

A NEW LONG WAR?

THE CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY THE ISLAMIC CALIPHATE

Dustin Dehez

The timing was deliberately chosen. On the first night of Ramadan this year, the spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)¹ announced the establishment of a new caliphate. He used the opportunity to call on all Muslims to declare their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS' leader and self-proclaimed new caliph. The group is trying to bolster its claims for legitimacy by claiming to continue the original caliphate that existed between 632 and 661 and to legitimise its own claims to power. Shortly before this, ISIS fighters had bulldozers drive up to the border between Iraq and Syria and tear down the fortifications in front of rolling cameras. ISIS has declared nothing short of the end of the old national boundaries that were drawn in 1916 as part of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.² This was preceded by the militia's rapid advances in Iraq, which culminated in the capture of many cities in the Sunni region of the country.

Mosul, Fallujah and Tikrit were the first to fall into the hands of ISIS, and in Syria, the militia controls the city of ar-Raqqa and parts of Deir ez-Zour and Aleppo provinces. In October, they eventually began a concentrated attack on one of the last Kurdish enclaves in Syria near the



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- 1 | Many acronyms and names are used to designate the Islamic State, from ISIS (used here) to Da'ish or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).
- 2 | In the Sykes-Picot Agreement, France and Britain agreed to divide the Middle East following the end of World War I; it is so named for the diplomats who negotiated it, Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot. The borders designated in the initially confidential document survived the end of the colonial era and are therefore considered by many to be illegitimate. Cf. specifically Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, London, 2013, 264-267. However, there are also observers who consider the role played by the agreement to be overblown; cf. Toby Dodge, "Can Iraq Be Saved?", *Survival*, 56, 2014, 7-20.

Turkish border: the city of Kobane (Ain al-Arab) was only able to hold out thanks to an allied air campaign. Though less publicised, the militia's advance into the Iraqi province of Anbar began simultaneously; now 80 per cent of the province is under ISIS control. With the proclamation of the caliphate, some observers had initially suspected that ISIS would focus on consolidating its position in the occupied territories. However, further offensives demonstrated that the militia was seeking to do both: to tighten its rule as well as expand its territory.

Fig. 1

Presumed dominion of the terror militia Islamic State



Source: Own illustration referring to Peter Mühlbauer, "Salafisten greifen syrisches Kurdengebiet an", Telepolis, 8 Jul 2014, http://heise.de/tp/bild/42/42198/42198_1.html (accessed 6 Nov 2014), map © Lesniewski / Fotolia, racken.

Not since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 has any Islamic fundamentalist group been so close to controlling a de facto state. However, the consequences extend far beyond Iraq and Syria. It is not only the militia's rapid advance throughout much of these countries that cause concern, but also the many atrocities and the ambitious government-like structures, which demonstrate the extent of the militia's totalitarian beliefs. Considering ISIS' gains to date, to date, the international community's response is hardly convincing. Though the United States has once again taken the initiative, forging an international coalition against the militia and, together with its allies, conducting air strikes on positions held by ISIS, the Obama

administration has already stated its intention to limit its involvement to air strikes. Even though France, the UK and several Arab countries have joined in on the operation, a coherent strategy to which all participating countries could subscribe, has yet to be formulated.

MILITARY TERRITORIAL GAINS

Just how great a risk ISIS poses became clear when its fighters quickly advanced into Mosul in June. Government forces in the city were routed and left behind materials and weapons in an uncoordinated withdrawal. The Iraqi government lost control of their borders with Syria and Jordan. In what came as a surprise to many observers, the Iraqi government quickly lost and military structures disintegrated. However, this meltdown of the security forces was aided by Baghdad's politics in three ways. First, the marginalisation of the Sunni regions of the country meant that the Iraqi security forces had no longer access to valuable intelligence information from the Sunni tribes, and thus were no longer able to correctly assess the situation in those areas. The surrender of Mosul makes this abundantly clear. ISIS had infiltrated the city months before it was able to raise the black flag of the fundamentalists. Its supporters collected taxes from local business people and liquidated potential adversaries. The Iraqi security forces, the government and public prosecutors mostly just stood by as the State's monopoly on the means of coercion disintegrated even before the first ISIS units entered the city.³

Second, over the past few years, despite all the American support in terms of equipment, the Iraqi army has not evolved into a cohesive force. Its composition essentially follows former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki's Shia-dominated agenda. Officers' ranks were not awarded according to skills and prior performance but for money. This, in turn, has resulted in officers recouping their outlay through so-called ghost soldiers: soldiers who existed only on the payrolls, but whose pay and equipment went straight into

