

Colonial Caliphate: The Ambitions of the 'Islamic State'

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Articles & Testimony

ISIS poses an existentially different threat than previous Sunni jihadist groups, with a focus on territorial possession and expansion.

By now, many have seen the variations of maps that “Islamic State” (IS) activists have posted online showing aspirational future areas of conquest. This genre usually encompasses areas that have been under historical Caliphates shaded in black, including places such as Spain or Greece that do not even have a Muslim plurality of the population today. Ultimately, IS (as well as other Sunni jihadi groups) hopes the entire world comes under its dominion. This is nothing new. But what are IS’s short to medium-term goals and how are they attempting to achieve them?

In short: its slogan *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding).

All of this, is of course, contingent on any level of success and legitimacy, which at this juncture will be difficult in the face of most Muslims rejecting its “Caliphate” announcement as well other Islamist groups including pro-al-Qaeda jihadis.

The “Caliphate project” is a unique enterprise and one that does not necessarily play by the same rules most follow, since ultimately its goal is to overthrow the Westphalian nation-state model and the post-World War II American international system. The announcement of the renewed “Caliphate” could signal something more akin to a colonial project where the “Islamic state” seeks to incorporate non-contiguous territories. Already in Iraq and Syria, the areas it has taken control of are not all contiguous. Therefore, it is plausible that factions or groups in other locales could conceivably take territory and, having pledged bay’a (an oath of loyalty) to the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, thereby expanding the State’s Caliphate.

Where Could This Occur? Would It Be Sustainable?

Beyond IS’s hope to “remain and expand,” I have a nascent hypothesis about its unique use of foreign fighters.

Unlike al-Qaeda, which has mainly used its foreign fighter contingents to train, plan, and then execute attacks in the West or Arab countries over the years, IS might have bigger plans for them. While IS would have no problem with dispatching foreign fighters for terrorist attacks out of theater (more on this below), they might also order their foreign fighter cadres to build up capacities for the expansion of its state once they return home. Further, it may also use them to infiltrate and subvert al-Qaeda branches and cells as part of its broader war with al-Qaeda for supremacy over the global jihadi movement.

The Islamic State's colonial Caliphate project would find the most fertile ground in the Northern Sinai, Eastern Libya, and some of the neighborhoods in poor areas of Western European cities that are Muslim-majority. None of this is inevitable. In fact, the Islamic State would have some serious difficulties in pulling it off, especially in Western Europe. But the jihadi movement has never let feasibility stand in the way of its ambitions. Like many jihadi strategists have proposed in the past, they would hope to set off a backlash that could lead to destabilization and chaos. This is exactly what jihadis thrive off. We have already seen failed attempts in England to establish "sharia zones" by local jihadis like the UK-based Anjem Choudary, who has cautiously spoken out in favor of the Caliphate claim.

Besides the Islamic State's ideological and narrative appeal, one of the biggest sources of its strength comes from its economic independence. Due to the spoils of war and criminal enterprises, they are far less reliant on private donors than al-Qaeda. Why is this relevant? Unlike al-Qaeda, the Islamic State has funding and can use its extra coffers to offer money to potential affiliates. It is a new center that can give resources to the periphery. In recent years, al-Qaeda has had more difficulty doing that.

The Islamic State's economic independence is also germane because many foreign fighters have criminal pasts and therefore would have experiences and have no issue with getting involved in criminal activities if and when they return home. Additionally, those outside the center of the Islamic State's gravity can leverage the criminal networks in locales like the Sinai and Libya. There has already been signs that jihadis have attempted to graft onto those criminal networks with varying success.

Similarly, one could see a scenario where Europe's foreign fighters — many of whom have deep criminal pasts — return home and set up business rackets and other illegal ventures in certain neighborhoods in areas where they are from and run them like mafia bosses or gangsters. This could lead to a chilling effect such as no-go zones where European police are not comfortable entering or operating. Again, this is all hypothetical and not the current reality, but setting up such independent economic hubs in "statelets" could further the reach of the Islamic State, which has no time frame on its project. The success of such an undertaking would likely have an easier chance of working in the Sinai/Libya scenario due to lack of full state writ already.

Baghdadi's Target Countries?

Following the announcement of the Islamic State's self-proclaimed Caliphate, its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivered a Ramadan address, which was filled with the usual jihadi platitudes. It also included specific "shout outs" to areas where Muslims are suffering and could be a clue to areas it hopes to expand its influence or compete with al-Qaeda. For instance, Baghdadi specifically notes the suffering of Sunnis in Burma, the Philippines, Indonesia, Kashmir, Bosnia, the Caucasus, Palestine, Egypt, East Turkistan (China), Iran, France, Tunisia, and Central African Republic. There is already known public support for the Islamic State or has foreign fighter networks that have fed itself in Iraq and Syria in the Philippines, Indonesia, Bosnia, the Caucasus, Palestine, Egypt, Iran, France, and Tunisia. Therefore, if one wants to look to areas that are not in surrounding countries to Iraq or Syria these are potentially more immediate targets.

