

## INFORME

**THE REAL DANGER OF THE ISLAMIC STATE**by **Piotr Kolowski**

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**RESUMEN**

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar el fenómeno del llamado Estado Islámico en Irak y Levante (al-daula al-islamiya fi al-‘iraq wa al-sham). Se concluye que es tanto una organización yihadista con objetivos globales, utilizando el terror y la propaganda sofisticada para difundir su ideología como una entidad “para-estatal” que emplea considerables recursos administrativos y militares para controlar y gobernar una base territorial claramente definida en el este de Siria y norte-oeste de Irak.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to analyze the phenomenon of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (al-daula al-islamiya fi al-‘iraq wa al-sham) taking note of its parallel and complimentary, but distinctive facets: it is both a jihadi organization with global goals, relying on terror and sophisticated propaganda to spread its ideology and a para-state entity efficiently using considerable military and administrative resources to control and govern a coherent and reasonably well-defined territorial base in Sunni-inhabited areas of Eastern Syria and North-Western Iraq.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

The so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Levant is both a jihadi organization with global goals, relying on terror and sophisticated propaganda to spread its ideology and a para-state entity efficiently using considerable military and administrative resources to control and govern a coherent and reasonably well-defined territorial base in Sunni-inhabited areas of Eastern Syria and North-Western Iraq. The Islamic State’s ideological genealogy can be explained within the context of regional developments during the last 15 years affecting the evolution of jihadist organizations. Its goals, strategy and functional model differ markedly from that of its predecessor, the global Al-Qaida network, but undeniable, inherited, similarities also exist. The group’s self-description contained in its propaganda aimed at global audience contrasts with data gathered from reports on actual ways of governance and revenue collecting employed in the territory it holds, allowing to see the Islamic State as a complex and multilayered organization. Long-term effects of the regional and Western response to the Islamic State’s ascendancy need to be assessed, paying particular attention to the need to address all of the IS’s aspects – internationalist jihadi network, efficient military organization but also a defender and provider of basic services to the marginalized Sunni communities – in order not only to degenerate and destroy its operational capacity and prevent its revival, but also to reverse the dismantling of urban and social systems in Sunni areas of Syria and Iraq safeguarding against their full collapse and transformation into permanent nexus of instability. It is the latter danger, that forms the most serious threat posed by IS to the region.

**II. ROOTS AND EVOLUTION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE**

The Islamic State in Iraq and Levant in its present form is a relatively young entity, declared only in April 2013. On 29 June 2014 it dropped geographical indicators from its name, thus becoming the 'Islamic State' and started calling itself a 'caliphate', thus pretending for world-wide leadership of jihadi cause. ISIL grew, via a series of transformations and name-changes out of what was prior a regional 'franchise' of the Al-Qaida network (since 2004 known as Al-Qaida in Iraq but growing from an earlier jihadist organization<sup>1</sup>). Its relationship with the mother organization has been contentious and – in more recent period – outright hostile. Despite sharing a common base of ideology, goals and personal ties, profound differences of outlook have gradually developed, forming the basis for the rival claims for authority over global jihad (and, more broadly, Muslim community in general) made by both.

Even though militant islamists already in mid-XX century had embraced anti-colonial and anti-imperial stances, confronting rhetorically both impious regimes at home ('near enemies') and their backers in the West ('far enemies'), their actions, for the most part, were linked to particular, localized causes (overthrowing the monarchy in Iran, renouncing secular state and peace with Israel, fighting Soviet invasions). When they turned against Western targets (as in Beirut in the '80s or attacks in metropolitan France in '90s) background in local conflicts was dominant. Al-Qaida's innovation consisted of focusing instead on a global picture and challenging Western political, economic and cultural dominance over Muslim countries. 9/11 attacks and subsequent terror plots had twin purposes of laying bare American vulnerability and pulling the West into prolonged and unwinnable conflicts. This quagmire coupled with continued terror campaign hitting US and Europe would deplete the West's manpower, resources and most importantly their fighting spirit. Al-Qaida in turn would be relatively unaffected, ground combat being fought by a host of its local allies, and not the network itself, which, being global, would be present everywhere at once but nowhere in particular, and thus impossible to defeat by conventional military means. Mounting intervention costs and public opinion outrage would eventually force the Western governments to sue for peace, i.e. to withdraw from backing the apostate regimes which would crumble enabling declaration of caliphate on their ruins<sup>2</sup>.