3 | Cf. Letta Tayler, "Before the Fall. ISIS was wreaking havoc in Mosul long before it took over the city", *Foreign Policy*, 13 Jun 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/06/12/before_the_fall_iraq_isis_mosul (accessed 3 Nov 2014).

the pockets of corrupt officers.⁴ Therefore, the Iraqi armed forces have never had the strength they appeared to have on paper. Put differently, the Iraqi army primarily lacked a sense of internal cohesion, by far the most important factor in determining an army's combat readiness.⁵



Fragile structure: The Iraq army is especially lacking internal cohesion. Corruption and a poor officer rank system lead to limited strength to fight. | Source: James Selesnick, U.S. Army, flickr ©¹.

Third, the marginalisation of the Sunni regions led to the security forces remaining totally ignorant of the fact that ISIS was purposefully liquidating moderate Sunni leaders. ISIS deliberately eliminated in particular those tribal elders who had come to an arrangement with the American troops and the Iraqi government to restore security and stability during the coalition's counterinsurgency campaign. This first laid the groundwork for ISIS' territorial gains and, second, makes the liberation of these territories much more difficult. Third, the tactics first used by the Iraqi government against ISIS have unnecessarily complicated the situation. The use of barrel bombs (oil drums repurposed into bombs) has been particularly counterproductive in this context.⁶ In September 2014, ISIS began

4 | Obtaining the rank of general in the Iraqi army is said to cost approximately 30,000 U.S. dollars. Cf. Dodge, n. 2, 12.

5 | Cf. Florence Gaub, *Rebuilding Armed Forces: Learning from Iraq and Lebanon*, Carlisle, 2011.

6 | Andrew McGregor, "Iraqi Counter-Insurgent Tactics under Fire", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 12, 13 Jun 2013, 1, <http://jamestown.org/uploads/media/TerrorismMonitorVol12Issue12.pdf> (accessed 6 Nov 2014).

similar disruptive operations on the northern outskirts of Baghdad. Since the summer, bombings have once again become an everyday occurrence. Even the headquarters of the Iraqi military intelligence service came under attack in September. Despite coalition air strikes, the militia is edging closer to the Iraqi capital.

Estimates of ISIS' strength vary widely, but most observers put the number at between 20,000 and 50,000 fighters, with a significant proportion coming from abroad.⁷ This also explains the escalating agenda of the self-proclaimed caliphate. The militia's capability to simultaneously wage war on so many different fronts with this number of fighters, forcing both the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi and Syrian armies to go on the defensive while at the same time fighting other rebel groups in Syria, suggests special organisational skills. Fighting units are rotated between different fronts with relative ease, suggesting high mobility and good supply lines. The offensive against the city of Kobane on the Turkish border and the simultaneous advance in the Iraqi province of Anbar demonstrate the persistence of the Islamists, who are able to carry out attacks on several fronts even in the face of constant air strikes by coalition forces.

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In view of the rapid territorial gains and the ability to drive back the Iraqi troops, some Syrian tribes and militias have sought to negotiate with ISIS, probably in part to escape the fate of conquest. In the province of Deir ez-Zour, several militias have professed their loyalty to the new caliphate. Some tribes have also expressed their support or negotiated a surrender. Its brutal actions against any kind of resistance aid ISIS in this context. In mid-August, the group executed 700 members of the Sheitat tribe in the Syrian province of Deir ez-Zour; only one hundred of them were fighters.⁸ The Iraqi army's attempts to recapture lost

7 | David Ignatius estimates that nearly half of the fighters come from neither Syria nor Iraq. David Ignatius, "The Islamic State's challenge to the United States", *The Washington Post*, 31 Jul 2014, <http://wapo.st/1xbJRsi> (accessed 3 Nov 2014); "Islamic State 'has 50,000 fighters in Syria'", *Al Jazeera*, 19 Aug 2014, <http://aje.me/1EkX5Fr> (accessed 3 Nov 2014).

