Kamal, and on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border north of Abu Kamal**. In those areas, the governance capabilities of the central regime are traditionally weak, and ISIS will seek to exploit the regions to regroup its remaining fighters, whose number, in ITIC assessment, may be about **several thousand**. They may leave the desert regions **to conduct surprise attacks on Syrian and Iraqi forces** to prove they are still a force to be reckoned with, even after the fall of the Islamic State. Even now attacks are being carried out against Syrian forces and their supporters by ISIS squads operating in areas which have allegedly been cleared by the Syrian forces.[5]


▶ **The collapse of the Islamic State created a security and governance vacuum filled by other forces. At the end of the Islamic State era, Syria is divided into several spheres of influence controlled by rival forces**:

◆ **The Syrian army and the forces supporting it, supported by Russia**, control most of the country from the Euphrates in the east to Latakia in the west, and the area north of Aleppo in the north to Daraa in the south; **Syria's most important cities are located in the area**. Of the various forces, the Syrian army and its supporters are the most significant.

◆ **The Kurdish forces**, supported by the United States (some of them operating within the SDF) control northeastern Syria, **the area east of the Euphrates**, with an enclave in northwestern Syria (Afrin). The Kurdish forces have a foothold west of the Euphrates in Manbij and its surroundings where they managed, with American support, to survive against Turkey and the rebel organizations it sponsors.

◆ **The rebel organizations**, dominated by the **al-Qaeda-affiliated Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham** control **the Idlib region**, their most prominent stronghold

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[5] One example is the suicide bombing attack carried out on November 13, 2017, against Syrian forces at the military airport in Deir al-Zor. It was carried out by six ISIS operatives of Chechen origin who wore Russian army uniforms. At least 13 Russian and Syrian army personnel were killed (Syrian Human Rights Observatory, November 14; Khutwa, November 13, 2017).

in Syria. There are also other several areas, including the Golan Heights, **the region northeast of Damascus and near the Syrian-Jordanian border**.

◆ After the collapse of the Islamic State, **ISIS operatives** fled to the desert regions to the west, east and north of the Euphrates. There are also ISIS operatives in several enclaves in southern and central Syria.

◆ **Turkish-backed rebel organizations**, situated along the border west of the Euphrates to the region of the Syrian-Turkish border north of Aleppo, where they create **a kind of safety zone for Turkey**.
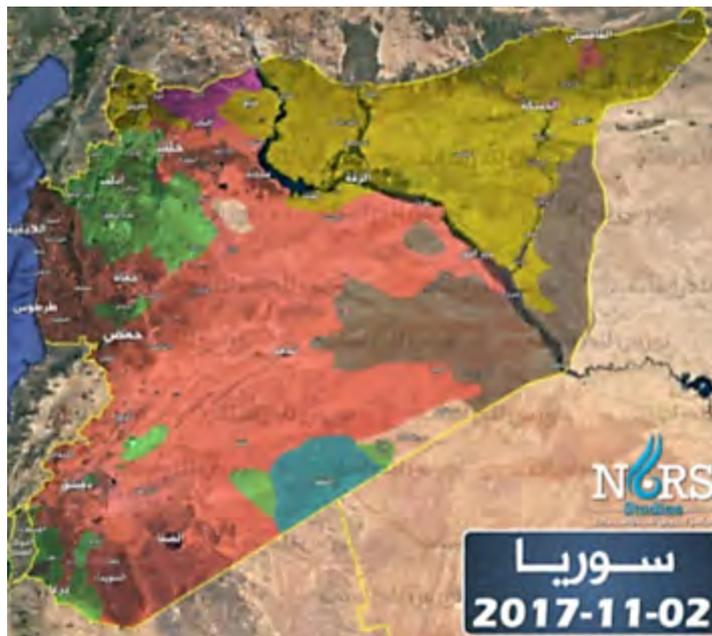

Deployment of forces in Syria, as of November 2, 2017: gray indicates ISIS; red indicates the Syrian army and the forces supporting it; yellow indicates the Kurdish forces; green indicates rebel forces; blue indicates rebel forces supported by the international coalition; white indicates uncontrolled areas. Purple (which does not appear in the Nors map legend) indicates an area controlled by Turkey and the rebels organizations it sponsors (Nors Studies, a Syrian institute for strategic research, November 2, 2017).

▶ **In Iraq as well the Islamic State has ceased to exist**. However, in all probability even after the fall of the Islamic State **ISIS still has a presence in western and northern Iraq**, including areas near the Syrian-Iraqi border. In areas conquered by the Iraqi forces, **local ISIS networks with operational capabilities still exist, and will continue to carry out attacks throughout Iraq**. **Such networks will be handled clandestinely without public visibility, and their connection with the ISIS leadership will be weak (at least initially)**. The support of the Sunni population for a reincarnation of ISIS will depend, to a great extent, on **the conduct of the Iraqi regime**, on whether it placates the Sunni population, including in the

sphere of the rehabilitation, or **whether it adopts an ethnic policy that gives priority to the Shi'ite population and relies on Iranian support**.

▶ The networks will continue to carry out terrorist-guerrilla attacks in Iraq even though the Islamic State no longer exists. One current indication of their existence and an ISIS announcement issued in October and disseminated in ISIS's Diyala Province northwest of Baghdad, which allegedly was cleared of ISIS operatives. **The announcement included detailed instructions accompanied by pictures for making small but powerful IEDs** (Haq, November 13, 2017). In ITIC assessment that would indicate that **ISIS is making the transition to a terrorist-guerrilla organization in the regions where it managed to survive after the collapse of the Islamic State**.
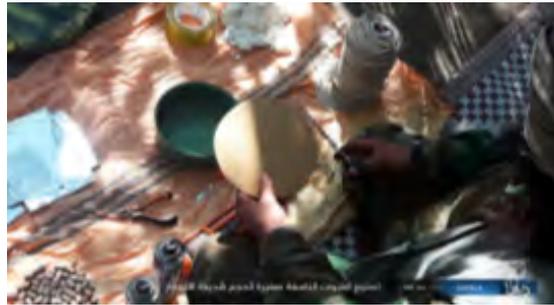
Right: Stage 1 in the preparation of an IED. Left: Stage 5 in the preparation of an IED (Haq, November 13, 2017).

Right: Stage 7 in the preparation of an IED. Left: Stage 13 which shows five IEDs ready for use (Haq, November 13, 2017).