Closer to home, though, the Islamic State hopes to expand its reach in terms of linking up contiguous territory over

“Sykes-Picot” borders. More recently, for the first time publicly the Islamic State has announced a presence in the Qalamoun region on the Lebanese-Syrian border as well as claiming responsibility for an attack in Beirut. If it hopes to expand into Lebanon, it will have to compete with the Qaeda-aligned Abdullah Azzam Brigades, which has years of experience recruiting. Similarly, while there has been support in Ma’an, Jordan for the Islamic State, this is a minority sentiment in the broader Jordanian jihadi current, which has been closer to and more supportive of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

The biggest prize beyond targeting Israel (more on this below) would be provoking violence against the Saudi regime and claiming Saudi territory. The majority of the 1,400+ Saudis that have gone to fight in Syria (and now Iraq) have joined the Islamic State rather than Jabhat al-Nusra. Additionally, hundreds in the last decade fought with the group when it was called al-Qaeda in Iraq. Among them, some then went onto fight with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). There are also number of its foreign fighters that have returned home and other soft support inside the Kingdom. Therefore, it is possible that the Islamic State may rely on those already inside Saudi, Yemen, and its own soldiers in Iraq to create a three-pronged attack. While the Saudi government would have air superiority, it has no significant experience in quelling an insurgency (though Saudi has been successful in counterterrorism campaigns against al-Qaeda) and could prove more difficult if it was drawn out. This in of itself would be a win for the Islamic State, “remaining” sometimes is just as important as outright victory.

The biggest win for the Islamic State though would be becoming a real player in the Israeli-Palestinian fight. This would be easier said than done and would rely on a number of factors falling into place. In the past, the global jihadi movement in Palestine was more aspirational than a true force on the ground. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and with space filled by the movement in northern Sinai global jihadis have been able to make in-roads, albeit still a relatively small movement. Domestically, the continued failed governance of Hamas in Gaza and continued corruption and general illegitimacy that Fatah has as a result of perceived collaboration with Israel in the West Bank has also been helpful.

What could propel the Islamic State in the Palestinian arena is another Intifada. In light of the above wariness and failures by the status quo Palestinian political parties, there has been a rise in Salafism in both Gaza and the West Bank. Therefore, similar to Hamas’ rise in the aftermath of both the first and second intifadas, it is possible that the consequence of a third intifada would be that the Islamic State would be able to carve a space out for itself, especially if it is perceived as the underdog punching above its weight and giving blows to the hated “Zionists.” If this came to fruition, it is possible that because the Islamic State is fighting Israel, it would lower the bar for support of the Islamic State due to a legitimate, but, at times, irrationally visceral hatred for Israel even if the group that is fighting this “resistance” or “jihad” against Israel has authoritarian tendencies, too. As a result, it is the hope of the Islamic State in the medium to longer-term that if it wins the Palestinians, it will subsequently then win the Muslim world.

Fracturing al-Qaeda Elements

Another way the Islamic State could gain “ungoverned” spaces or build up its capacities and networks is through creating breakaway groups of members that defect from al-Qaeda branches to new Islamic State “territories” in places like Syria, Yemen, Somalia, or North Africa. The recent successes on the battlefield in Iraq (and now again in Syria due to a shifting of new resources gained in the Iraqi offensive) and the announcement of the Caliphate, the Islamic State perceives that this could push more factions, individuals, or groups to join up with its cause and reject the “out of touch” leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Recently, in light of these Iraqi offensives, whether it is legitimate or through coercion, members and leaders within Jabhat al-Nusra in both the Deir al-Zour and Damascus region have defected, pledged bay’a to Baghdadi, and joined the Islamic State. There are also unconfirmed rumors that foot soldiers in both AQAP and Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin, al-Qaeda’s Somali branch, have some sympathies for the Islamic State. Thus far, we have already seen al-

Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's Central Region officially splitting and supporting the Islamic State. We have also seen some members and a leader in AQAP that went to Syria to fight that have since backed the Islamic State, too. All of those pledges of fealty occurred prior to the Islamic State's Caliphate announcement. Since then, the only relevant bay'a given was by a faction from within the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, a group known for its close ties to al-Qaeda, which itself had nine members defect to Baghdadi a couple of months ago.

The Islamic State hopes this trend continues. The biggest potential tipping point would be for AQAP to switch sides since it is still rightly perceived as al-Qaeda's strongest branch. While AQAP's senior leadership has loyalty to Zawahiri and al-Qaeda, in part because of its leader, Nasir al-Wihayshi's mentorship under Usama bin Ladin in Afghanistan. One thing to look for going forward is whether the large Saudi contingent that fought with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and then returns to Yemen to continue jihad with AQAP decides to make a power play against AQAP's senior leadership or attempts to fracture the organization and create a breakaway group while also taking members from AQAP with it.

Conclusion

One way that the Islamic State hopes any of these various potentialities comes to fruition is that it compels the West to focus more on its own homelands instead of security in the broader Arab world. This could be done through dispatching any number of the up to thousands of Westerners in its ranks to conduct terrorist attacks in the West. Thereby, creating a distraction for Western countries, while the Islamic State is continuing its hoped takeover of more territory and resources in the region. As a result, it is a misnomer to think that it is an either/or policy for the Islamic State to only be interested in just state-building or terrorism. As we have seen with AQAP in the past, the Islamic State will likely be in the business of both. For this potential plan to work out, though, the Islamic State will need to expand its support base beyond just its most hardcore following and address some of the skepticism and issues that top jihadi scholars like Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi have warned it about. Otherwise, all these aspirational ambitions will be for naught.

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