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The Islamic State's challenge to international order

ANDREW PHILLIPS*

The Islamic State (IS) has emerged as the most alarming face of the 'Jihadi Spring'. In 2011, jihadists looked destined for the dustbin of history. Popular movements toppled dictators throughout the Arab world, confounding the extremist narrative that redemption could come only through the path of jihad. Fast-forward three years, the Arab Spring has turned decidedly frosty, most notably in Iraq. Once the centrepiece of the Bush administration's 'forward strategy of freedom', now, alongside Syria, it is the epicentre of jihadists' regional resurgence.

Snatching survival from the jaws of defeat

Jihadism's resurgence in Iraq is especially remarkable, given the immense material and reputational damage the jihadists sustained prior to the USA's 2011 departure from Iraq. Jihadists such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi played a huge role in driving the anti-Coalition insurgency there in the early to mid 2000s. But their zealotry and brutality quickly alienated them from host communities, creating an opening for a US-sponsored Sunni tribal 'Awakening', which later almost destroyed Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Three factors explain how jihadists have been able to recover following the near-death experience of the 'Awakening'. First, a *discriminatory and divisive* Iraqi government under former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki failed to conciliate disaffected Sunnis following the Awakening. More concerned with building his own patronage networks than cementing a multi-confessional Iraqi state, al-Maliki failed to integrate Iraq's Sunnis into the political process. This left them open to revived jihadist overtures, as well as ensuring continued sectarian division in Iraq.

Second, a *distracted* Washington meanwhile failed to exercise its leverage (admittedly limited) post-2011 to pressure Baghdad into honouring its commitment to conciliate with the Sunnis and thus uphold a durable post-war political settlement. Escalating tensions in East Asia, more immediate policy challenges in Libya and Syria, and the Obama administration's determination to avoid being

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sucked back into the Iraqi ‘quagmire’ all contributed to a dilatory US response to al-Maliki’s post-2011 backsliding.

Finally, the *partial disintegration* of governmental authority in Syria following the onset of civil war there has provided a further fillip to jihadism in Iraq and beyond. The war in Syria has given Iraqi jihadists invaluable opportunities to gain battlefield experience and new recruits, while operating in sanctuaries beyond the reach of the al-Maliki government. Following the jihadists’ capture of the Syrian city of Raqqa, IS seized oil wells, which have enabled it to finance its operations autonomously from the private Gulf State patrons on which it formerly depended. This access to independent resources has made it richer, bolder and more dangerous than any of its jihadist rivals, paving the way for its most recent assault on the Iraqi state.

The multidimensional IS challenge

Following its February 2014 break with Al Qaeda, its June capture of Mosul, and IS Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s declaration of a revived caliphate, IS has consolidated its reputation as arguably the world’s most dangerous (and certainly its richest) jihadist terrorist entity.

Within Iraq itself, IS is now well advanced in building a jihadist proto-state across swathes of the Sunni Triangle, formerly the cradle of the anti-Coalition insurgency during the Iraq War. Building on its successes in Syria, IS has committed not merely to outgunning Baghdad, but also outgoverning it, at least in the Sunni-majority areas IS now holds. This constitutes a radical evolution from the strategies of its more protean predecessors (such as Al Qaeda in Iraq), and reflects the immense self-confidence of the IS leadership.

Regionally, IS has challenged the legitimacy of the prevailing order at two levels. In attempting to consolidate a jihadist statelet spanning parts of Syria and Iraq, IS challenges the territorial dispensation that has prevailed since the 1916 Sykes–Picot Agreement first split the region into British and French spheres of influence. Sykes–Picot stands as an enduring symbol of betrayal and humiliation for the Arab world. Its prominence in IS propaganda reflects al-Baghdadi’s canny marshalling of pan-Arabist sentiment to legitimate his fledgling statelet. Al-Baghdadi’s declaration of a revived caliphate—effectively a claim to leadership of the world’s Muslims—meanwhile directly challenges the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy, which grounds its authority in its status as custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Finally, at the systemic level, in laying claim to caliphal authority, IS follows Al Qaeda’s precedent in challenging the most foundational principles of today’s global order, in which political authority is institutionalised in a universal system of sovereign nation states, rather than anchored in a common system of religious authority. The vision of a revived caliphate may present to westerners as an absurd totalitarian fantasy. But it taps into a deep disaffection with a world order that an angry minority of Muslims regard as the product of

Western imperialism, designed to keep the Islamic community (umma) estranged both from God and from one another, as well as hostage to a toxic Western secular modernity.

