

The Demise of the Caliphate: Quo Vadis ISIS?

Ely Karmon

December 2016

As the two coalitions against ISIS, the one led by the United States (is it indeed a coalition?) and the other one led by Russia and Iran, are close to defeat the organization on its territorial basis in Iraq and Syria and conquer the two major stronghold cities, Mosul and Raqqa, politicians, military experts and academic pundits are asking themselves what will be the future of its scattered forces and especially the impact of its "ideology" on future events in the Greater Middle East and beyond.

This paper presents some of the possible scenarios in such a dynamic and complex situation. However, some important territories where ISIS associates, leaders and individual fighters could find suitable ground to build a new territorial basis or stage from there major local or international terrorist attacks will be the subject of a follow-up paper.

This is particularly relevant to Libya, perhaps the best example of a successful ISIS province, developed under the guidelines of the Caliphate's leadership, absorbing experienced jihadists arriving from Syria and Iraq and taking advantage of the civil war between the multiple tribal militias to gain terrain. But with the loss of its territorial strongholds, Darnah in late 2015 and Sirte by December 2016, its fortunes there appear uncertain.

By the end of 2015 it was evaluated that between 27,000 and 31,000 people have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS and other violent Salafist groups from at least 86 countries.¹ Less than a year later, while the group's territory has shrunk, ISIS has no more potential reserve fighters as the flow of foreign fighters has been cut to a trickle this year from a peak of 2,000 foreign recruits crossing the Turkey-

¹ "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," *The Soufan Group*, December 8, 2015, at <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters/>

Syria border each month to as few as 50, according to U.S. intelligence assessments.²

About 45,000 jihadists have been killed in Iraq and Syria since the US-led operation to defeat ISIS began two years ago: 25,000 fighters killed over the past 11 months and some 20,000 killed previously, according to Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, who commands the US-led coalition campaign. MacFarland estimated in August the overall remaining strength of ISIS from about 15,000 to 30,000.³

The battles of Mosul, Raqqa and other minor cities in Syria and Iraq will yield heavy losses in the ranks of ISIS's military and foreign fighters forces among killed, wounded and prisoners.

Iraqi forces have entirely surrounded Mosul and now, 45 days into the battle, their focus is on consolidating recent gains before pressing forward with the offensive to allow the nearly 100,000 troops to converge more or less simultaneously on the city.⁴ At the beginning of the operation an estimated 9000 Islamic State terrorists full of determination not to hand over the city, equipped with many vehicle bound improvised explosive devises (VBIED) and chemical weapons opposed the coalition forces.⁵ The absolute advantage in numbers, equipment and professionalism definitely favor the coalition.

Iraqi commanders say they have killed at least 1,000 Islamic State fighters. A government adviser estimated the jihadist group at the first week of December to be about 4,000 fighters. They still hold about three-quarters of the country's largest northern city and their stiff resistance means the military's campaign is likely to stretch well into next year.⁶

² Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan and James McAuley, "Flow of foreign fighters plummets as Islamic State loses its edge," *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2016.

³ *AFP*, "45,000 Islamic State fighters killed in past two years: US general," August 11, 2016, at

<http://www.firstpost.com/world/45000-islamic-state-fighters-killed-in-past-two-years-us-general-2948676.html>

⁴ Mohammed Tawfeeq and Salma Abdelaziz, "Iraq: Death toll climbs as urban warfare slows battle for Mosul," *CNN*, December 2, 2016 <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/02/middleeast/iraq-mosul-battle-isis/>

⁵ Joshua Philipp, "Middle East Exclusive: ISIS Mustard Gas Stockpile Captured Near Mosul (Photos)," *Epoch Times*, October 23, 2016, at <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/2175873-exclusive-isis-mustard-gas-stockpile-captured-near-mosul-photos/>

⁶ Saif Hameed and Ulf Laessing, "Islamic State strikes back to slow Iraqi forces in Mosul," *Reuters*, December 4, 2016.

On the premise that in the next months this resistance will be broken and not many of the fighters will be able to flee what will happen with the remaining ISIS scattered forces?

Joining Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in Syria

Many if not most of the ISIS fighters will join, on an individual basis, the ranks of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in Syria (JFS - Front for the Conquest of Syria).

Since its emergence in January 2012 Jabhat al-Nusra was the most powerful faction in Syria's five-year conflict opposing both President Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State militant group. Originally supported by ISIS, which controls swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, it split from the hardline group in 2013.

The apparent tactical “split” between Al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra in July 2016 and the changing of its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham reflects a decentralized strategy of AQ's central leadership.