8 | Cf. "Islamic Sate group 'executes 700' in Syria", *Al Jazeera*, 17 Aug 2014, <http://aje.me/1siZ1qe> (accessed 3 Nov 2014).

ground continue to prove futile. The next level of escalation was achieved when the Islamists began a new offensive on the long front with the Kurdish region of Iraq capturing the cities of Sinjar, Zumar and Wana in quick succession. However, in the process, the Islamic State has also created powerful enemies. The flight of the Yazidi religious minority to the Kurdish controlled territory called the United States and Europe to action; they are now moving to halt the advance of ISIS with the help of Kurdish forces and their own air strikes. Although the Kurdish Peshmerga have been able to stop the advance of ISIS into the Kurdish region of Iraq, and despite the air strikes by the coalition forces, ISIS continues to conquer more and more parts of Syria and is consolidating its control in Iraq.



For fear of the IS and the ongoing civil war, thousands of people flee Syria. They are seeking refuge in the neighboring countries Jordan, Lebanon or here in Turkey. | Source: EU/ECHO, flickr ©11©.

STRUCTURE OF ISIS AND DIFFERENTIATION FROM AL-QAEDA

Many observers attribute ISIS' roots to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the organisation under the leadership of Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that had mounted attacks throughout large parts of Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, al-Zarqawi, whom al-Qaeda granted the title of "Emir in the Country of Two Rivers", largely operated autonomously from al-Qaeda and was responsible not only for the escalating civil war in Iraq. In 2005, his organisation perpetrated three simultaneous attacks on

hotels in Jordan. In June 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed in an American bombing raid, and the coalition forces' counter-insurgency strategy that began shortly thereafter coupled with the deployment of additional troops to Iraq quickly quashed al-Qaeda's ability to operate there. Though there is a certain overlap in the people involved in both ISIS and AQI, the two groups have since gone their separate ways.

ISIS is thus the first Islamist terrorist organisation to not even attempt to gain ideological endorsement from al-Qaeda. While the two organisations share key goals, a dispute between ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has so far prevented a formal alliance. In fact, both organisations had remained in what could almost be considered a partnership of convenience until 2004.⁹ However, when al-Baghdadi announced in April 2013 that his organisation would expand into Syria and would no longer call itself the Islamic State of Iraq, but rather the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a rivalry arose for supremacy in fundamentalist circles. Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, head of another Islamic fundamentalist group, al-Nusra, particularly disapproved of this step and gained support from al-Zawahiri in his attempt to keep ISIS out of Syria, who in turn urged ISIS to only fight in Iraq.¹⁰ Al-Baghdadi ignored the request, not least because it would have implied recognition of the hated Sykes-Picot lines. In January 2014, this rivalry eventually led to an open split, with al-Nusra fighters continuing their affiliation with al-Qaeda and fighting against ISIS units. Al-Nusra hence rejects the establishment of a new caliphate and belittles it as "twitter caliphate".

In April 2013, the organisation announced that it would expand into Syria and would call itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Behind this rivalry for leadership in fundamentalist circles lies an old conflict over the strategy for establishing a new caliphate. While the movement loyal to al-Qaeda first wants to fight the so-called far enemy (i.e. Western

9 | Cf. Yoram Schweitzer, "ISIS: A Risk Assessment", *INSS Insight*, No. 564, 23 Jun 2013, <http://inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=7116> (accessed 3 Nov 2014); in greater detail: Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Research Notes, 20, 6/2014, http://washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf (accessed 3 Nov 2014).

10 | Cf. Zelin, *ibid.*, 4.

democracies), ISIS is reverting to the methods of the Islamic fundamentalist forces who were active in the 1990s, aiming first at near enemies, rival militias and secular regimes.¹¹ Al-Qaeda therefore considers the proclamation of a caliphate premature because a new caliphate will only be able to hold its own once international opponents are neutralised. The recent announcement by al-Qaeda that it is seeking to establish a cell in India is likely a sign that al-Qaeda will not simply cede this leadership role. However, the division between ISIS and al-Qaeda should not be interpreted too rigidly. Since al-Qaeda itself is no longer the centralised organisation it used to be until 2007 and has since relied heavily on the strength of its regional affiliates, from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), coalitions of opportunity between its offshoots and ISIS are conceivable. The coalition air strikes in particular may boost efforts to come to some kind of truce among Islamists.

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The rapid advance has also boosted speculation that the rebels are a coherent and tightly managed group. This is, of course, not true.