Section Two: Assessment of the Implications of the Fall of the Islamic State

The takeover of al-Raqqah: convoy of ISIS SUVs entering al-Raqqah (al-Arabiya, July 1, 2014)

The liberation of al-Raqqah: flags of the SDF and Kurdish organizations in Syria waving in central al-Raqqah in Syria after the takeover of the city from ISIS (Twitter, October 18, 2017)

Part One: Possible Changes in ISIS's Nature and Modus Operandi

In ITIC assessment, after the collapse of the Islamic State, **ISIS will change its nature and modus operandi**. From an organization that controlled extensive territory and managed the lives of the residents, **it will again be a terrorist-guerrilla organization** not bound by the need to defend a territory but operating mainly from the deserts of eastern Syria and western Iraq. **In ITIC assessment, after the takeover of the territory of the Islamic State, ISIS will reorganize, learning the lessons of the Islamic State's failure. The organization will make an effort to continue its terrorist-guerrilla operations and improve their "quality" in order to prove that it is still a force to be reckoned with.** In ITIC assessment, ISIS's main targets will be the Iraqi army, the Syrian army, government targets in Iraq and Syria, Shiite/Alawite targets, and targets affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah. That is liable to become a considerable nuisance **but will not constitute an international strategic threat,** as the Islamic State was at the height of its expansion.

▶ **The number of ISIS operatives in its reincarnation will be far lower than at its height** (around 30,000 operatives). In ITIC assessment, ISIS's activity against the regimes in Syria and Iraq will be carried out **by several thousand Syrian and Iraqi operatives, survivors of the campaign that will lead to the fall of the Islamic State. The operatives may be joined by hundreds of foreign fighters who will have difficulty returning to their home countries** and will continue fighting in the ranks of Isis. ISIS's terrorist-guerrilla activity **is liable to become a considerable nuisance to the Iraqi and Syrian regimes.** However, in ITIC assessment, **it will not constitute an international strategic threat** as the Islamic State was at the height of its expansion.

▶ In ITIC assessment, after the collapse of the Islamic State, ISIS will **converge within itself**, and may temporarily diminish or abandon its practical activity for realizing its global vision. **In ITIC assessment,** in its new format ISIS **will devote less attention** to the Islamic State's provinces abroad, **and it its interest in terrorist attacks abroad may gradually decrease.** In ITIC assessment, **its main concern will be to survive, reorganize its forces, display its operational capabilities** and **renew its base of support among the Sunni Arab population** in Syria and Iraq.

Part Two: Effect on the Islamic State Provinces outside Iraq and Syria

Overview of the provinces during the era of the Islamic State

In November 2014, at the height of the Islamic State's expansion in Iraq and Syria, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi issued pre-recorded announcements of the establishment of Islamic State provinces in other countries: **Saudi Arabia** (Hejaz), **Yemen, Sinai, Libya, and Algeria.** Subsequently, ISIS other provinces were established: **the Khorasan Province** (Afghanistan/Pakistan) (January 26, 2015); **the Egypt Province** (the Land of Kinana); **the West Africa Province**, based on **the Nigerian Boko Haram** (March 13, 2015); **provinces in the Caucasus** (June 21, 2015); and **provinces in southern part of the Philippines** (January 24, 2016). Thus ISIS has provinces in **around ten countries/geographic regions.** In some countries **there are several provinces**. The provinces were subordinate to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi through a body called the **Directorate of the Far Provinces**, which was responsible for the provinces outside Iraq and Syria (it is not known if the Directorate will function following the collapse of the Islamic State). In addition, **there are provinces on paper** where ISIS does not carry out any organized activity.[6]

Map from a video issued by ISIS in November 2014 of the provinces which, according to ISIS, had pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Algeria, Libya, Sinai, Yemen and Saudi Arabia (reblop.com, November 17, 2014). They were later joined by additional provinces.

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[6] ISIS was aware of the gap between a pledge of allegiance with declarations about the establishment of new provinces, and the situation on the ground, which sometimes made it difficult for ISIS to establish a presence. To bridge the gap, in early 2015 ISIS established criteria for transforming a local jihadi organization into a new province of the Islamic State.

▶ The provinces' functional capabilities and how they are controlled by the Directorate of the Far Provinces vary from one province to another. Most of the provinces distant from Iraq and Syria **do not receive significant attention and assistance, and ISIS's control over them is fairly weak** (West Africa, the Philippines and Yemen). On the other hand, several provinces that ISIS is especially interested in (Sinai, Libya) and that are relatively near Iraq and Syria have received its support.

▶ During the past year, ISIS has been preoccupied with and prioritized the fighting in Syria and Iraq. That has undermined its ability and will to provide significant assistance to the provinces. **Unlike Iraq and Syria, ISIS operatives do not exercise territorial and administrative control over the population in these provinces** (aside from an unsuccessful attempt in **Sirte, Libya**, which was liberated from ISIS on December 5, 2016, after seven months of fighting).

▶ ISIS's two most noteworthy successes so far have been in **an Arab country that collapsed** (Libya) and in a region **with a low level of governance** (the Sinai Peninsula). In Libya, ISIS lost its territorial base but still has a presence. On the other hand, ISIS failed to establish itself in countries and regions **where it encountered fierce opposition from strong local forces: Sunni Salafist-jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda** (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which operates in Yemen, and the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan) **or competent local security services in countries that have not experienced the regional turmoil** (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Algeria). **In the Israeli-Palestinian arena** (Judea and Samaria, the Gaza Strip), ISIS also failed to strike roots because of the lack of widespread popular support and the effective preventive measures taken by the **Israeli and Palestinian security services.**

The effect of the collapse of the Islamic State on ISIS's provinces abroad

How will the collapse of the Islamic State and ISIS's transition to a terrorist-guerrilla organization affect its provinces abroad? In ITIC assessment, **the model of the Islamic State has lost its attractiveness and it is doubtful whether an attempt will be made to repeat it,** at least in the short term. However, **the concept of jihad against the so-called infidels from within and without is still valid. The Salafist-jihadi ideology has supporters in the various provinces. Therefore, the expectation is that most (if not all) of the**

provinces will continue to exist and that the fighting will continue in the various countries, possibly with a higher level of cooperation with local Al-Qaeda networks.

▶ **The chances of survival and the degree of success of the ISIS provinces in the various countries will depend on four main factors:** the **political and social** conditions prevailing in each country; **the balance of power** between ISIS operatives and the military and security services of the various regimes; the degree to which **ISIS operatives** who fought in Syria and **Iraq managed to return to their home countries**; and the **strength of the Al-Qaeda** branch in the same country as the ISIS province. Therefore:

◆ **In countries that have collapsed, or in countries or regions with weak governance,** the ISIS province will continue to operate and will not be significantly affected by the collapse of the Islamic State.

◆ **In countries where al-Qaeda or radical Islamic organizations (the Taliban in Afghanistan) are in a position of power,** the operatives in ISIS's provinces may **attempt to join forces with the rival jihadist organizations and continue their terrorist-guerrilla activities with a new identity.** Alternatively, **they may increase their cooperation with their former rivals** and put an end to local conflicts.