In an August article, this author and Shaul Shay evaluated that in case ISIS will be defeated militarily, JFS will not unite with ISIS's decimated forces but would call its local fighters and individual militants to join JFS ranks to continue the fight. JFS will refuse to negotiate under any condition with the Assad regime, will not participate at any international conference sponsored by the great powers and will fight Hezbollah, Iranian forces and Shia militias until their complete expulsion from Syria.⁷

After the major rebel stronghold and symbolic city Aleppo falls completely to Damascus regime forces it will give Bashar al-Assad a major morale boost. The city controls major roads leading to Turkey in the north and areas controlled by ISIS in the east. Its fall may cause the militias' joint command to splinter and the militias themselves “to scatter to the four winds,” leaving JFS the only force still capable of fighting the Syrian army.⁸

In October, the rebranded organization announced the cooptation of the Salafist jihadist rebel group Jund al-Aqsa into its ranks, despite the latter repeatedly

⁷ Shaul Shay and Ely Karmon, “Jabhat Fateh al-Sham - Did Jabhat al-Nusra Split from Al-Qaeda?” *ICT website*, August 4, 2016, at <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1751/jabhat-fateh-al-sham-did-jabhat-al-nusra-split-from-al-qaeda>

⁸ Zvi Bar'el, “What Happens After Aleppo Falls,” *Haaretz*, December 10, 2016.

clashing with the other powerful jihadist group, especially Ahrar al-Sham in the opposition-controlled Idlib province.⁹

If it will resist the Assad/Russian/Iranian expected assault after the fall of Aleppo, JFS could become the most important jihadist actor in the region, even if not formally allied to al-Qaeda Central (AQC).

The fate of the European Foreign Fighters

In an analysis of the latest ISIS propaganda video, “You must fight them, oh Muwwahid [Monotheist]” Haroro J. Ingram evaluates that its slick imagery featuring a French fighter named Abu Sulayman Al-Firansi, suggests that it is a result of mounting pressures in its heartlands in Syria and Iraq driving ISIS to draw attention away from these losses, especially in Mosul and move the war to the West, “behind enemy lines” to stretch its front and sow fear. ISIS will be desperate to inspire “lone wolves”, especially in the West.¹⁰

Alex Younger, the head of the British intelligence agency MI6, lately said the scale of the terrorism threat to the UK is "unprecedented" and UK intelligence and security services had disrupted 12 terrorist plots since June 2013. He added that ISIS had a "highly organized external attack planning structure" which was plotting attacks against the UK and its allies "without ever having to leave Syria".¹¹

In its November 2016 report, EUROPOL evaluated that all EU Member States that are part of the US led coalition against IS are prone to be attacked by terrorists led or inspired by ISIS. If ISIS is defeated or severely weakened in Syria/Iraq, there may be an increased rate in the return of foreign fighters and their families and given the high numbers involved, this represents a significant and long-term security challenge.¹²

According to a more recent EU report, as many as 1,750 foreign jihadis have returned to Europe. The report warned there were two types of foreign terrorist fighters returning: “the majority that will drift back, and those who will be sent back on specific missions, which are of most concern.” Some returnees have been convicted and serving prison sentences, while others are being monitored and some

⁹ *Middle East Eye*, “Syria rebels outraged as Fateh al-Sham sides with 'IS front group',” October 10, 2016, at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/nusra-jund-al-aqsa-merger-838041746>

¹⁰ Haroro J. Ingram, “How to Slaughter the Disbelievers”: Insights into IS’ Instructional Video, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT)*, 29 Nov 2016, <https://icct.nl/publication/how-to-slaughter-the-disbelievers-insights-into-is-instructional-video/>

¹¹ *BBCNews*, “Terrorism most immediate threat to UK, says MI6,” December 8, 2016.

¹² *EUROPOL*, “Changes in Modus Operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited,” November 2016.

are free in their communities. “There is also a significant foreign terrorist fighter contingent with Daesh in Libya which might attempt to use their nationality or family connections to return to Europe,” the report said.¹³

It should be mentioned however that many remaining Foreign Fighters will die fighting in Syria and Iraq as they often serve as cannon fodder in hundreds of suicide bombings. They will have also difficulty in their attempts to return to Europe because Turkey closed its border and Jordan has efficient defenses.

According to some reports, in the early days of the assault on Islamic State in Mosul, Iran, Russia and even France, which wanted Islamic State crushed and eliminated successfully, pressed Iraq to seal off the city, thus blocking retreating fighters to sweep back into Syria, to Raqqa in particular. Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi told his followers there could be no retreat from the city as “the value of staying on your land with honor is a thousand times better than the price of retreating with shame.”¹⁴

Three ISIS leaders were killed at the beginning of December by a coalition airstrike in ISIS’ capital, Raqqa, Syria, further disrupting ISIS's ability to carry out terrorist operations beyond Syria and Iraq. Two of the targets, Salah Gourmat and Sammy Djedou, were directly involved in plotting the November 13, 2015 Paris attacks. The third, Walid Hamman, was a suicide attack planner who was convicted in absentia in Belgium for a terror plot disrupted in 2015. The leaders were working to plot and carry out attacks on the West, the Pentagon said, and were part of a terror network run by Boubaker Al-Hakim, who was killed in an earlier coalition airstrike on November 16.¹⁵