In fact, these territorial gains were made possible because various Sunni groups had taken up arms against the Iraqi government and entered into alliances of convenience with the ISIS militias. Among others, those groups include the General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries, consisting mainly of former officers of Saddam Hussein's disbanded Iraqi army; its alliance of convenience with ISIS is likely to be temporary. The Military Council of Tribal Revolutionaries, said to be supported primarily in the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, as well as the Military Council of Anbar Tribal Revolutionaries, which unites the remaining forces of Anbar's Awakening, also belong to this alliance along with a few rather more religiously motivated groups,¹² of which Jam'at Ansar al-Islam (JAI) is probably the most well-known. The extent of coherence with which ISIS can operate in Iraq can therefore not yet be determined with certainty.

11 | Cf. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy. Why Jihad Went Global*, Cambridge, 2005.

12 | A detailed examination of the groups can be found in Bashdar Pusho Ismaeel, "A Marriage of Convenience: The Many Faces of Iraq's Sunni Insurgency", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 15, 25 Jul 2014, 4-6, http://jamestown.org/uploads/media/TerrorismMonitorVol12Issue15_01.pdf (accessed 6 Nov 2014).

It appears to be more certain that the proclamation of the caliphate has heralded a changing of the guard on the part of fundamentalist organisations. Al-Qaeda's rise was inextricably linked with the return of fighters from the Soviet war in Afghanistan, which now dates back decades. For the latest generation of fundamentalists, especially those moving from Europe to the Middle East, that war against the Soviet Union is not even a distant memory. Moreover, over the past few years, al-Qaeda has not succeeded in carrying out any more major attacks that could have been used to attract support. Their leading figure, Ayman al-Zawahiri, still serves as a spiritual frontfigure, but other key players are long since dead and, similar to al-Zawahiri, those remaining are not considered charismatic.

In contrast, the proclamation of a new caliphate overshadows al-Qaeda. The caliphate is much better suited to serve as what al-Qaeda is named for and what it always wanted to be: a base. Since ISIS has been challenging al-Qaeda as the most important fundamentalist organisation, the Islamist scene has rearranged itself. The leader of the Somali group al-Shabaab, Mukhtar al-Zubir, has reiterated his oath of loyalty to al-Qaeda, while others are now following ISIS, including Ansar al-Sharia in Libya.¹³ Only time will tell the extent of this rearrangement, which primarily depends on whether ISIS will be able to establish itself in large parts of Syria and Iraq in the long run.

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GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

ISIS pursues a twofold strategy. It immediately begins building its own, sometimes quite extensive government structures in the areas it controls. One can use the Syrian city of ar-Raqqa, which ISIS completely took over at the beginning of the year, to study its conceptions of "government". After it had succeeded in capturing the last of

13 | In early October, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) followed suit and also declared its loyalty; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which is also based in Pakistan, congratulated al-Baghdadi. Cf. Jacob Zenn, "Islamic State Finds new Ally in Pakistan's TTP", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 19, 10 Oct 2014, 2-3, <http://jamestown.org/uploads/media/TerrorismMonitorVol12Issue19.pdf> (accessed 6 Nov 2014). TTP further declared that jihadists would be sent to Syria.

Police tasks are carried out by al-Hisba, a religious police force that monitors compliance with *sharia*, Ramadan and a strict dress code. the Syrian government forces' bases in November 2013, the militia had complete control of the city and the region. Killed government soldiers were beheaded, their

heads subsequently put on display. With this macabre demonstration of force, ISIS signalled it would not tolerate any resistance. At the same time it began to levy taxes and introduce new policing and judicial structures.¹⁴ Police tasks are carried out by al-Hisba, a religious police force that monitors compliance with *sharia*, Ramadan and a strict dress code.

But the real pillars of the governmental structures are the courts, with which ISIS combines two functions. First, they ensure that the Islamic legal system covers all parts of society. Dispensation of justice thus follows only religiously based laws; people are prosecuted for consuming alcohol, tobacco and drugs, and family and business disputes are decided in accordance with Islamic law as a matter of principle. Secondly, however, the rapid establishment of these courts also provides for a noticeable re-establishment of semi-public structures, and the harsh sentences handed down, even for very minor cases, are proving dissuasive. In this way, the militia aims to establish a kind of legal certainty that promises to gain them legitimacy, at least temporarily.¹⁵ Although ISIS seeks for all cases to be brought to court, one can assume that torture and murder outside the courts are also a matter of course. The judgements of these courts and the application of justice under ISIS therefore have no basis in the rule of law.