◆ **In countries where ISIS's provinces are weak** because of local security force counterterrorism efforts and were in difficulties even before the fall of the Islamic State, the provinces and ISIS networks **may be pushed into a corner and fight for their continued survival** (Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Jordan).

▶ Notable are ISIS's branches in **the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, and West Africa**, **where the organization has a strong presence**:

◆ The **Sinai Province**, which operates in a region of weak Egyptian governance, is one of ISIS's outstanding successes. **In ITIC assessment, it will continue to be difficult** for the Egyptian security forces to overcome. The Sinai Province **will probably try to strengthen its ties with jihadist operatives in Egypt, ISIS operatives in Libya, and jihadist operatives in the Gaza Strip.** It will **also look for alternative sources of funding** (robbing banks, smuggling, etc.[7]). **The absence of a significant al-Qaeda presence in Sinai** may also help the ISIS province to survive. Therefore, in ITIC

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[7] On October 16, 2017, operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province robbed the National Bank branch in central El-Arish. According to Egyptian media reports, the ISIS operatives stole 17 million Egyptian pounds (about $1 million) from the bank. Criminal activity may be a new modus operandi for ISIS's Sinai province and other provinces.

assessment, even after the collapse of the Islamic State, **ISIS's Sinai Province will continue to exist** and wage its campaign against the Egyptian security forces. At the same time, ISIS's branch in Sinai **may also occasionally attack Israel** (rocket fire, border attacks, and showcase attacks).


ISIS operative in the Sinai Peninsula carrying a Strela (SA-7) missile on his shoulder
(ISIS-affiliated Twitter account, February 6, 2015; file-sharing website, February 5, 2015)

Operatives of ISIS's Sinai province making their presence felt
(ISIS-affiliated Twitter account; file-sharing website, March 1, 2015)

◆ **ISIS's provinces in Libya** lost their territorial base in the area of Sirte in December 2016. **In ITIC assessment**, that **may serve as a test case for ISIS's future conduct in Syria and Iraq. That is because in Libya**, even after ISIS had been defeated and lost the area of Sirte, **it did not cease to exist but changed its mode of operation.** At this stage, **ISIS operates in Libya as a terrorist-guerrilla organization,** without the characteristics of an Islamic state and without territorial and administrative control over residents. **Its operatives are reorganizing, mainly in southern Libya,** and in various cities where they have a presence and are working to acquire financial resources, including through **criminal activity** (hijacking trucks, robbing smugglers,

etc.). Currently, with its reorganization, **ISIS is expected to expand its terrorist-guerrilla attacks throughout Libya, expand its ties with jihadist networks in North and West Africa, and even initiate terrorist attacks in North Africa** (Tunisia may be targeted) **and Europe.**
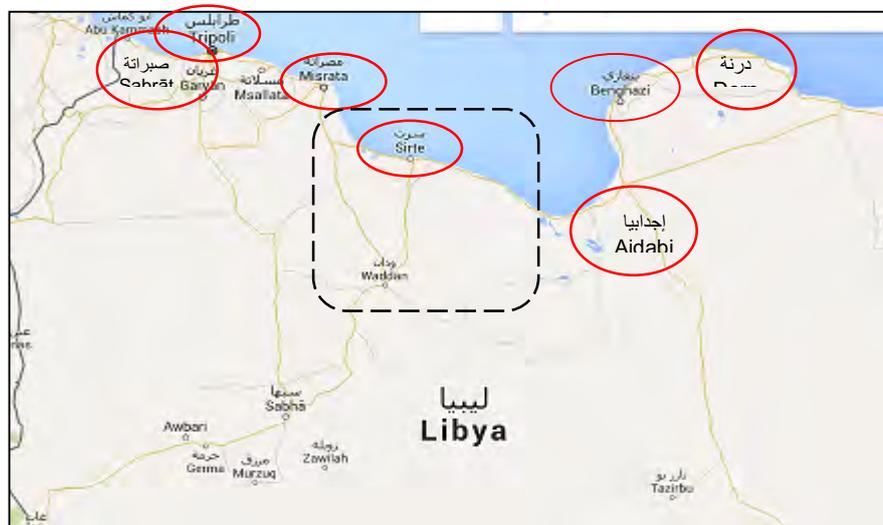
ISIS's area of territorial control in the Sirte region, which fell to the Libyan Government of National Accord after seven months of fighting. Major cities in or around which ISIS has a presence but not control are marked in red (Google Maps). In addition, ISIS operatives fled from Sirte to the deserts of southern Libya.

◆ **West Africa:** in ITIC assessment, ISIS's West Africa Province, based on the **Nigerian Boko Haram**, will continue to operate not only in Nigeria but also in **other sub-Saharan countries and West Africa.** The province **is liable be assisted by ISIS operatives returning to Libya from Iraq and Syria** and of ISIS operatives who fled to southern Libya. In recent months, ISIS's province has been **very active in Nigeria and in the neighboring countries**, regardless of the collapse of the Islamic State. According to General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States, in early October 2017, four US Army soldiers and five Nigerian soldiers were killed on the **Niger-Mali** border in an attack carried out by local ISIS-affiliated operatives (shocking the American public, most of which was unaware of the US presence in Africa) (Daily Sabah, October 24, 2017). Previously (July 2017), ISIS reported that operatives of its West Africa Province had taken control of a **Niger army camp in the area of Bouza**, in southern Niger (near the border with Nigeria).

Photos from a video documenting the takeover of the army camp in southern Niger. Top: Weapons that fell into the hands of ISIS's province. Bottom: Preparations for departure. The commander of the force briefing the organization's operatives (Haq, July 7, 2016)

Will ISIS shift its center from Iraq and Syria to another country?

Will ISIS's leadership move to one of its provinces after the collapse of the Islamic State to establish an alternative center of the Islamic State? In ITIC assessment, it will not, for two main reasons: Even after the collapse of the Islamic State, the political, social and security chaos in Iraq and Syria is expected to continue, **enabling ISIS to continue to operate as a terrorist-guerrilla organization.** As long as those basic conditions exist, **ISIS and other jihadist organizations will continue operating in Syria and Iraq in the heart of the Middle East**. Moving to the periphery of the Middle East or even farther away would be an indication of ISIS's failure and would reduce its chances of recovering and becoming a leading jihadi organization again. In addition, in ITIC assessment, **it will be hard for ISIS to establish itself in other provinces, let alone repeat the experiment of establishing the Islamic State** (the failure of ISIS's territorial area in Sirte, Libya, clearly illustrated the difficulties involved).