European police and security agencies have now much better information about those who went to Syria and Iraq and have taken more stringent measure to control the returnees. In March 2016, German news organizations, including *Süddeutsche Zeitung* obtained thousands of documents that include a list of 22,000 names of potential ISIS recruits, including more than 800 German citizens and others from 40 countries: Saudis, Tunisians, Moroccans, and Egyptians. A spokesman for Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office, the *Bundeskriminalamt*, confirmed that

¹³ Julian Robinson and AFP, “Up to 1,750 ISIS jihadists have returned to Europe with orders to carry out attacks, EU report warns,” *Mailonline*, December 7, 2016.

¹⁴ Dominic Evans, Maher Chmaytelli and Patrick Markey, “How Iran closed the Mosul 'horseshoe' and changed Iraq war,” *Reuters*, December 7, 2016.

¹⁵ <http://fox43.com/2016/12/13/pentagon-3-isis-leaders-killed-in-airstrike/>

it had Islamic State personnel file documents such as those obtained by the Sueddeutsche Zeitung.¹⁶

The Europeans have lost two to three precious years in preparing to deal with the exponentially growing internal and external jihadist threat and it will now take much political will and several years to do it effectively. Moreover, the political landscape in Europe is already changing and on the individual level the citizens of the peaceful European countries will have to adapt to an atmosphere of permanent threat. However, there are signs of change. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has promised new measures to improve security; such as information sharing, deciphering web chatter and tackling arms sales on the Internet and an early alert system. For its part, the French government announced the formation of a new National Guard composed of volunteers from the police, paramilitary police, and military to protect citizens from terrorist attacks and President François Hollande encouraged all “patriots” to enlist. France is also considering banning foreign funding of mosques.¹⁷

Central Asia and Afghanistan as Foreign Fighters hub

Many fighters from different Arab countries but especially those from Caucasus, Central and Southeast Asia will either return home or more probably will flow to the Taliban “liberated” territory in Afghanistan and the Pakistan tribal areas, a revival of the 1990s situation. They will try to build an ISIS territorial basis there but many will probably strengthen the ranks of Al-Qaeda in the region as its ally, the Taliban, has succeeded to weaken the pro-ISIS groups that tried to challenge it in the region.

According to various reports, a total of 6000 militants from Central Asia and the Caucasus have already been enlisted in ISIS ranks. As for the terrorist threat on the post-Soviet space in Central Asia, according to statements by Uzbek officials, at least 300 Uzbek citizens are fighting in ISIS ranks in Syria. Moreover, the largest radical group in Uzbekistan – Imam Bukhari Jamaat has joined ISIS in Syria. Various sources say that at least 500 and 800 Kyrgyz citizens have visited at some

¹⁶ J. Weston Phippen, “The Islamic State’s Orientation Questionnaire,” *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2016.

¹⁷ Ely Karmon, “Europe Slowly Waking Up to Islamist Terror,” *The Israel Public Diplomacy Forum Newsletter*, August 2016.

point ISIS training camps. Experts say there's over a thousand Uzbek and Tajik militants still fighting under the black banner of ISIS.¹⁸

On January 26, 2015, Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, Islamic State's chief spokesperson, released an audio statement in which he declared the establishment of Wilayat Khorasan, a branch "encompassing Afghanistan, Pakistan and other nearby lands". Wilayat Khorasan has pursued a campaign of expansion and consolidation in the region, mostly in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan. The group, however, has experienced several setbacks on the battlefield.

The most crushing defeat that Wilayat Khorasan suffered was the annihilation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in August 2015. The IMU's pledge of allegiance was received with great enthusiasm. However, IMU stood no chance against the Taliban onslaught. In October 2015, the Taliban established a special forces unit, comprised of highly skilled and experienced militants, to combat ISIS and by December 2015 the Taliban had killed hundreds of IMU fighters in Zabul including its emir, Uthman Ghazi. Taliban militants, Afghan security forces, and local militias have also chipped away at Wilayat Khorasan-held territory in Nangarhar province along the Pakistani border in eastern Afghanistan, where the group had hoped to establish a base of operations.¹⁹

Jacob Zenn, a Fellow of Eurasian and African Affairs at The Jamestown Foundation, ironically noted that the Taliban's elimination of the IMU is a stark reminder that despite 15 years of U.S. and coalition involvement in Afghanistan, many terrorist groups were not eliminated while, the Taliban has achieved this objective quite quickly.²⁰