In material terms, ISIS has been able to secure funding for its activities. Capturing Mosul provided additional assets that were not taken or destroyed by the fleeing Iraqi security forces. Furthermore, the Islamists now control the production of nearly 80,000 barrels of oil a day, which are either sold through middlemen at below-market prices or are delivered as directly as possible to end users, providing

14 | Apparently, stores are charged two U.S. dollars a month in taxes. Borzou Daragahi and Erika Solomon, "Fuelling Isis Inc", *Financial Times*, 22 Sep 2014, 7.

15 | Cf. Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, "ISIS Governance in Syria", *Middle East Security Report*, No. 22, Jul 2014, http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf (accessed 6 Nov 2014).

the organisation with a steady flow of money.¹⁶ Abductions and looting of cultural treasures in areas controlled by ISIS have provided it with additional income; according to estimates, ISIS has nearly one billion U.S. dollars in funds at its disposal.¹⁷ ISIS and the al-Qaeda offshoot al-Nusra have fought over the oil wells and refineries, but here, too, ISIS seems to have prevailed. In addition, due to its rapid conquest of other Iraqi regions and the uncoordinated withdrawal of the Iraqi security forces, ISIS is now in possession of numerous captured weapons without the need to spend a great deal of its own funds on arms. In the fight against other Syrian rebel groups, this factor has ensured a military superiority that will be difficult to compensate against.

After establishing judicial structures, the militia then focuses on education. Boys are familiarised with the Quran and with handling weapons as early as possible. But ISIS' plans to extend beyond that. As such, the Islamic State has created its own structures for municipal functions, including the maintenance and construction of water and power lines as well as the running of bakeries. However, it is questionable whether this level of institutional permeation can be maintained. In the medium term, ISIS is reliant on foreign volunteers making up for its lack of expertise. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi therefore followed the proclamation of a caliphate by calling upon all Muslims worldwide to fulfil their religious obligation and emigrate to the caliphate (*hidshra*).¹⁸ Although many of ISIS' actions are aimed at gaining the goodwill of the people in conquered towns and cities, this seems to usually only last a short time. If the militia feels secure somewhere, efforts to "purify" society in accordance with the group's fundamentalist beliefs take priority. The militia does not shy away from mass executions for this purpose. Though

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16 | The *Financial Times* estimates that 3.2 million U.S. dollars is being generated daily from the sale of this oil. Cf. Daragahi and Solomon, n. 14.

17 | Cf. Sam Jones, "Unrivalled riches help Isis aspire to role of state", *Financial Times*, 23 Jun 2014, 3.

18 | Cf. Stephan Rosiny, "'Des Kalifen neue Kleider'. Der Islamische Staat in Irak und Syrien", *GIGA Focus Nahost*, No. 6, 2014, 5, http://giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/gf_nahost_1406.pdf (accessed 6 Nov 2014).

Christians are still tolerated in Raqqa under payment of a penalty tax, in other areas held by ISIS, all those of other faiths are faced with the demand to convert. Those refusing run the risk of execution. The fate of the Iraqi Yazidis can therefore be seen as the harbinger of what may also threaten other religious communities. By comparison, the desecration of Christian churches and the destruction of Shia mosques seem relatively minor events.

The area controlled by the self-proclaimed Islamic State is now so vast that al-Baghdadi does not rule it directly, instead dividing up the country into so-called wilayah. This entails the establishment of a federal governmental structure, even though the regions are not strictly bounded; ar-Raqqa, where control is particularly consolidated, is

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controlled by a specially appointed emir, Abu Luqman. However, ISIS' far-reaching ideas on governance also provide opportunities for the Iraqi government and the international community. What the militia has already implemented in the Syrian provinces of ar-Raqqa and Aleppo provides a glimpse into what it seeks for Mosul and other Iraqi areas it controls. The idea of an Islamic State that regulates every aspect of religious and political life in the strictest possible manner cannot be particularly desirable, especially for the Iraqi tribes who only formed an alliance of convenience with ISIS in the first place out of frustration with al-Maliki's government. ISIS seems to have realised the danger of this and is attempting to secure the loyalty of the tribes. In the province of Aleppo, the organisation maintains an office for tribal affairs and public communication so that it does not lose the tribes in the area under its control. ISIS generally puts considerable effort into public relations activities. According to one of its annual reports, which have been published since 2012, ISIS was responsible for more than 10,000 operations before it even started its offensive against the Iraqi army. Nevertheless, it remains questionable whether the mixture of an absolute claim to power, terror and rudimentary government services can provide stability in the long term. The Islamic State's claim to sole representation inevitably invites conflict.