Despite initial successes, seemingly corroborating validity of AQ's thinking (eg. Spanish government's decision to withdraw forces from Iraq in the aftermath of Madrid station bombings), this plan ultimately wasn't successful, as Al-Qaida's capacities to project power (i.e. organize large-scale disruptive attacks) into West were quickly exhausted. Core leadership was eliminated, seized or forced to focus all efforts to evade capture making it effectively unable to lead and coordinate attacks on the far front. Its inspirational role continued but as copycat activities by "lone wolf" terrorists or small cells based in the West proved ineffectual. The center of gravity shifted to local AQ branches (and looser affiliates), of which Al-Qaida in the Arabic Peninsula, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Qaida in Iraq were the best known. This enabled Al-Qaida brand to survive and maintain relevance, but at the same time brought about renewed territorialization of jihad, with local operatives of each branch allowing their particular priorities to gradually dominate their agendas, in some cases practically reverting to a pre-Al-Qaida 'local jihad' model.

1. Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi's Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad founded in Jordan in 1999

2. Interestingly, this analysis was valid to a point - the West did eventually grow exhausted of intervention and fall of some of the Middle Eastern regimes can arguably be partially ascribed to Western inaction in their defense.

One of those branches, AQI, the future Islamic State under leadership of Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi was characterized by penchant for extreme, even by jihadi standards, violence, virulent hatred of the Shia and absolute lack of moral inhibitions at targeting civilians, including Sunnis. To dismay of AQ's central leadership, it apparently preferred targeting Iraqi Shia to US servicemen. Clearly visible in AQ's then second in command, Ayman Zawahiri's July 2005 letter to Zarqawi are both seeds of IS future doctrine (emphasis on the need for immediate establishment of 'caliphate' after clearing parts of Iraqi territory of US forces) and roots of future AQ-IS disagreements. AQ's approach seeks social acceptance (at least by Sunnis) and sharing governance broadly with population as precondition for establishing sustainable territorial control, whereas Zarqawi's viewpoint – inherited by IS – is much more totalitarian, emphasizing elimination of any potential competitors and establishing exclusive control over any community outreach.

Zarqawi's inability to foster equitable ties with tribal communities and his inflexibility resulted in many local Sunni populations eventually pulling their weight behind Anbar Awakening in 2006-2007 and by 2008 forcing AQI to retreat to underground existence in Mosul in a state of 'extraordinary crisis'. This period of decline was however marked by a pivotal event cementing organizations trajectory towards statehood, namely the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq on 15 October 2006 with its capital in Baquba and Zarqawi's successor, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its figurehead. The declaration of ISI, widely criticized in jihadi circles as premature and without firm sharia basis, was of little immediate practical consequence (as ISI didn't have exclusive control over meaningful territory) but much symbolic value. It visibly marked, by the adoption of a separate name and flag, a distance from AQ, taking on more Iraqi focus instead of AQ-style 'jihadist international'. As this direction was pursued, former Iraqi military and intelligence officers started to form the bulk of the group's membership, previously dominated by foreign fighters. Ties with AQ were continued and ISI benefitted from access to funding lines and suicide bomber candidates via AQ network, in particular via channels going through eastern Syria.

During the relatively calm period of 2010-2011 ISI was effectively dormant along with the other components of the wider Sunni insurgency, putting aside dreams of statehood. Core elements of its structure, tactics and goals – Iraqi-led organization; considerable military expertise; communication networks straddling Syria-Iraq border; no qualms about using extreme and indiscriminate violence; ideological rigidity; unwillingness to compromise; hyperbolic ambition and aspirations for total territorial control – were already in place, allowing it to wait for more favorable circumstances and opportunity to reassert itself.

### III. THE ASCENT OF THE IS

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi assumed leadership of ISI in 2010 and quickly was able to impose a centralized, top-down, military-style structure on the group and to exploit opportunities offered by surfacing of internal conflicts in Syria and Iraq as a result of botched government response to popular discontent. Answering to the mounting instability in Syria ISI reactivated cross-border networks and sent back home a contingent of experienced Syrian fighters who would later form the nucleus of the Nusra Front, the official Al-Qaida outfit in Syria. Simultaneously, it seized the opportunity offered by increasingly sectarian and ham-fisted governance of the Shia Prime Minister of Iraq, Nuri al-Maliki, to reinsert itself among the gradually alienated local Sunni populace of Northern and Western Iraq. Widespread resentment over Shia dominance in the Iraqi Security Forces, perceived increase of Iranian influence and strong-arm tactics used systematically to silence dissent after the withdrawal of the