ISIS has not renounced to implant itself in Afghanistan. In June, The Khorasan Province claimed responsibility for the assassination of Afghan member of parliament Sher Wali Wardak by an IED while in his car and for a suicide attack on a bus carrying Nepalese security guards in Kabul. But the Afghan Taliban also claimed responsibility for the attack. ISIS claimed responsibility for a deadly

¹⁸ Martin Berger, "Radical Islamic Terrorism Spreading Across Central Asia Like Fire," *New Eastern Outlook*, July 9, 2016, <http://journal-neo.org/2016/07/19/radical-terrorism-is-spreading-across-central-asia-as-fire/>

¹⁹ Nathaniel Barr, "Wilayat Khorasan Stumbles in Afghanistan," *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Vol.15, Issue: 5, March 3, 2016, at <https://jamestown.org/program/wilayat-khorasan-stumbles-in-afghanistan/>.

²⁰ Jacob Zenn, "The IMU is extinct: what next for Central Asia's jihadis?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13357-the-imu-is-extinct-what-new-for-central-asias-jihadis?.html>

attack with over 80 killed on a peaceful demonstration by Hazara protesters in the Afghan capital Kabul in July 2016 with the intention to inflame sectarian tensions. However, according to Emily Winterbotham from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) Afghanistan does not provide the same enabling environment as Syria or Iraq and ISIS is largely viewed as a foreign entity by most Afghans.²¹

Gen. John Nicholson, the top commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said the number of ISIS fighters in Afghanistan has declined from an estimated 3,000 at the start of this year to between 1,000 and 1,500. The majority of those in Nangarhar are former members of a Pakistan Taliban group known as TTP, he said, adding that they were largely forced out of Pakistan by a government offensive and joined ISIS earlier this year.²²

The rise of Islamic State in Afghanistan poses serious security concerns for Russia, said in September 2016 Zamir Kabulov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's director of the Second Asian Department in Afghanistan Moscow, adding that Washington bears responsibility for the current chaos in the country. Kabulov said that about 2,500 ISIS combatants are currently in Afghanistan.²³ It seems the Russians have interest in inflating the threat of ISIS in Afghanistan as the same Kabulov declared in April 2016 “there are now 10,000 IS fighters in Afghanistan. A year ago there was a hundred. This growth over a year is spectacular.” Kabulov claimed ISIS is preparing to expand from Afghanistan into other Central Asian countries and Russia, and in this indeed Moscow has reasons to worry.²⁴

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has recently addressed the fact that the American administration has neglected the continuous resilience and change of strategy by AQC and its consequences. He maintains that the Obama administration consistently spoke about the weakening of al-Qaeda’s core, and it goes out of office maintaining the same assumption. He argues that “al-Qaeda played itself off of ISIS’ rise and brutality,” to frame itself as “a more palatable alternative to ISIS.” Thus, al-Qaeda has been able to quietly rebuilding. According to Gartenstein-Ross Al-Qaeda’s core leadership will certainly try to ensure that ISIS isn’t a threat to

²¹ Emily Winterbotham, “A Shift in Tactics for ISIS in Afghanistan?” *Newsweek*, July 25, 2016.

²² “Five US troops wounded in combat with Isis in Afghanistan,” *AP*, July 28, 2016.

²³ “Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan is threat to Russia – Moscow,” *RT NEWS*, September 13, 2016.

²⁴ “10,000 ISIS fighters in Afghanistan ‘trained to expand to Central Asia, Russia’,” *RT NEWS*, April 19, 2016 /

lure away its affiliates, which ISIS has dedicated a lot of effort to trying to do in recent years.²⁵

Nowhere is this competition more important than in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Ayman al-Zawahiri leads the AQIC decimated core leadership. At the time, he announced the establishment of Al-Qaeda Jihad Organization in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) to be active in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma and India, with little success. With the recruitment of thousands of jihadists fleeing Syria and Iraq AQ could threaten again Central Asian states, Russia, China, India and regain its influence in Indonesia and the Philippines. With the huge advantage of having the support of the Taliban on the two sides of the border, a Taliban that already controls 15-20% of Afghanistan's territory and could become the main actor in this tough country after the withdrawal of US and NATO forces.

Iran under ISIS Threat

Since ISIS took control of Mosul in June 2014, the Iraqi army crumbled like a house of cards and the organization approached Baghdad and threatened to attack the Shiite holy sites in Karbala and Najaf, the Iranian military leaders issued numerous, quite hysterical, declarations and went out of their way to convince their audience that Iran's territory is not under threat.²⁶

Iranian border guards' commander General Hossein Zolfaqari said the "ISIL terrorist group which has caused chaos in Northern and Northwestern Iraq in the last two weeks" has not approached Iran's borders in the West. He said Iran was boosting border checkpoints and plans to improve equipment of border units. Iranian Interior Ministry Spokesman Hossein Ali Amiri noted that there is no security lapse along Iran's borders with the neighboring countries, and no notable problem along the border with Iraq. "However, the necessary measures have been adopted by the Interior Ministry and border police," he added. Deputy Chief

²⁵ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Al Qaeda Assessment Off the Mark," *The Cipher Brief*, December 8, 2016, at <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/al-qaeda-assessment-mark-1089>

²⁶ Ely Karmon, "The Iran Nuclear Deal, The Fight Against ISIL and Iran's Domestic Troubles," October 21, 2014, <http://www.ict.org.il/Article/1235/The-Iran-Nuclear-Deal-The-Fight-Against-ISIL>.