Part Three: The Threat of Global ISIS Terrorism

Overview of terrorist attacks abroad during the era of the Islamic State (June 2014 – November 2017)

The objectives of the terrorist attacks

The establishment of the Islamic State **was accompanied by a campaign of terrorism initiated by ISIS abroad.** ISIS's terrorist attacks were directed mainly **against the countries that participated in the American-led coalition against ISIS.** Most of the terrorist attacks were directed against **the United States and the West**, as well as **Turkey and Russia**. The attacks were intended to **disrupt daily life**, **terrorize** residents, and **harm economies** (especially the tourism industry). Their objective was to **deter ISIS's enemies** from continuing their participation in the campaign against ISIS or at least to minimize their participation. The attacks were also aimed at **glorifying ISIS's image as the leading jihadist organization and raising the morale of ISIS operatives in Syria and Iraq and ISIS supporters abroad, especially at a time when the Islamic State was rapidly collapsing.**

▶ In ISIS's terrorist campaign abroad, **the organization enjoyed considerable relative advantages.** It had a territorial base of control from which attacks could be directed and their perpetrators could be sent; foreign fighters, including from Western countries, joined the campaign and provided it with added value (knowledge of language and culture); an effective propaganda system that instigated Muslims around the world to carry out indiscriminate attacks; large financial revenues that facilitated terrorist activity abroad; and the existence of alienated Muslim communities in the West where ISIS's calls to attack Western countries were well received.

In view of those advantages, it can be said in retrospect that despite several impressive successes, and despite the many losses to Turkey, Russia and countries in the West, during the period of the Islamic State ISIS did not achieve its strategic goals in operating its campaign of terrorist attacks abroad. The attacks did not divert the attention of the West and Russia from the campaign in Syria and Iraq, exert pressure on local governments or deter them from continuing to fight. On the contrary, **the attacks greatly increased the international community's determination to fight against ISIS.** Thus, ISIS's terrorist attacks abroad caused many losses, impacted public opinion, especially in the West, and also caused economic damage, mainly to the tourism industry. In retrospect, however, it is clear

that **they did not yield strategic achievement for ISIS that could have affected the process of the collapse of the Islamic State.[8]**

The nature of the attacks

▶ The attacks carried out by ISIS or its supporters abroad were mainly **shooting attacks, vehicular attacks, and stabbing attacks (knife or ax).** The attacks **can be divided into two types:**

- ◆ **ISIS-directed attacks:** Those attacks **were directed by the ISIS headquarters in Syria (mainly in al-Raqqah).** They were preceded by planning, intelligence collection, weapons transfers and logistical preparations. The attacks were relatively sophisticated and **caused large numbers of fatalities.** In five ISIS-directed attacks in Turkey, Paris and Brussels, **250 people were killed and more than 1,000 wounded.** ISIS-directed attacks required meticulous time-consuming preparations with the involvement of many operatives. Therefore, the security services in the various countries found that type of attack **easier to prevent**.

- ◆ **ISIS-inspired attacks:** Attacks carried out by local residents, **usually (but not always) individuals** influenced by Islamic State ideology and propaganda. The attacks were generally carried out spontaneously, on the perpetrator's initiative and without outside guidance and assistance. **ISIS-inspired attacks are difficult to prevent because they are the result of a (sometimes hasty) personal decision by the perpetrator or perpetrators,** usually without indication, and using readily available weapons (a knife or a car)[9]. **Most of the attacks abroad that can be linked to ISIS were ISIS-inspired attacks** (28 out of 33)[10].

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[8] The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, adopted a **different policy of refraining from carrying out attacks abroad.** This policy **contributed to its (relative) survival** since the US and the West generally refrained from carrying out airstrikes against it.

[9] Thus **it is difficult to determine in which cases the perpetrator was indeed influenced by ISIS's ideology or propaganda.** A claim of responsibility by ISIS **does not necessarily mean** that the perpetrator was actually inspired by the organization.

[10] **A recent example of an ISIS-inspired attack** is the case of **Sayfullo Saipov**, the terrorist **who carried out the vehicular attack in New York City** (October 31, 2017). According to the indictment filed against him in New York, one of the cellphones found in his van **contained over 90 videos** that appeared to be ISIS propaganda videos. According to the indictment, Saipov was particularly influenced by a video showing ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi calling on Muslims in the United States and elsewhere to react to the killing of Muslims in Iraq.

Types of attacks
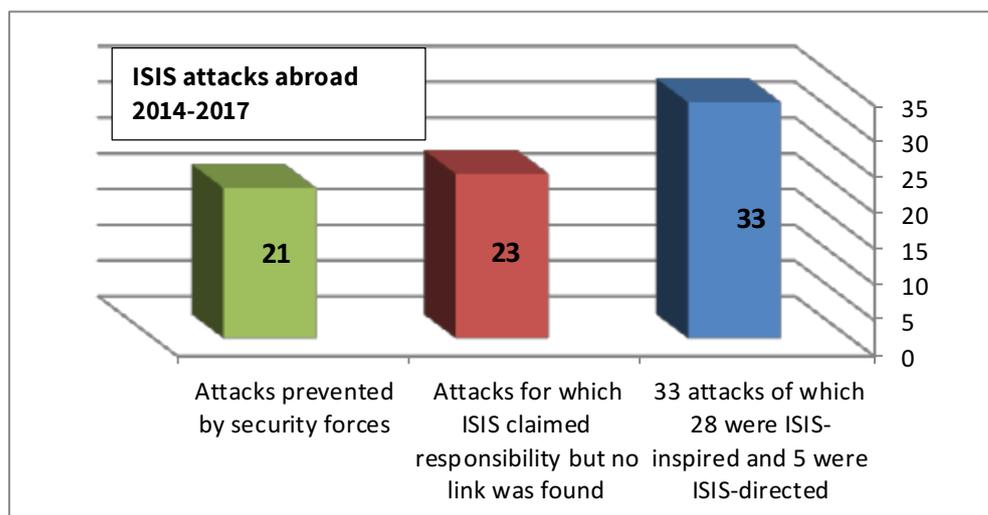
Scope of the attacks[11]