US Army from Iraq in the end of 2011 fuelled instability and helped ISI regain a firm footing in Anbar, Niniva and Baghdad belt of Sunni communities. Equally important was the apparent inability of key Sunni politicians to openly oppose Maliki's dictatorial tendencies. As a result, Sunni political elite in Baghdad (as represented by such politicians as Nujaifi brothers or Salih Mutlaq) which continued to support Maliki, lost their legitimacy in the eyes of a large part of Iraqi Sunnis creating a political vacuum ISI was eager to fill. At the same time, as a result of the "Breaking the walls" campaign of jailbreaks started in 2012 and culminating in 2013, its ranks were joined by hundreds of experienced and radicalized Sunni fighters.

By 2013 conditions in Syria, torn by civil war, were ripe for establishing ISI's presence more firmly and directly. It rebranded itself as ISIL and crossed into eastern Syria, precisely when the focus of regime and opposition had shifted most resources to Homs and Aleppo battles, leaving eastern deserts relatively easy to take over. ISIL announced its merger with Nusra, entering period of dispute and subsequently confrontation with Al-Qaida central which intervened in favour of Nusra's independence. Zawahiri's orders were tersely rebuked, as the state cannot be subservient to a mere organization. In parallel ISIL consolidated its presence on the ground by gradually subsuming, often forcefully, other, smaller rebel groups, taking advantage of a de facto truce with the Syrian regime. Characteristically, it was much more interested in carving out for itself a zone of exclusive control (which it finally managed in early 2014) than in fighting against Assad.

Final steps towards a bid for statehood were taken during the post-electoral power vacuum in Iraq, with the political elites in Baghdad squabbling over cabinet formation and failing to reach a decision on Maliki's third term in office. ISIL surged in June 2014, crossing the border, routing demoralized Iraqi Army and taking control of key Sunni areas of northern, western and central Iraq such as Mosul, Tal Afar and Tikrit. Subsequent offensives launched added to its control zones considerable territories in both Iraq and Syria. On 29 June 2014 the caliphate was declared and ISIL dropped the geographical determinant from its name becoming Islamic State (IS). Its transformation from a terrorist organization into a sui generis, multilayered state-like entity was now complete.

#### **IV. MEDIA OF THE ISLAMIC STATE**

The sophisticated use of varied media and social networks is one of the characteristic traits of IS and one of the starting points for most of the published analysis of the group. Its gruesome execution videos are familiar heritage of the earlier stages of the Iraqi insurgency, being "pioneered" by none other than al-Zarqawi. IS media work builds upon previous efforts of Al-Shabab (Twitter) and AQAP (magazine "Inspire") with which it shares the intention to address English-speaking global audience. The nature of calls to jihad being broadcasted is however markedly different, reflecting difference of approaches between IS and AQ. The AQ-edited magazine called "Inspire" famously instructed readers 'how to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom', IS's "Dabiq" instead of calling for random acts of violence, beacons all the like-minded to come and join IS in building a utopian, but really existing Caliphate. Calls to sympathizers for individual attacks against Western (especially American and French) targets –including ordinary citizens!– also appear in the latest IS propaganda, but they remain marginal with top priority reserved for hijra to the Caliphate. Interestingly, only Syria (not Iraq) is pointed to as a worthy destination for prospective emigrants, rhetoric well reflecting acute differences in IS composition in both countries, decidedly more cosmopolitan in Syria.

It would be misleading to rely on IS propaganda to explain its functioning, motivation and goals, as it is very clearly geared towards attracting new recruits from Westernized backgrounds. Hence e.g. lengthy explanations of reasons for rejecting logic of individualism and personal choice or orientalist elaborations on tribal structure of Middle Eastern society as justification for policy of group responsibility introduced by IS. Attention is given to its Western victims, whose murders are explained away as rational response to irresponsible behavior of Western governments, in stark contrast to gleeful accounts of massacres of local enemies of IS, which is also telling.

Another purpose of propaganda activity is providing religious credentials for IS actions, in particular the declaration of Caliphate and claim for spiritual and political leadership of the Muslim world. Despite apparent studiousness, IS demonstrates a 'quick-fix' approach to theological issues. Majority opinion of scholars questioning the validity of declaring the caliphate is refuted essentially on the basis of a simple wager – the results of IS actions will be known soon (within in a year) and thus it will be clear whether the Caliphate is legitimate or not. Revival of the institution of slavery, another IS innovation in the field of religious law, can perhaps be read as a demonstration of audacity, not a truly religious gesture.