Liaison of the Iranian Army's Ground Force troops General Ali Arasteh said divisions in the South and Southeast have gone on alert due to the unrests in Iraq.²⁷

Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, commander of the Iranian army ground forces, said that a 40-kilometer (about 25 miles) red zone of deterrence had been designated. Forty kilometers, he said, was as close as Iran would permit terrorist groups operating in Iraq to approach the Iranian border. Crossing the 40-kilometer line would prompt a military response from Iran. He said that during 2014 and 2015 ISIS, operating in Iraq's Anbar Province, had tried to come within 12 kilometers of Iran's western border. In response five Iranian army ground force brigades with helicopter air cover and intelligence support had been put on alert and were ready to initiate a military campaign in the event that ISIS came closer than 40 kilometers to the Iranian border.²⁸

It seems the Iranian military's boastful declarations did not impress ISIS leaders.

Many active members and recruiters for ISIS active for two years have been arrested in Iran's western Kermanshah province, said in November 2015 Bahman Reyhani, the regional commander of the revolutionary guards. According to Iran's Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi some armed groups had engaged the security forces in direct firefights particularly in the southern Arab province of Khuzestan.²⁹

Commander of Iran's Law Enforcement Border Guards Brigadier General Qasem Rezayee announced that his forces had disbanded three terrorist groups with plots to carry out sabotage acts in the country in the past Iranian year (ended on March 19, 2016). Ground Force Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Pourdastan announced that the country's border guards killed two ISIS terrorists who planned to conduct suicide attacks in late February 2016.

In April, Mahmoud Alavi said his forces discovered and dismantled a large bomb-making workshop of the terrorists during the parliamentary election days in February stressing that while "the sound of explosions is heard in European countries, Iran enjoys unique security due to the supremacy and control of its intelligence forces." Iranian security forces have crushed over 20 terrorist groups that had planned to carry out terrorist attacks across the country over the past year,

²⁷ *Fars News Agency (FNA)*, "Guards Commander: Iran's Western Borders Not Approached by ISIL Terrorists," June 25, 2014.

²⁸ *Mehr News Agency*, May 11, 2016.

²⁹ "Iranian army: ISIS members and recruiters detained in Kermanshah," *Rudaw*, November 20, 2015.

he said. In May 2016, security forces detained two “Takfiri terrorists” in the Western province of Hamedan who planned to carry out operations in Tehran. In July, Iranian security have arrested 40 members of a terrorist group in the eastern parts of the country, the interior minister Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazli announced. He said the terrorists dug a 40-meter-long tunnel at depth of 20 meters under a house to carry out explosions and terrorist attacks,” added the minister.³⁰

In November 2016, a car bomb destroyed a bus carrying Iranian pilgrims heading home after taking part in a major Shiite religious observance in the holy city of Karbala. Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister Hassan Qashqavi was quoted as saying that 80 people were killed, including 40 Iranians. The Islamic State group claimed the attack.³¹

The Islamic State’s Furqan Media Foundation has released at the beginning of December an audio message from the group’s new spokesman, Abu al Hassan al Muhajir. He briefly discusses the battle raging around Mosul, pointing specifically to Tal Afar, where Iranian-backed militias operating as part of the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) are leading the charge. Muhajir highlights the sectarian aspect of the fight, saying the “Rawafidh [Shiites] have come with their horses and men to the land of Tal Afar, full of hatred and vengeance towards the houses of Islam, to take them and get the Sunni people in them.” Muhajir accuses the West and Iran of conspiring against Sunni Muslims throughout the region.³²

Iran, the main support to the Baghdad Shi’a government and the Damascus Alawi regime, a country where Shi’a Persians represent only 55% of the population and its border provinces are inhabited by Sunni Kurds, Arabs and Baluchi minorities, could indeed become a preferred target of ISIS terrorism and guerrilla after their defeat in Iraq and Syria.

A new potential shelter: Latin America?

Historically Sunni jihadists and ISIS have had minimum presence on the continent.

It seems Trinidad and Tobago is among the countries that have contributed the most fighters to ISIS per capita. More than 100 Trinidadians are believed to have gone to Syria. Nine Trinidadians were caught by Turkish authorities *en route* to

³⁰ *Tehran Times*. July 22, 2016.