> **Since the declaration of the establishment of the Islamic State, 33 terrorist attacks have been carried out in Western countries, Russia, and Turkey. They included both attacks carried out by ISIS and ISIS-inspired attacks.**[12] ISIS claimed responsibility **for 23 other attacks**, but no connection has been found between ISIS and the perpetrators of the attacks. Analysis of the attacks indicates that there was a significant increase in the number of attacks in 2016 (15 attacks). **However, in 2017 there was a significant decrease in the number of attacks, returning to the level of 2014 and 2015.**
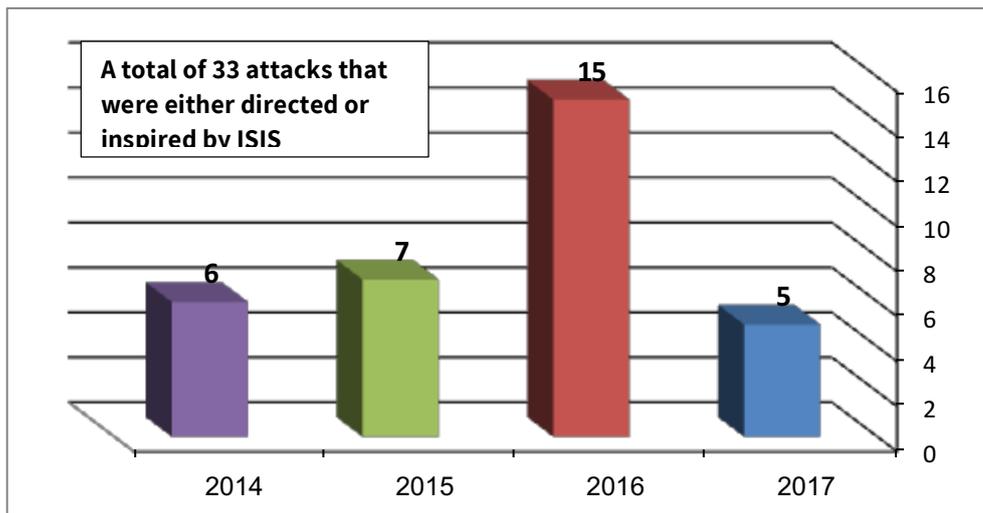
▶ **In ITIC assessment, the drop is the result of the decline in ISIS's operational and propaganda capabilities** and the improvement in the ability of the security services in various countries to cope with the threat of ISIS terrorism. Another reason might be the **decline in the motivation of ISIS supporters abroad** due to the severe damage to ISIS and the Islamic State's brand, and the severe blow suffered by the ISIS propaganda campaign.[13]

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[11] The data on ISIS attacks abroad are based on ITIC information, as it appeared in the weekly summaries of the ITIC. In addition, sometimes the ITIC does not have sufficient information about the motives of those who carried out the ISIS-inspired attacks, and therefore **the ITIC cannot link them with ISIS. Moreover, the information that the ITIC possesses about prevented terrorist attacks in the various countries is partial and incomplete,** because not all the relevant information was revealed in the media.

[12] The countries in which ISIS's provinces operate and the Arab-Muslim world **are not included in the statistics.**

[13] In the media, especially social media, there were many photos and videos documenting ISIS's defeat and the surrender of its operatives, in contrast to the images of victory and ISIS's terrifying actions at the height of the Islamic State's power.

Attacks in foreign countries carried out by ISIS and its supporters during the years of the Islamic State, by year

A total of 33 attacks that were either directed or inspired by ISIS

Year	Attacks
2014	6
2015	7
2016	15
2017	5

▶ **In 2017,** when pressure on ISIS increased and signs of the Islamic State's disintegration became apparent, **there was a significant decrease in the number of attacks abroad and they returned to the level of 2014-2015. So far (November 2017), five attacks that can be linked to ISIS have been carried out.** In ITIC assessment, the decline is mainly the result of **the Islamic State's losses and military defeats, which harmed its brand. Damage was also done to ISIS's operational capabilities abroad and to its overseas propaganda machine.** In addition, **during 2017, ISIS claimed responsibility for at least 12 attacks that could not be linked to the organization.** The large number of claims of responsibility of doubtful reliability **indicates a tendency to present "successes" no matter what, which may be an indication of ISIS's severe distress.**

The propaganda machine

▶ **The attacks abroad were accompanied by an intensive propaganda campaign** which began in April-May 2016 and targeted ISIS supporters abroad (especially in the West). ISIS called on its supporters **to attack civilians indiscriminately.** The attacks were intended to be carried out using every possible means, mainly **knives** (stabbing attacks) **and vehicles** (vehicular attacks), weapons that are readily available and easy to obtain. In retrospect, the propaganda campaign that **accompanied the attacks had a great effect on ISIS supporters, especially in the West.** The year 2016, in which a major propaganda effort was made, was also a record year in terms of attacks abroad.

Call to kill "infidels," i.e., Americans, French and their allies, using every possible means. ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (left), who died in an airstrike on August 30, 2016 (Akhbar Dawlat al-Khilafah, April 16, 2016)

▶ During 2017 and especially after the fall of al-Raqqah (October 17, 2017), **there was a significant decline in the quality and scope of ISIS's propaganda.** That was reflected, by damage to major media outlets;[14] proliferation of false reports about attacks allegedly carried out by ISIS supporters around the world; failure to exploit propaganda opportunities[15] and a widening gap between ISIS's propaganda content and the situation on the ground. The main reasons for that were, in ITIC assessment, loss of the territories where ISIS's communications infrastructure was located and the death of professionals who ran the propaganda system. **Nevertheless, despite the collapse of the Islamic State, the propaganda campaign still continues,** although with a lower profile.**[16]**

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[14] See Gilad Shiloach in the inaugural issue of the Moshe Dayan Center's weekly, Jihadiscope, November 9, 2017: "ISIS's defeat in Syria and Iraq is also the end of ISIS's media as we know it" (dayan.org website).

[15] On November 2, 2017, ISIS claimed responsibility for the vehicular attack in New York City. The claim was issued after a relatively long period of time, more than two days after the attack, despite the fact that the attack was successful (from ISIS's perspective) and ISIS could have derived a major propaganda benefit from it. Moreover, the claim was published in **ISIS's weekly Al-Nabā'** and not in the usual format used by **ISIS's Aamaq News Agency.**

[16] ISIS recently issued a poster entitled "Advice to Jihad Fighters in Enemy Places" detailing the steps to be taken at each stage of the attack. The Eiffel Tower appears in the background (Haq; file-sharing website, November 10, 2017).