REACTIONS IN IRAQ AND THE REGION

ISIS' offensive in Iraq took the Iraqi army by surprise, and in many areas led to the virtual overnight collapse of its military structure.

Given the disintegration of the Iraqi armed forces, the political process in Iraq was once again the focus of international attention.

The completely uncoordinated withdrawal of Iraqi forces left large quantities of modern weapons, often from American stocks, to fall into the hands of ISIS. For a period, the disintegration of the armed forces had prompted fears that even Baghdad could fall. Given this alarming development, the political process in Iraq was once again the focus of international attention. Nearly all actors quickly agreed that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki bore significant responsibility for the dramatic deterioration of the situation. That al-Maliki did not intend to unite the country but would continue to divide it became clear on the very day in 2011 that then U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta visited Iraq to attend the formal end of U.S. troop presence in Iraq. Since the so-called surge, the U.S. troops had been perceived by many Sunnis as a guarantee for their safety and their participation in the political process.¹⁹ It was only this guarantee that allowed for al-Qaeda's support in Iraq to be undermined and, to some extent, for relative peace to be brought to the country.²⁰ As Panetta watched the departure of the last American soldiers, Iraqi security forces attempted to arrest Kurdish Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi,²¹ although he was able to withdraw to Kurdish Northern Iraq.

But al-Maliki had thereby already achieved what he sought to achieve. The arrest warrant and subsequent death sentences *in absentia* against the country's Sunni Vice President left no doubt: the era of attempting to unite the country through political balance was over. Even in previous years, Maliki had sent plenty of signals that he would seek

19 | Cf. Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends. General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way out of Iraq*, New York, 2008.

20 | The term "surge" denotes the strategy that the United States began in 2007 to strengthen the troop presence in Iraq and simultaneously initiate a counterinsurgency. Cf. Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge. My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*, New Haven, 2013.

21 | Cf. Bill Park, *Turkey-Kurdish Regional Government Relations After the U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq: Putting the Kurds on the Map?*, Carlisle, 2014, 16-17.

complete power. It was not only on this matter that the constitution that provided for a referendum on the final status of the city of Kirkuk was ignored. Maliki similarly pushed aside the Erbil Agreement reached in November 2010. Against this background, it was still doubtful, whether the Shia forces in the country and the region would also withdraw their support for al-Maliki.



Seeking autonomy: The Iraqi city of Erbil is the seat of government of the Kurdish Autonomous Region. President Masoud Barzani decided to fight against ISIS after also Kurdish cities became occupied. | Source: Jeffrey Beall, flickr ©¹.

Al-Maliki's fall from power began when the most important cleric in Shia Islam, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, expressed his disenchantment with the prime minister. Al-Sistani had already played a significant role in the stabilisation of the country under the presence of the Americans and advocated sectarian reconciliation. He asked volunteers to join the security forces to stop the advance of ISIS. He also demanded that the government stop discriminating against Iraqi Sunnis and that instead it should allow them to participate in the political process and partake in the revenues from the sale of commodities. Signs of distancing itself from al-Maliki's regime also came from Iran, the one major ally of the government in Baghdad. Furthermore, the Obama administration had already been seeking al-Maliki's resignation since June. In other words, thanks to his sectarian agenda, al-Maliki managed to lose the support of both Washington and Tehran.

The fact that al-Maliki was ultimately forced to give up his office also relates to his desire to cement his own claims to power and the dominance of Iraqi Shiites in the structures of governance. In this way, he has undermined the formal chain of command of the armed forces from the outset. He established an office that granted him direct access to the Iraqi army. Since the withdrawal of the American troops in 2011, he has also merged Shiite militias and regular army units in many places. His attempt to exploit the armed forces to retain his own power ultimately cost him support. After both Iran and the Iran-backed Shiite militias, especially Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AHH), and the Shia parties on top of that withdrew their allegiance to al-Maliki, instead supporting his party rival, Haider al-Abadi, a coup aided by the army was no longer possible either. It is definitely a reflection of his style of government that it was not the situation in the country itself that prompted the Prime Minister to resign. Meanwhile, al-Abadi has implemented the mandate to form a new government, though important offices – those of the Interior Minister and the Minister of Defence – initially remained unfilled.²² The hopes of the international community now rest on him succeeding in governing better and more inclusively.



Overcoming the divide: As of 8 September 2014, Haider al-Abadi (l.) is Iraq's new Head of Government, here together with his Italian colleague, Matteo Renzi. The Iraqi Prime Minister is facing the task of governing more inclusively and handling the security situation. | Source: Tiberio Barchielli, Filippo Attili, flickr ©①③②.