³¹ “Islamic State car bomb kills 56, including 20 Iranians, in Iraq,” *The Japan Times*, November 25, 2016.

³² Thomas Joscelyn, “New Islamic State spokesman seeks to rally Sunnis against Iran, West,” *Long War Journal*, December 5, 2016, at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/new-islamic-state-spokesman-seeks-to-rally-sunnis-against-iran-west.php>

join IS in Syria and are awaiting deportation. The government is looking at possible measures introduced by other countries aimed at curbing these numbers, including detention, forfeiture of travel documents and citizenship removal.

In 1990, about 100 armed militants affiliated with Jamaat al Muslimeen (Jamaat), a local organization rooted in the black Muslim community, stormed the country's parliament, holding the prime minister and other members of the government hostage for six days. It's an event that has been described as the only Islamist insurrection in the western hemisphere.

It should be noted that in November 2015 Brazil was threatened by ISIS in a Twitter profile owned by Maxime Hauchard: "Brazil you are our next target. We can attack this country of shit." The Brazilian Intelligence Agency (Abin) confirmed that the profile belongs to the French terrorist who appears in videos of the beheadings in Syria. The message was posted a week after the coordinated attacks in France.

Indeed, in June 2016 Brazilian police arrested a dozen Islamic State sympathizers accused of having made up an "amateurish" and disorganized potential terror cell whose only contact with each other was via Internet messaging. In conversations online the 12 men praised terrorist attacks in Europe and talked about buying guns with an eye toward striking during the Olympics. Several suspects swore allegiance to Islamic State, but there is no evidence of any actual contact with IS, Justice Minister Alexandre de Moraes said. In July police was investigating a second group of possible would-be terrorists. I didn't see any update of what happens with the two dozen would-be terrorists.³³

There is a possibility that some ISIS jihadists will prefer to reach South America evaluating it would be easier for them to infiltrate through the borders' barrier. Many of these could be those which have financial resources or past criminal experience.

Could ISIS's jihadist ideology and strategy decline?

The Al-Qaeda leadership has been criticized at its time by many of the Egyptian jihadist ideologues. In a startling move in February 2000, the Egyptian Jihad

³³ Lisandra Paraguassu and Anthony Boadle, "Brazil arrests 10 for 'amateur' terror plot against Olympics," *Reuters*, July 21, 2016.

announced the dismissal of al-Zawahiri as its leader because of disputes over the issue of a truce with the authorities and the end of violence inside Egypt, announced in 1997.³⁴ Subsequently, Usama Siddiq Ayyub, one of the Egyptian Jihad leaders living in exile in Germany, and supported by other Jihad leaders within and beyond Egypt called for an end to violent acts at home and abroad in order to focus all efforts on the liberation of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Zawahiri did not accept this initiative because of his strategic alliance with bin Laden.³⁵

One of the leaders of the Egyptian Islamic Group, Isam Darbalah, published a book, “The Strategy of al-Qa’ida: Mistakes and Dangers,” which outlined sharply “the wrong arguments and assumptions” of al-Qaeda. These mistaken assumptions included: the existence of a global plan to eradicate Islam and the Islamic movements, irrespective of what al-Qaeda and others were doing toward the US; the affirmation that US interests could never agree with Islamic interests, since enmity was deep-rooted and a clash unavoidable; that concluding peace or negotiating or establishing an alliance with the US was tantamount to treason; that the US, in its conflict with al-Qaeda, could not afford human losses; that the disparity in power between the Islamic umma and the US is irrelevant because Islamists fight was based on faith and not on numbers.³⁶

According to this text, the strategy of al-Qaeda is founded on a clear misunderstanding of reality, a mistaken evaluation of “the capabilities of the nation,” and those of “the opponents.” Darbalah concludes that al-Qaeda strategy cannot achieve its goals and is “inconsistent with sound logic.” Moreover, the flawed al-Qaeda strategy has resulted in the “collapse of the emergent Islamic state in Afghanistan,” harmed “the causes of Islamic minorities through the deliberate confusion of movements resisting occupation with terrorism,” allowed “the achievement of Israeli goals and ambitions,” exposed “to racial harassment”

³⁴ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 7, 2000.

³⁵ In August, 11 Jihad members jailed in the Wadi al-Natrun prison in Egypt issued an appeal to the movement leaders inside and outside Egypt to accept the initiative proposed by Usama Ayyub and unify all efforts toward the goal of the liberation of Jerusalem. See *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 8 and 13 February 2000.

