

# Disentangling the Legacies of ISIS

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



## Articles & Testimony

It is certainly still premature to engage in a post-mortem for the “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While the group has lost two-fifths of its territorial conquests, including Tikrit, Ramadi, Tal Abyad, Sinjar, and Palmyra, ISIS has not yet been put fully on the defensive. Instead, it continues to seek, and occasionally achieve, new gains in conventional battles. Nevertheless, the expiration of ISIS’s claim to a territorial “caliphate” is now conceivable. And in light of this end to the group’s physical presence, that challenges those fighting ISIS to begin addressing the many corrosive legacies that will be left by the group’s demise.

This decline of ISIS can be partially attributed to the sustained albeit at times disjointed efforts of the United States-led international coalition. The coalition has indeed succeeded in halting many of ISIS’s logistical and income-generating trade channels and targeting the group’s command-and-control infrastructure. The coalition has also increasingly moved their fight squarely into the 21st century: among the most effective efforts has perhaps been the attempt at a comprehensive interdiction of access to the internet. While ISIS social media has not vanished, few reliable channels remain for the dissemination of its (diminishing) signature propaganda. This ISIS propaganda machine has been curtailed in quality, quantity, and reach.

Still, many of ISIS’s current setbacks came from self-inflicted wounds. For reasons that may remain obscure until ISIS leadership records are available, the terror organization has often acted as its own worst enemy: engaging dormant foes in untimely, unnecessary, and costly battles; alienating the local population through intransigence and open hostility; and dedicating a notable fraction of its resources to tangential actions and endeavors, such as destroying shrines and combating cigarette contraband. ISIS’s loss of focus may have been an incidental drift caused by ideology or a deliberate derailing induced by an attack from within the organization. Either way, the result of these internal and external factors has been a dramatic dislocation of the totalitarian system that ISIS sought to implement.

Consequently, even ideologues sympathetic to ISIS are now openly contemplating the potential loss of much, if not all, of the group’s territorial core in Iraq and Syria — even as they simultaneously point out that the price of reconquest by government or other forces may be at the cost of rendering national recovery impossible. During the battles for Tikrit and al-Ramadi, ISIS was defeated, but the Iraqi government’s victory came at the price of heavy military losses and extensive destruction in both cities. ISIS pursued a similar tactic in Kobani, where it retreated only after most of the city had been reduced to rubble.

ISIS supporters expect the same fate for the group's two main strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa. Advancing forces will be left with the burden of severely damaged urban infrastructure and a virtually unmanageable displaced population crisis, potentially fueling further refugee outflow. Meanwhile, these supporters underline, the terror organization would maintain an underground presence in anticipation of a future resurgence, leaving ISIS undefeated ideologically.

Although this is the image put forth by ISIS supporters for the near future, such musings ought not be dismissed as mere wishful thinking. Radical jihadism has metamorphosed and metastasized repeatedly in the past decades, and it is unreasonable to assume that the collapse of a territorial caliphate would prove a fatal blow to its most advanced manifestation.

Moreover, the most worrisome aspects of ISIS's putative legacy may not be the direct consequences of the "bitter victories" against it, as dramatic as national devastation and international refugee crises may appear to be. As part of its strategy against ISIS, the international community should recognize that ISIS has generated four long-term threats to regional and international stability — each with a nearly prohibitive cost to challenge and mitigate.

The first increasingly visible challenge is the rise of jihadist internationale. From France to China, Russia to the Philippines, thousands of jihadists have been recruited and trained by ISIS. Contrary to the often apologetic claim that Islamic State has provided a magnet for international jihadists to leave their home countries to be killed in Syria, ISIS has served as the incubator of a new generation of international jihadists. Recruited from across the globe, this new generation has been given advanced training and tested in harsh combat. The fittest have survived and often returned to their original societies, to ticking human time bombs who may resume their fight at any time in the next few decades, and with whom international security services will have to negotiate for the foreseeable future.