Right: Call by ISIS on its supporters abroad to carry out stabbing attacks (cover of Issue No.2 of ISIS's magazine Rumiyah, October 4, 2016). Left: Encouraging vehicular attacks in a series of articles: "Just Terror Tactics" (Rumiyah, November 11, 2016)

Assessment of the nature and scope of the terrorist threat abroad after the fall of the Islamic State

▶ In ITIC assessment, the fall of the Islamic State is likely to lead to a significant reduction in ISIS's operational capability to carry out directed attacks abroad (the more complex and deadly attacks). **That is due to a variety of reasons:** the loss of many operatives who directed the attacks abroad, at both the command level and the operational level; the fall of the headquarters (in al-Raqqah and elsewhere) where the attacks abroad were planned and directed; the departure of foreign fighters who played key roles in terrorist attacks abroad; the blow to ISIS's propaganda machine, which contributed to the mobilization of Muslims to carry out ISIS-inspired attacks.[17]

▶ In ITIC assessment, **ISIS's main concern after the collapse of the Islamic State will be to reorganize the operatives who fled to the deserts of Syria and Iraq and to revive the organization's operational capabilities.** At a time when ISIS is fighting for its survival in its core countries, it will most likely refrain from assigning high priority to complex directed attacks abroad in the Western countries, Russia, and Turkey, **although there may be isolated initiatives for attacks to avenge the fall of the Islamic State.**

▶ During the establishment of the Islamic State, **ISIS operated local terrorist networks abroad** based mainly on local Muslim residents who had adopted the Salafist-jihadi ideology.

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[17]According to The New Yorker, official American sources claimed that the fall of al-Raqqah significantly reduced ISIS's ability to plan and coordinate terrorist attacks abroad. According to the sources, ISIS has lost more than 120 of its leaders, and the organization is now fighting for its survival (The New Yorker, October 23, 2017).

Those networks **will continue to exist**, while refraining, perhaps temporarily, from contact with ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In ITIC assessment, **the networks may carry out independent activity and are liable to join forces with local al-Qaeda networks or supporters.** In addition, a dangerous alliance may be formed between **such networks and local fighters returning from Syria and Iraq.**

▶ However, only a small number of the attacks carried out by ISIS abroad were planned by ISIS headquarters in Syria and involved operational, logistical and intelligence preparations. **Most of the attacks in the West were carried out by individuals, mainly Muslims, who identified ideologically with ISIS and its propaganda messages, sometimes underwent a rapid radicalization and decided to carry out an attack in the name of ISIS without the involvement of its headquarters** (ISIS-inspired attacks). **The existence of alienated and frustrated Muslim communities in the West will continue to be a key factor causing radicalization among young people even after the fall of the Islamic State.**

▶ Will the motivation of jihadists in Western and other countries around the world to carry out ISIS-inspired attacks **increase or decrease following the fall of the Islamic State?** In ITIC assessment, although ISIS's prestige and the Islamic State brand have been severely compromised, **ISIS-inspired attacks will not stop and, in the short term, may even increase** (to avenge or protest the fall of the Islamic State). Subsequently, the scope of ISIS-inspired attacks will be affected by ISIS's ability to rehabilitate itself and reposition itself as a significant force in Iraq and Syria and by its ability to rehabilitate its propaganda machine, which was severely compromised after the collapse of the Islamic State.

▶ Thus:

◆ **ISIS-inspired attacks will not be affected by the loss of ISIS's operational capabilities.** ISIS-inspired attacks are carried out by local citizens. They operate in diverse geographical locations, independently and sometimes spontaneously, without logistical, intelligence or operational support from ISIS. Therefore, the various intelligence services find it very difficult to collect information about such attacks and to prevent them, **and the situation is not expected to change.**

◆ **ISIS-inspired attacks abroad were fueled by an intensive ISIS propaganda campaign.** In many cases propaganda motivated young Muslims, who were sometimes radicalized, to carry out ISIS-inspired attacks. **ISIS's propaganda machine was damaged by the collapse of the Islamic State.** The scope of ISIS-inspired attacks in

the period following the fall of the Islamic State **will also be affected by ISIS's ability (and will) to rehabilitate its propaganda machine, which played an important role in motivating supporters to carry out ISIS-inspired attacks** (possibly by receiving media assistance from global jihad supporters around the world).

The risks posed by the return of the foreign fighters

▶ According to a US intelligence estimate from mid-February 2015, a period in which ISIS's momentum was halted, there were approximately **20,000 fighters from 90 countries in the ranks of ISIS.** Many foreign fighters came from Arab countries. Their number was estimated at **more than 12,000, including many from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco** (Sky News Arabic, February 12, 2015). To these countries can be added **Libya**, with around 1,000 foreign fighters. In addition, **more than 3,400** citizens from **Western countries** joined the ranks of ISIS as **foreign fighters**. (**Note**: ITIC assessment in 2014 was that **around 3,000 of the operatives who joined were from the West, nearly half of them from France and Britain**.)
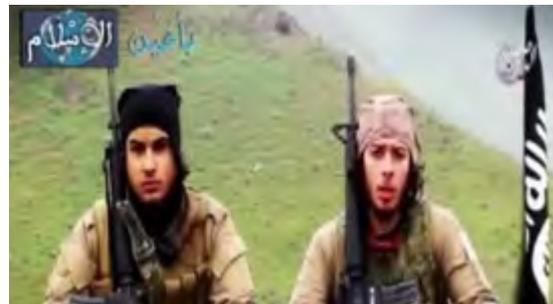
Right: French-speaking ISIS operatives threatening to carry out additional attacks in France (Video on the YouTube account of an ISIS-affiliated news website, February 14, 2015). Left: Abu Anwar the Canadian, a jihadi operative who appeared on an ISIS video and called for terrorist attacks in Canada (Twitter, December 7, 2014)

▶ The threat of terrorism abroad, and in the West in general, will also be **affected by the number of foreign fighters returning to their home countries.** The Soufan Group, a United States-based research institute, published a study by Richard Barrett on the subject. According to the study, **around 5,000 ISIS fighters from 33 countries have already returned to their home countries.** In addition, **several thousand foreign fighters who fled from the combat zones are now near the Syrian border with Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq, waiting for an opportunity to leave Syria and return to their home countries.** Another group of foreign fighters, who were forced to leave the Islamic State and are unable or

unwilling to return to their home countries, are now seeking new battlefields or refuge in Muslim countries (The Soufan Group, October 24, 2017).

▶ **It may be assumed that the influence and involvement in terrorism of those returning to their home countries will increase as their numbers rise. In ITIC assessment,** the return of the foreign fighters to their home countries **can be expected to pose a serious security problem for the various governments, especially in the countries of North Africa and Western Europe (mainly France and Britain)**. That is because they are **skilled, experienced fighters who absorbed Salafist-jihadi ideology in the ranks of ISIS.** They operatives may join local Salafist-jihadi networks in their home countries and **encourage Islamic radicalization and terrorism.**

▶ Some of the foreign fighters may return to their home countries **with their wives and children**, who were indoctrinated in the ideology of the Islamic State and witnessed the atrocities carried out in Syria and Iraq. **Those children are liable to become a new generation of ISIS supporters in the West.** However, it is still difficult to estimate how many of the fighters who returned from Syria will continue to adhere to ISIS's ideology and how many will be motivated to carry out attacks in their home countries on behalf of the organization.