³⁶ Darbalah was a member of the Shura Council of the Egyptian Islamic Group who had been serving a life sentence in the greater jihad case since 1981. See *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 6 August 2003. Part one of four part report by Abd-al-Latif al-Minnawi from Cairo: ‘New Book For the Egyptian Islamic Group on al-Qa’ida’s Mistakes. There Is Not A War Led By the United States Against Islam. Al-Qa’ida’s Policies Boosted the Presence of Anti-Islam Currents. The Strange Fatwas That Sanction the Killing of Civilians, Women, and Children Have Nothing to Do With Islam’ (FBIS-NES-2003-0809).

Islamic communities in Europe and the US, and pushed the US to adopt “a strategy that responds to the agenda of the Christian right ... for the clash of civilizations.”

Reuven Paz, the renowned Israeli researcher of radical Islam, argued that “persistent divisions, conflicts, rivalries, and personal agendas within the global Jihad movement have thus far prevented its terrorist methods from spreading beyond its thousands of militants, activists, sympathizers, and fundraisers,” while the Muslim world at large has never accepted bin Laden as “the new Islamic Caliph.”³⁷

During the years 2003-2006 the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)³⁸ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, recognized as the “founder” of ISIS, followed an extreme violent strategy of all-out sectarian war against the Shi'a, the killing of innocent Muslims and the beheading of Western hostages, which contradicted bin Laden and al-Qaeda's views.

In July 2004, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, an influential jihadi cleric and Zarqawi's former religious prison mentor, criticized "blowing up cars or setting roadside explosives, by firing mortars in the streets and marketplaces, and other places where Muslims congregate." Al-Maqdisi stated that the "hands of the Jihad fighters must remain clean so that they will not be stained by the blood of those who must not be harmed even if they are rebellious and shameless," and warned against attacks on Christian churches, as this would strengthen the will of the infidels against Muslims everywhere. A year later, al-Maqdisi criticized "the extensive use of suicide operations" in which many Muslims were being killed and expressed reservations about the extensive killing of Shi'a in Iraq. Moreover, he opposed declaring the Shi'a as non-Muslims, which in effect permitted their blood. Some Sunni sheikhs urged Zarqawi to withdraw his anti-Shi'a statements on the grounds that they ignite fitna (internal strife), thus serving the interests of the occupation. So did the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq, the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz al-Shaykh, and the Syrian Islamist Shaykh Abd al-Mun'im Mustafa Halimah.³⁹

³⁷ Reuven Paz, “Tangled Web: International Networking of the Islamist Struggle,” unpublished manuscript, p. 45-46.

³⁸ The real name was Tandhim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi bilad al-Rafidain (The al-Qa'ida Jihad Organization in the Land of the Two Rivers).

³⁹ See Ely Karmon. “Al-Qaida And the War on Terror After the War in Iraq,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Article 1, March 2006.

Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi was released from a Jordanian prison in June 2014. Abu Qatada (Omar Mahmoud Othman), another influential jihadi cleric, was released from a Jordanian prison in September 2014. The two respected authorities within Salafist circles who are close and tend to side with the Jabhat al-Nusra have both condemned ISIS. In what was seen as the fiercest attack on ISIS delivered by an Islamist figure, Abu Qatada issued a 21-page statement in which he denounced the group's declaration of an Islamic caliphate spanning Iraq and Syria, describing the step as "void and meaningless." According to Jordanian political analyst Mohammad Abu Rumman, the pair's severe condemnation of ISIS points to a fundamental shift taking place within the movement, represented by a tendency towards a largely approach of peaceful da'wa (proselytization) and rejection of staging military operations.⁴⁰

In the longer term, there is the possibility that many of the jihadist ideologues and their followers will consider "the caliphate era" in Syria and Iraq as a huge mistake and will try a more moderate political approach to the huge problems tearing the Arab and Muslim world. This could be a trend similar to the one that impacted on the radical leftist terrorist groups like the Italian Red Brigades (BR) and the German Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), and even the nationalist ones like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Irish Republican Army (IRA) after the fall of the Soviet empire. It seems unbelievable how the Uruguayan Tupamaros have changed from a Latin American "urban guerrilla" to a political governing party, but it happened.

Conclusion

Daniel Byman, from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, describes the threat of returning foreign Arab jihadists to their home states and the broader Arab world as the result of them being "hardened veterans, steady in the face of danger and skilled in the use of weapons and explosives." Most will be locally and regionally focused, will form networks with other radicals and establish ties to jihadists around the world. Different countries have different mitigating factors that

⁴⁰ Mohamed Al-Daameh, "Abu Qatada, Maqdisi can unify Islamist ranks against ISIS: experts," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 27, 2014.

limit the danger, he argues, while presence or absence of strong and focused security services is particularly important.⁴¹

No doubt there will be a wave of terrorist attacks by local cells and returnees in Europe, possibly in the United States, Russia and elsewhere, as a reaction or revenge to the destruction of the caliphate. This calls for a determined counter-terrorist strategy and close operational cooperation between all countries involved.