Besides the creation of jihadists, ISIS has created a lost generation in the areas of Syria it controls, treating Syria as occupied territory and Syrians as a hostile occupied population. ISIS jihadists have often rejected Syrian expressions of Islam as corrupted, and ISIS courts has meted harsh punishments—almost invariably death—in an effort to instill this radical understanding. The overall success of the radicalization enterprise may be questionable. But in regards to Syrian youth, ISIS has implemented cult-like indoctrination methods with some success — desensitizing young Syrians to casual murder and dismemberment while providing them with sanctioned paths to fulfill any = violent and vile fantasies. The opportunity to kill "apostates"—more accurately any enemies of ISIS—has even been presented as a reward for scholastic achievement. And while ISIS's contribution to the brutalization of Syrian society pales when compared to the actions of the Syrian regime, the trivialization of death and the glorification of murder are disruptive legacies for any attempt at reconstituting any normal social structure in Syria.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, ISIS can claim four "active and productive" franchises: Sinai, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Sinai may be its most successful remote presence, with sustained capability in engaging the Egyptian armed forces and reported material self-sufficiency. ISIS-leaning ideologues present Libya as an alternative core in the event that the Syrian and Iraqi dominion needs to be abandoned, even though the group's control of territory is sizable yet uncertain. In Yemen and Afghanistan, ISIS has little to no territorial control, but has the prospect of poaching members from other jihadist organizations as they crumble. Beyond these four locales, ISIS has a more precarious standing. Its West African franchise, the relabeled Boko Haram, has benefited only marginally from attempts at a more robust organization, and has suffered successive defeats. Efforts for franchises in the Caucasus, Somalia, and the Philippines are inconclusive; the project for another franchise in Bangladesh has been slow to materialize; while Indonesia, Tunisia, and Algeria have so far failed to live up to the expected potential. Nevertheless, this ISIS global overlay to international jihad is the product of only two years of organization and outreach. The reality of satellites proliferating, or even spawning further secondary manifestations, will require multi-lateral alliances to address it.

Moreover, ISIS's insidious ideology has begun to taint some other Muslim communities. While the debate rages between bonafide Islamophobes who have endorsed the claim of the "Islamic State" to represent the essence of Islam and the overwhelming majority of Muslim activists who reject the reductionist characterization of their faith and culture, radicalism has made dangerous inroads into Islamic scholasticism and theology. These developments are not the result of a natural proclivity within Islam as much as a consequence of the lack of adaptation in conventional Islamic scholarship to the tools of modernity that are being brandished by radicalism. These tools include scientism (the concept that truth is known rather than sought, as in the conventional credo), historicism (the view that revelation was gradual and self-abrogating instead of atemporal, which insists that the martial end of the revealed message is the absolute norm instead of on par with all other aspects of the revelation), and totalitarianism (religion is an all-encompassing unitary system instead of an all-embracing plural framework).

The Islamic intellectual universe is being invaded today by ideologies with a selective utilization of modernity to advance regimentation, exclusion, and a rejection of universal values. Currently, Islamic scholasticism is not equipped to counter this offensive. ISIS represents the practical implementation of these potent fringe propositions. As incredible as it may seem, ISIS has displayed some restraint in implementing the stricter radical propositions – and has even been criticized by ultra-radicals for its dereliction. The prospect of the dissemination of ultra-radicalism and its potential applied manifestations is a major long-term threat for both Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Had Syria, which enabled the worldwide expansion of ISIS, and Iraq, which served as ISIS's initial breeding ground, been engaged with differently, much of these seemingly insurmountable problems could have been avoided. Similarly, addressing these issues today, in spite of the magnitude of effort and sacrifice required to do so, would avoid the necessity of allocating far more blood and effort at the unavoidable next juncture. Those most affected by the group have taken some actions in the right direction. European governments, for example, are seriously assessing their exposure to returning jihadists. However, Syria continues to be left to the exacerbating hegemony of Russia and Iran, while international alliances and coalitions seems to be merely reactive in addressing new iterations of ISIS. Most ominously, no credible counter current has gained enough ground to handle the damaging effects of radical Islamic theology.

Defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria is an important goal. But unless an international determination to manage the complex legacies of ISIS is developed, any promised victory in Iraq and Syria would be short lived.

*Hassan Mneimneh is the Contributing Editor at Fikra Forum. This article was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=9512#.V2aTKbsrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=9512#.V2aTKbsrLIU). ❖*

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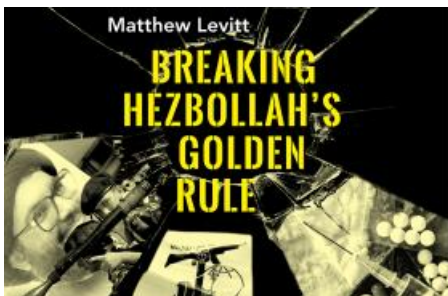
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