22 | These offices were only filled on 18 Oct 2014 with the appointment of Sunni politician Khalid al-Obeidi as Minister of Defence and Mohammed Salim al-Ghabban as Interior Minister.

After ISIS conquered Kurdish cities as well, Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq, declared his intention to fight the terrorists to his last breath. ISIS had originally declared its intention not to fight the Kurdistan Regional Government and its Peshmerga. After the collapse of the Iraqi government troops and their withdrawal from areas claimed by the Kurds, the Peshmerga also took position there. The Regional Government in the long disputed city of Kirkuk in particular has created facts on the ground. At least this has resulted in indirectly implementing the spirit of the Iraqi constitution, as referenda were supposed to be held for the areas in dispute between Baghdad and Erbil, namely Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Ninawa.²³ The Kurdistan Regional Government has also long undermined Baghdad's claim that it only sells Iraqi oil through the Iraqi Oil Marketing Company. Instead, it is partially sold directly to Turkey. Under al-Maliki, Iraqi Kurds were well on the road to independence. Now the threat posed by the Islamic State has forced them to cooperate more closely with Baghdad. The irony here is that the Iraqi army did in fact have the weapons to fight ISIS, but not the necessary cohesion and discipline. The Kurds, in turn, lack the necessary equipment to counter an army that is well-equipped with captured weapons. It is also clear that even though the Western hope that Kurdish forces will stop ISIS' advance is justified, any attempt to recapture the occupied territory is something Kurdish forces will not be able to accomplish on their own.

ISIS' offensives have so far been focused on Iraq and Syria, but the agenda of the Islamists extends beyond these territories. It has become clear from some of the skirmishes that have already taken place that the Islamic State is willing to make more enemies. In early August, ISIS fighters entered Lebanon for a short time to free members of their own militia from the hands of the Lebanese security forces.²⁴ Members of the militia had already engaged in combat with Iranian border forces in mid-June. So far,

23 | Cf. Maksut Kosker, "Oil Fuels the Kurdistan-ISIS Conflict", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 14, 10 Jul 2014, 6-7, http://jamestown.org/uploads/media/TerrorismMonitorVol12Issue14_01.pdf (accessed 6 Nov 2014).

24 | Cf. James Traub, "The Arab War on Terror", *Foreign Policy*, 22 Sep 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/22/the_arab_war_on_terror (accessed 3 Nov 2014).

they have only stopped short of the Jordanian and Turkish borders. However, their activities to date do not suggest that this reluctance to enter Jordan will be permanent. Nearly 600,000 refugees from the Syrian civil war have fled to Jordan already, and the advance of ISIS will only boost this influx further.




Allied partners: To protect the NATO-member Turkey against attacks from war torn Syria, the alliance decided in December 2012 to station air defense systems, here the Patriot, in the border region. The German Bundeswehr is involved in Operation Active Fence since early 2013. | Source: © Carsten Vennemann, Bundeswehr.

THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION

The United States has now formed a coalition of almost 60 countries to combat ISIS. However, the contributions of the countries in this coalition of the willing vary considerably, and even the United States, which leads the alliance, is keen to emphasise the limits of its own commitment. The Obama administration has therefore made it clear from the outset that its direct involvement would be limited to air strikes and to providing instructors to the Iraqi army as well as to training moderate Syrian rebels. Although the air campaign around the Syrian city of Kobane received the main media attention, the United States has focused its activities on Iraq.

Washington was, in fact, only ready to take military action in Syria after a long period of reluctance.²⁵ Obama did not announce plans to form an international coalition against ISIS and extend the attacks to Syria until 10 September. Against the backdrop of the clearly articulated limits of its own commitment of resources, the strategy's ambitious objective comes as a surprise. Destroying ISIS, as President Obama announced, is unlikely to be possible without ground troops, and the effectiveness of the air strikes in particular suffers from a lack of ground reconnaissance. President Obama has appointed retired General John Allen as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, appointing experienced Iraq expert Brett McGurk as his deputy. Still, it took months for the 500 million U.S. dollar aid package for the Syrian opposition to pass Congress. Congress, although under the leadership of the Republicans, is willing to help the administration, but demands regular reports.