Part Four: The Impact of the Fall of the Islamic State on ISIS's Relations with Al-Qaeda

The impact on the relations between Al-Qaeda and ISIS

▶ Al-Qaeda, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, **opposed** the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Lebanon **from the outset**. That was expressed in a speech in which he outlined principles and strategy for the continuation of the fighting in Syria and Iraq, in light of the increasing difficulties experienced by the jihadi organizations (al-Sahab, April 23, 2017). Al-Zawahiri's strategy centered on certain **operative guidelines:** to abandon the concept of control over territory; to adhere to the strategy of guerrilla warfare, "the weapon of the weak;" the campaign in Greater Syria (al-Sham) must be viewed as part of a global campaign, not a local one; cooperation among Muslims in Greater Syria should be increased and Muslims throughout the world should take part in it.

Background slide of the recording of al-Qaeda leader Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri's speech calling on ISIS to abandon the territorial concept (YouTube, April 23, 2017)

The collapse of the Islamic State indicates that **ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's concept of the establishment of the Islamic State here and now was wrong, and that Al-Zawahiri** (and Osama bin Laden before him) were right to oppose the establishment of an Islamic state that controlled territory. Following the collapse of the Islamic State, **there may be changes in the charged relationship between ISIS and al-Qaeda. Such changes may occur in Syria and Iraq, as well as in ISIS's provinces abroad.** ISIS operatives **may rejoin al-Qaeda**, the jihadi organization from which ISIS emerged, **to unite forces and present a unified image of the jihadi organizations.** Even if ISIS operatives continue to maintain separate organizational frameworks, **local cooperation between ISIS and al-Qaeda may develop in Syria, Iraq, and the various provinces abroad.**

Part Five: Local, Regional and International Results of the Fall of the Islamic State

The strategic level

On September 10, 2014, American President Barack Obama announced the start of an overall campaign against ISIS, **intended to degrade the organization until its destruction**. In theory, the collapse of the Islamic State is a victory for the US and its strategy. In practice, however, **the Iranians and the Russians**, whose entry into the campaign accelerated the collapse of the Islamic State, **will reap the fruits of victory.** A short examination of the possible effects of the collapse of the Islamic State on the strategic and operative levels follows.

The United States

▶ In ITIC assessment, **the United States will settle for attaining the strategic goal of eliminating the Islamic State and weakening ISIS.** In contrast to Russia and Iran, which will seek to derive maximum political-strategic benefit from their assistance to the Syrian regime, **the United States will be satisfied with attaining the declared goal and will try to avoid a significant military presence or the investment of significant economic resources in Syria.** That is partly due to its awareness of the fact that **its real impact** on developments in Syria and Iraq is **low** and because it **lacks interest in dealing with the many challenges** on the agenda after the fall of the Islamic State: **the rebuilding of the cities and rural areas that were destroyed** (for instance, Mosul); **the sectarian tensions** between Sunnis and Shi'ites; **the political weakness** of the central regimes in Baghdad and Damascus, and the intense of involvement of Russia and Iran.

▶ **The Kurdish forces are the United States' main asset in Syria, and, as part of the SDF, shown impressive fighting ability.** Further US support for the Kurds and their aspirations for autonomy may help preserve an American outpost on Syrian soil, but is liable to put the United States on **a collision course with Turkey, and to embroil it in the political struggles** that will continue in Syria even after the fall of the Islamic State. On the other hand, **abandoning the Kurds in Syria would signify a total American retreat, leaving Russian-Iranian Syria protectorate and harming the regional status of the United States.** In light of this dilemma, the United States may examine with Russia (and the Syrian regime) the possibility of **agreeing to a large degree of autonomy for the Kurds,** so as not to bind itself with commitments to the Kurds and to enable it to carry out a smooth retreat from Syria.

▶ **In Iraq, the United States may find itself in competition with Iran over its influence on the Iraqi regime.** Although the United States has provided essential assistance to the Iraqi army in the campaign against ISIS, **Iran has Shi'ite proxies in Iraq** that have improved their military capabilities in the campaign against ISIS (the Iranian-affiliated Popular Mobilization militias). **The strengthening of the Shi'ite militias** will be exploited by Iran to curb the American influence on the regime in Baghdad after the collapse of the Islamic State, **with the goal of turning Iraq into an Iranian-sponsored state.** The degree of American willingness **to make political, economic and military investments in Iraq in the struggle against Iran for political influence is questionable.**

Russia

▶ **What will be the implications of the collapse of the Islamic State on Russian policy in Syria?** In the short term, **it is doubtful whether there will be a significant change.** The Russians will continue to consolidate and expand the de-escalation zones and will try to advance a political settlement acceptable to the Syrian regime. **At the military level,** they will help the Syrian army establish itself in the Euphrates valley, the core of the Islamic State in the past (with potential friction with the Kurdish SDF forces). At the same time, the Syrian army (and the Russians) **will focus their attention on Idlib Province, which is still under the control of the Headquarters for the Liberation of al-Sham** (affiliated with al-Qaeda), which is perceived by the Russians as a terrorist organization for all intents and purposes. Therefore, it appears that **Russia will continue to be involved in the fighting in Syria** in the short term, after the collapse of the Islamic State.

▶ In ITIC assessment, the collapse of the Islamic State will lead to a Syrian attack on the area of Idlib to eliminate rebel organization presence. Later, when they believe that the situation has calmed down, **the Russians may reduce the size of their military presence in Syria, presenting the step as a victory in the campaign against the terrorist organizations.** According to Russian media reports, Russia is examining the possibility of withdrawing some of the Russian forces (the Russian daily Kommersant and the TASS News Agency, October 30, 2017). However, even if the Russians reduce their military force in Syria, **they will act to safeguard their interests and will strive to preserve the great influence they gained over the Syrian regime during the civil war. That is liable to lead to friction between Russia and Iran, which also aspires to be the dominant force in Syria.**

Iran[18]

The collapse of the Islamic State **opens up new opportunities for Iran to expand its influence in Syria, Iraq, and the Middle East as a whole.** Iran, which has in the past proved itself capable of exploiting an opportunity to improve its status as a regional power, will seek to exploit the **security and governmental vacuum left by the Islamic State** in order to advance its own regional and local ambitions, **and to play an important role in shaping the Middle East.**

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[18]For an assessment of Iranian policy in the period after the collapse of the Islamic State, see the article by Dr. Raz Zimmt from November 2017: "Iran in the Post-ISIS Era: Aims, Opportunities and Challenges (Updated Version)."

