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Thinking the Unthinkable: Coming to Grips with Islamic State

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Despite a year-long campaign of air strikes and ground attacks which incurred heavy losses Islamic State (IS) shows continued resilience. The US-led coalition's alliances with militant groups and IS' durability raise the spectre of jihadist groups becoming a more permanent fixture in the Middle East.

Commentary

IT'S ALMOST a year since a US-led coalition launched air strikes and increased support of Iraqi and Kurdish military forces in a bid to degrade and destroy the self-styled Islamic State; yet the jihadist group that has conquered a swath of Syria and Iraq has demonstrated resilience despite suffering significant losses.

The limited impact of the airstrikes and Iraqi ground operations raises the spectre of a longer term existence of a disruptive entity in the heartland of the Middle East. It also raises the question of how the international community will deal with it in the absence of political will to employ the kind of force that could potentially destroy it.

IS still resilient

Few officials and analysts expect the reportedly serious wounding of self-declared caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State - also known by its Arabic contraction *Daish* - to weaken the group as it fights multiple battles in Iraq and Syria. There have been news reports that Al-Baghdadi was paralysed in a US air strike two months ago and that his day-to-day responsibilities have been taken over by his deputy, Abu Alaa al-Afri, who in turn has reportedly been killed in a recent US air strike. Prior to this, IS has stood its ground in Syria, made advances in Iraq, and according to some Iraqi lawmakers, infiltrated Baghdad which has been rocked by bombings in recent days.

IS has so far demonstrated its ability to withstand significant military pressure rather than collapse under its own weight even as it licks its wounds in an environment in which the attitudes of some of the United States' closest allies towards militant Islamist militias, including some associated with Al Qaeda, are changing. A greater willingness to forge tactical alliances with groups long considered

beyond the pale, coupled with IS' resilience raises the spectre of jihadist groups becoming a more permanent fixture in the Middle East's political landscape.

Predominantly Islamist rebel forces with Jabhat al Nusra, an Al Qaeda affiliate, in the forefront have made significant advances in Syria and put the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on the defensive. The Gulf states and Turkey appear willing to grant support despite the failure of Qatari efforts to persuade Jabhat al Nusra to break its ties to Al Qaeda.

Potential threat

A flurry of meetings of various rebel groups; the recent dissolution of the Levant Front, the largest rebel alliance in Aleppo; the unexpected presence of the leader of the Saudi-backed Islam Army that operates out of Damascus, Zahran Alloush, at a recent gathering of Syrian clerics in Istanbul; and talk of Saudi efforts to bring rebel groups together in Riyadh to discuss the creation of some kind of representative political entity, suggests stepped up Saudi, Turkish and Qatari efforts to turn the tide in Syria's four year-old civil war.

Jamal Khashoggi, a well-connected Saudi journalist quipped in a recent tweet that Alloush's visit "to Turkey removes the last obstacle for Saudi-Turkish-Qatar cooperation in Syria". Alloush's cousin, a leader of the Revolutionary Command Council, an insurgent alliance that includes the Islam Army, added that Turkey was seeking to unite rebel groups across Syria.

Ironically, the rise of a more united, more effective anti-Assad front may ultimately pose the most serious threat to IS whose relations with rival groups in Syria are at best tenuous. Jabhat al Nusra and IS have fought numerous battles for turf in the war-torn country.

A pariah state

Nonetheless, IS, widely viewed as the world's richest jihadist group despite reduced revenue streams as a result of curtailing by the US-led coalition of income from the sale of oil from captured Syrian and Iraqi oil facilities and diminished ransom returns from kidnappings, has proven capable of institutionalising taxation and levies and administering Shariah justice. Absentee landlords who receive rents from properties owned in IS-controlled territory report that they receive payments with officially documented taxes deducted by the group's administration.

Similarly, a cache of documents belonging to one of the architects of IS that were obtained by German magazine *Der Spiegel* illustrates how a former Iraqi Baathist military officer designed in neat diagrams the structure of a future Islamic state divided into provincial councils dominated by intelligence and security services. The plan involved the provision of financial service and the operation of schools, day care centres, media and public transportation.

"It is true that jihadist experiments in ruling a specific geographical area have failed in the past. Mostly, though, that was because of their lack of knowledge regarding how to administer a region, or even a state. That is exactly the weakness that IS strategists have long been aware of - and eliminated. Within the 'Caliphate', those in power have constructed a regime that is more stable and more flexible than it appears from the outside... Within IS, there are state structures, bureaucracy and authorities," *Der Spiegel* concluded.

Thinking the unthinkable

Visits to Lebanon by Syrian residents of IS-controlled territory highlight problems of how the international community copes with an entity that holds out the prospect of longevity despite being a pariah and under continuous military, economic, and political pressure. The visitors in Lebanon are frequently stopped by security forces on suspicion of being jihadist operatives because they carry identity cards issued to every resident by IS. The visitors are caught in a bind being unable to travel in or out of IS-controlled territory without those identity cards.

Iraqi Advisory Group chairman Norman Ricklefs recently raised the question at an RSIS seminar of how the international community would deal with IS five years down the road. It is a question few analysts have entertained on the increasingly questionable assumption that IS will either be defeated

by the US-led coalition or will collapse under its own weight. So far, that has proven to be wishful thinking.

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