In a recent excellent historical analysis of ISIS, Craig Whiteside predicted, based on its spokesman Mohammad al Adnani's declaration, that "insurgents do not have a choice when faced with direct pressure other than to melt away to fight again, in another time and place." These sanctuaries, argues Whiteside, will be within Iraq and Syria just like they were before, not in some far away location where the local dynamics are unfamiliar. The next generation of Salafi jihadist revolutionaries will most likely learn from the mistakes of the past and be even more difficult opponents.⁴²

The Iraqi authorities prepare themselves for such a scenario. Recently six officials – four from intelligence agencies and two from the Interior Ministry's counterterrorism agency – described the planning in interviews with the Associated Press, on condition of anonymity.

The immediate priority for Iraqi officials is to limit the number of militants who escape Mosul to go into hiding. On the longer term, they said, the fight against post-Mosul Daesh can only succeed if the border with Syria is secured. Iraq also wants to intervene against Daesh (ISIS) in Syria to ensure the group's de facto capital there, Raqqa. Interestingly, a counterterrorism official claimed that Damascus had quietly given permission for Iraq to carry out airstrikes by drone or warplanes in Raqqa, although Syrian officials did not confirm the plan. They hinted that this plan could be feasible as "the Syrian and Iraqi governments are both allied to Iran, and Iraqi Shiite militiamen have been fighting in Syria alongside the forces of President Bashar Assad."⁴³

⁴¹ Daniel Byman, "The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, 2015 - Issue 8, May 1, 2015, at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1031556>

⁴² Craig Whiteside, "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2016), at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/523/html>

⁴³ Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq prepares for new fight against post-Mosul Daesh," *Associated Press*, December 10, 2016, at <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2016/Dec-10/384823-iraq-prepares-for-new-fight-against-post-mosul-daesh.ashx>

Although this is clearly an Iranian priority, other regional powers, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, but also the United States, have all the reasons to oppose such a plan.

The Iraqi counter-terrorism experts evaluate that after Mosul, ISIS plans to abandon military-style formations and operate in cells of up to 50 fighters attacking civilian targets, government complexes, military installations or prisons to free jailed members, as it did when sleeper cells attacked in October 2016 the oil city of Kirkuk, killing at least 80 people. The organization, they claim, has already a list of places to hide and how to secure supplies of food, water and fuel in remote desert and rocky gorges in western and northwestern Iraq close to the Saudi and Syrian borders.⁴⁴

It is of note that the Iraqi security experts told AP that, on the longer term, “the fight against post-Mosul Daesh can only succeed if the Shiite-led government in Baghdad addresses longtime grievances by Iraq’s Sunni Arab minority that fueled support for the militants.”⁴⁵

The Institute for the Study of War has lately published the paper “Anticipating Iraq’s Next Sunni Insurgency” in which it analyzes in detail the scenario to which the above mentioned “Iraqi counter-terrorism officials” referred.⁴⁶

The authors highlight the role the neo-Baathist insurgent group Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN) has played in the different phases of the Iraqi Sunni insurgency and in the formation and success of ISIS on the battle ground. It also describes the differences and conflicts between the two organizations.

It argues that the JRTN’s rhetorical resurgence has already begun, seeking to demonstrate that it is the best champion for Sunnis in Iraq over the alternatives of ISIS and the Iraqi Government. JRTN is setting conditions to take immediate advantage of ISIS’s loss in Mosul in order to reclaim the city and its networks.

The demise of the Caliphate and the destruction of its territorial stronghold is an important factor in the long-term battle against regional and global jihadist terrorism and partially against its ideological influence.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Emily Anagnostos, Jessica Lewis McFate, Jennifer Cafarella, and Alexandra Gutowski, “Anticipating Iraq’s Next Sunni Insurgency,” The Institute for the Study of War, November 30, 2016, at <file:///C:/Users/Ely/Documents/Iraq/Anticipating%20Iraq%E2%80%99s%20Next%20Sunni%20Insurgency.html>

However, without a just political solution and the respect for the rights of the Sunni population, but also of other minorities, like the Kurds, living between Baghdad and Damascus in Iraq and Syria, the violent sectarian and ethnic wars will continue to destabilize the Middle East and the international community and fuel jihadist terrorism.

To mitigate the resurgence of a Sunni insurgency in Iraq with disastrous consequences for the future of the country and the region, the United States and the West, with support from the moderate Arab states, should reconsider the strategy of excessive de-Ba'athization, including the then disbanding of the Iraqi Army and Police, they followed since Iraq's occupation in 2003. They should reach to the Ba'athist secular elements in the Sunni insurgency in order to include them in a political solution and should also press the Shi'a led government in Baghdad to accept such agreements.

One of the conditions of such a solution should be the fight against jihadist elements in the Sunni insurgency and providing critical information which could help dismantle ISIS's infrastructure and networks, in Iraq and elsewhere.