▶ During the civil war, Iran sent a **small Revolutionary Guards force** of about 1,000 fighters to Syria. **Most of Iran's activity in Syria was carried out (as usual) by Shi'ite proxies**, of which the **Lebanese Hezbollah** operatives (around 6,000-8,000 fighters) were the best fighters. In addition to the Hezbollah operatives, **Iran sent more than 10,000 Shi'ite fighters to Syria.** Those fighters operate in militia units supported by Iran: **the Fatemiyoun Brigade**, mainly composed of **Afghan Shi'ites**, consisting of around 2,000-3,000 fighters; **the Zaynabioun Brigade**, mainly composed of fighters from **Pakistan**, consisting of around 1,000 fighters, and the **Iraqi Shi'ite** militias, consisting of thousands of fighters.[19] In addition, Iran established militia units in Syria of Syrian Shi'ite operatives from the Aleppo area called the **(Imam) Al-Baqer Brigade.**

▶ The Iranian force and Iran's Shi'ite proxies supported the Syrian army and played an important role, **first in maintaining the survival of the Syrian regime, and later in supporting its military offensives.** In ITIC assessment, Iran will strive to **permanently maintain military Shi'ite units under its direction on Syrian soil,** as an available force that could be used in Syria to advance Iranian interests.

Insignia of the Afghan and Pakistani militias handled by Iran in Syria

Right: The Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade. Left: The insignia of the Pakistani Zaynabioun Brigade. The text under the name Zaynabioun reads "Islamic resistance in the world"

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[19]Based on an article by Ephraim Kam, "Iran's Shiite Foreign Legion" (INSS, Strategic Assessment, Vol. 20, No. 3, October 2017).

Right: Qassem Soleimani next to fighters of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade on the Syrian-Iraqi border (Tasnim, June 12, 2017). Left: Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Qods Force, visiting operatives of the al-Baqer Brigade in Deir al-Zor. The brigade is based on Syrian operatives (Vedeng News website, November 6, 2017).

▶ **In ITIC assessment, Iran will seek to advance several key objectives in its policy in Syria and Iraq in the era following the fall of the Islamic State and the stabilization of the Syrian regime:**

◆ **Stabilizing and shaping the Syrian regime, using Syria's territory for regional terrorism and subversion:** Preserving President Assad's regime, helping to consolidate it and expanding its control in Syria will continue to be a **vital objective for Iran.** That is because the Syrian regime is **Iran's strategic ally in the Arab world and also because of the negative consequences that the fall of the Assad regime is liable to have on Hezbollah** as a result of the loss of the Syrian logistical hinterland. Moreover, **Syria, which is situated in the heart of the Arab world, is perceived as an important geopolitical center from which Iran could conduct subversive actions against Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, to advance its regional hegemony.**

◆ **Establishing a sphere of Iranian-Shiite political influence: the "Shiite Crescent" would extend from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon,** and other countries such as **Yemen and Bahrain** would be added to it.[20] The various countries in the sphere

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[20] **Qais al-Khazali**, a Shiite operative who **heads an Iraqi militia called the League of Righteous People**, which operates under the protection of Iran, made a speech to his militia operatives on May 10, 2017. **He spoke about the Shi'ite vision of spreading throughout the Middle East: "[…] if in the past people used to talk about the Shi'ite Crescent, with the help of Allah we will have a Shi'ite Full Moon.** We will have all the land, from east to west. With the help of Allah and with the spirit of the last Shi'ite imam, **the deployment of our fighting forces will be completed:** from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps **in Iran,** to Hezbollah **in Lebanon,** to Ansar al-Allah (the Houthi rebels) **in Yemen**, to the holy mobilization [i.e., the Popular Mobilization] **in Iraq** and the brothers of al-Zeynab [i.e., the Shi'ite operatives defending the shrine of Set al-Zeynab south of Damascus], your brothers [**in Syria**]…" (Al-Jazeera, Qanat al-Iraq, May 10, 2017).

of influence (with the exception of Yemen) would be connected by a **land corridor from Iran to Syria and Lebanon.** Such a corridor would provide Iran with an **additional alternative for sending troops, weapons and equipment to Syria and Lebanon.** The land route would also provide Iran with **economic advantages** and would reduce its dependence on the **air route** that it currently uses on a regular basis, and on the **maritime route**, which it used on several occasions in the past. In ITIC assessment, Iran is striving to **create access to the Mediterranean in Syria and to gain a permanent military foothold in Syria for itself and for the Shi'ite militias** (although senior Iranian officials have denied such an intention).

◆ **Creating a terrorist threat to Israel from the Golan Heights:** In ITIC assessment, Iran has a clear interest in turning the Golan Heights into an **active terrorist front against Israel,** in addition to Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. That will be done mainly by **supporting terrorist networks in the Golan Heights, composed of Hezbollah operatives, Palestinian and local Druze operatives recruited by Iran.** Iran also wants to **establish the presence of the militias under its protection in the hinterland of the Golan Heights and southern Syria.** Statements to this effect have already been made by the leader of Hezbollah and the leader of the Iraqi militias operating in Syria under Iranian protection.[21]

◆ **Turning Iraq into an Iranian protectorate:** Iran has a clear interest **in turning Iraq,** at one time a military threat (the Iraq-Iran war) **into an Iranian protectorate, exploiting the large Shi'ite community to advance Iranian interests.** To advance its goal, **Iran will continue sponsoring the Shi'ite militias under its influence** (the Popular Mobilization), whose power increased during the campaign against ISIS, **as a tool for exerting pressure on the Iraqi regime, should it refuse to follow the Iranian line.**

◆ **Pushing the United States out of Syria and Iraq:** The United States is perceived by Iran **as a major threat to its national security and vital interests in the Middle East. Therefore, Iran will follow a policy of minimizing American influence in Syria and Iraq** after the collapse of the Islamic State. The policy will be part of **Iran's overall**

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[21] On November 10, 2017, the BBC News website reported that, according to an unnamed Western intelligence source, Iran was setting up a permanent military base near the city of al-Kiswe, south of Damascus. According to the BBC report, satellite images showed that construction work had been carried out there in 2017.

strategy aimed at undermining American influence and Sunni Arab countries in the Middle East, primarily Saudi Arabia.

◆ **Deepening Iran's political, economic, religious, and cultural influence in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon:** That will be accomplished by exploiting **those countries' weak central governments** and by taking advantage of the opportunities inherent in **rehabilitating the economy and infrastructure in Syria and Iraq,** which were destroyed during the war years. **The Shi'ite communities living in those countries (and the Alawite community** in Syria) are an important tool for attaining this goal.

The Iranian Minister of Industry meeting with the governor of the Iraqi central bank to discuss expanding cooperation between the central banks in Iran and Iraq (IRNA, November 2, 2017). This is evidence of Iran's intention to expand its economic activity in Iraq following the military campaign against the Islamic State.