On 10 September, President Obama announced the forming of an international coalition against ISIS and extension of the operation to Syria. He also assigned the already retired four-star general John R. Allen, here at a press conference at the Pentagon in March 2012, to be the coordinator of the campaign. | Source: Kap Kim, U.S. Army, flickr ©.

25 | Nouri al-Maliki had already asked the United States in November 2013 to at least provide additional support to the Iraqi air force. Cf. Eli Lake, "Why the White House Ignored All Those Warnings About ISIS", *Daily Beast*, 6 Jul 2014, <http://thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/06/why-the-white-house-ignored-all-those-warnings-about-isis.html> (accessed 3 Nov 2014).

In fact, a number of unresolved questions accompany this strategy: first, the government considers the granting of the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) in 2001 the legal basis for the air strikes, even though it had asked Congress to repeal this authorisation only months before. The President has not yet called on Congress to issue an amendment. Second, the United States does not want to completely dominate the coalition, but the Arab allies in particular are currently waiting for a greater commitment by the Americans. And third, it is unclear how long Washington can hold the coalition together, especially since it is now already becoming clear that, to a certain extent, the coalition members are pursuing their own objectives in the region. Egypt would rather intervene in Libya than participate in the fight against ISIS, and though Saudi Arabia has sided with Washington, it fears that the United States appears too willing to compromise with Tehran in order to secure Iranian support for its strategy in Iraq. And NATO ally Turkey is particularly struggling against the United States' "Iraq first" strategy, instead calling for action to be taken against Syrian dictator Assad, whom Ankara considers a greater problem. Against this backdrop hangs the threat of a war that could last for years with no clear victory. The American intelligence services at least seem to share this assessment, as they anticipate a prolonged conflict.²⁶ The point is essentially that any strategy to combat the self-proclaimed Islamic State that only considers the problem to be an Iraqi one cannot succeed, nor can the coalition succeed as long as there is no consensus on the solution to be sought in Syria.

OUTLOOK

Historian and sociologist Charles Tilly once coined the phrase that "war makes states". He was referring to the fact that the establishment and consolidation of effective state structures are greatly facilitated in times of war, since it is war that forces a government to raise extraordinary revenues and conscripts for the army. With respect to ISIS, this dictum is not entirely far-fetched. The militia leadership seems aware that its forces will only be able to hold

26 | Cf. David Ignatius, "The Islamic State's Potential Weakness", *The Washington Post*, 14 Aug 2014, <http://wapo.st/1uAjnSi> (accessed 3 Nov 2014).

all those fronts on which they are currently waging war if sufficient support and supplies are available in the areas they control. Nevertheless, the creation of quasi-governmental structures is not all that is required to fight a multi-front war against the Iraqi and Lebanese governments, the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Syrian regime, other rebel groups, the United States and the West as a whole. From the start, ISIS has tried to implement its own vision of governance – that of the new caliphate – regardless of the military situation.

These quasi-governmental structures are relevant from a Western perspective. A strategy to combat ISIS cannot succeed if ISIS is treated solely as just another terrorist organisation. It stands out from ideologically related organisations precisely because it does not subordinate its perceived mission to shape society to gaining victory over its enemies, rather seeking to link the two. For those actors fighting against ISIS this means they will have to adjust to a long and bitterly fought conflict, and that the liberation of areas currently held by ISIS should be combined with the establishment of public structures. The well-known maxim from the debate on counterinsurgency strategies applies here: this opponent must be “outgoverned” rather than outgunned. Iraq must therefore oppose ISIS through better government structures in the hope of reclaiming the legitimacy that it has lost. A new government under a new prime minister is an important step in the right direction, but is not sufficient. After the start of the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq in 2007, the coalition forces succeeded in prising the Sunni groups away from al-Qaeda. For the Sunnis, the American presence in the country guaranteed the promise of participation in the political process. Whether they would once again be willing to accept such a promise without a comparable guarantee, however, is questionable. It is nevertheless true that the key to victory against the Islamic State still lies in the hands of the Sunnis.

Should a better, more inclusive government not emerge and the country's various political groups not be offered participation in the political process, it would absolutely be possible for a new state to arise and confirm historian Charles Tilly's dictum. After all, the threat posed by ISIS at

least ensures the cooperation of the Kurdish parties with each other and, in fact, provides a basis on which a secular State can be established. In the end, the first successful counter-offensive did not come from Iraqi government forces or other Syrian rebels, but from Kurdish forces. History would take an interesting turn if the proclamation of the caliphate were to lead to the creation of an independent Kurdish State.

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