'Mission accomplished'—now what?

IS's recent successes are stunning and disturbing. They show that jihadist extremists remain resilient and adaptive enemies, capable of learning from their mistakes, leveraging historical grievances and rapidly exploiting the chaos that the Arab Spring has brought in its wake. But while jihadism remains a potent threat to global peace and security, we would be unwise to exaggerate its strategic prowess.

IS, in particular, has won major battlefield and propaganda victories of late. However, as al-Baghdadi's ambitions have grown, so too have the ranks of his enemies. IS's break with Al Qaeda, and the fratricidal violence now playing out between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, starkly illustrates the division that besets the jihadist movement. Clashes over ego and ideology have long plagued the jihadist demi-monde, and will only escalate following al Baghdadi's assertion of caliphal authority. Despite their pretensions towards global Islamic solidarity, jihadists also have long been deeply divided by nationalist sentiments. As IS cannibalises Al Qaeda affiliates, these tendencies towards entropy will likely worsen.

The rapidity and scale of IS victories and the hubris of al-Baghdadi's dreams are, meanwhile, galvanising regional opposition. For over three decades, Sunni Islamic extremists have enjoyed the patronage of wealthy Gulf State benefactors, keen to burnish their own religious credentials while deflecting dangerous zealots abroad. Now engorged with loot and increasingly self-sustaining through activities ranging from kidnapping through to oil exports, IS is no longer so bound by the purse strings of its former sponsors. This combination of financial autonomy and ideological zealotry now makes IS a major source of regional destabilisation for states that not so long ago nourished IS's brethren.

Finally, IS's own state-building ambitions may yet prove its undoing. Now basking in the glory of its own 'mission accomplished' moment, IS's self-proclaimed mantle as protector of Iraq's Sunni minority confines its potential appeal to the Sunni Triangle. It also virtually guarantees the hostility of the country's non-Sunni majority to the jihadists' further expansion.

Even within its new fiefdom, IS is likely to find that it is far harder to rule than it is to conquer. Host communities can be terrorised into submission for a time. But IS can consolidate the caliphate only by building state-like capacities for taxation, administration, adjudication and popular mobilisation. Evidence from Raqqa and other IS enclaves indicates that this is precisely what IS is trying to do. But here IS will confront a key paradox.

If it is able to learn from al-Zarqawi's errors, *if* it can develop the fiscal and administrative capacities for territorial rule, and *if* it can forge the coalitions

with local notables necessary to make the caliphate's rule politically sustainable, IS *may* be able to carve out a territorial toehold from which it will be difficult to be dislodged in the medium term. But the more state-like the caliphate becomes, the easier it will be to contain and, eventually, to roll back. From global jihadism's birth in the 1980s, in the crucible of the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, jihadists have enjoyed the advantages of rootlessness. Insurgents in the twentieth century frequently pursued classically Maoist strategies of rebellion—they aimed to spread their authority from isolated 'base' areas to encircle and overthrow existing governments within a clearly defined territory. Conversely, the jihad jet set organised around deterritorialised networks, and exploited modern communication and transportation technologies to wage an insurgency against the West on a global scale.

Al-Baghdadi and his followers remain bin Laden's ideological heirs, and have demonstrated similar acumen in harnessing the infrastructure of globalisation (including, most notably, social media) to prosecute their struggle and rally extremists globally to their cause. But territorial rule is a different game to Twitter activism. And the tensions involved in consolidating a local caliphate while fighting a global jihad will be immensely difficult to bridge. The caliphate may be reborn, but the hubris of its new Caliph may yet prove its undoing.