Taking into account that IS ranks have swollen after their sweep of Mosul, naturally at the expense of more moderate forces, and that a significant component of IS command is composed of former Baathist, it can safely be assumed that at least a significant proportion of the fighters is not deeply religious and does not share the ideology, apart from, perhaps, predilection for extreme violence and nihilist destruction.

Where IS acts on religious matters, systemic influence of Wahhabism can be immediately recognized. Introduction of Saudi-style morality police (hisba) and destruction of shrines and other objects of veneration are telling examples. But, stepping away from practical domain, it's hard to find any evidence of deep theological thought – it is no accident that none of the established jihadi preachers supports IS, not even Zarqawi's former mentor, al-Maghdisi.

In essence, IS's public actions seem designed to demonstrate power, audacity and absolute disregard for moral norms rather than any religious credentials. Their main appeal – at least among Westerners – is to those already affected by nihilism and attracted by indiscriminate violence and terror<sup>3</sup>. Again, they, while terrifyingly real, do not fully reflect IS's nature, being just one of the layers thereof.

Consistent effort at territorial control and governance is what tells IS apart from its peers and in consequence analysis of IS's organization and behavior in controlled areas is of crucial importance for understanding the group.

## V. GOVERNANCE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

IS diffuses apocalyptic visions abound with constant allusions to Muslim eschatology and the 'last crusade' to take place in Syria. But these coexist with instances of pragmatic behavior, such as seeking limited accommodation with Assad regime and smuggler gangs, or exploiting conflicting policies of regional actors (Sunni Arab states'

fear of Iran; Turkish apprehension of Kurdish independence) not to mention tactical alliances with non-Islamist (or at least non-Salafist) forces such as the Naqshbandis.

IS is a physical reality on the ground, in full control of Raqqa city since mid-January 2014 and since summer 2014 it has been governing a large swath of territory in Syria and Iraq, including major urban centers and inhabited by at least 5 to 7 million people. Even though direct information from IS-controlled areas is scarce, the length and scope of its territorial presence has allowed for significant understanding of the nature of its governance and revenue collecting.

Military organization forms the core of IS. As a result of recent victories it has swollen in size to over 30 000 fighters, around a third of them foreign. Their ranks are now being vetted and purged – with heavy fighting on various fronts serving as a vetting mechanism of sorts – IS leadership seems aware of the danger sudden growth poses to cohesion.

In IS command former prisoners of Camp Bucca and veterans of Iraqi insurgency play a key role. It has been estimated that a third of IS commanders have backgrounds in the Saddam-era army<sup>4</sup>. Foreign fighters' presence is more visible in Syria, where they fill majority of administrative oversight positions and form de facto elite of the state. In Iraq, IS seems to rely more on local cadres and has rebuffed attempts of its Baathists allies to provide ruling echelons for Mosul.

Characteristic of IS military are excellent command and control capabilities, emphasis on centralized organization driven by metrics and detailed reporting.

IS has put much emphasis in its declared goal of erasing borders – cause playing to tribal sentiments on both sides, and symbolically significant. In practice however it tends to follow existing lines, with only two (Falluja and al-Furat) of its 16 wilayat (governorates) being new entities, and only al-Furat straddling the state border.

IS has demonstrated systematic approach to governance aimed at securing lasting hold of territory. Achieving and maintaining exclusive control is seen as of paramount importance, with establishment of justice system, administration and introduction of various services gradually following where IS's hold is firm and unchallenged. Investment of resources is scalable depending on the level of local support and availability of skills, machines and material.

IS state apparatus broadly divides its functions into two categories: administration (Islamic outreach and education; law enforcement; courts; tribal affairs) and Muslim services (humanitarian aid, running bakeries, provision of water and electricity). Administrative actions, Islamic courts and law enforcement institutions in particular, are developed first, as they are –with apparently some justification– seen as efficient and low cost ways to build popular support and maintain social control, much as in the experience of Afghan Taliban.

With strengthening of local presence, Islamic charity, usually introduced at initial stages, gives way to a system of price controls aimed at lowering costs. IS then actively tries to establish its monopoly as the primary source of basic goods such as

4. In particular, both deputies of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – Abu Muslim al-Turkomani (real name: Fadel al-Hayali) in Iraq and Abu Ali al-Anbari in Syria are former officers – respectively Lt. colonel of military intelligence and major general in Saddam's army. Other members of IS military council: Samir Khilfawi, Haji Bakr, Adnan al-Sweidawi or Adnan Nijim have similar backgrounds.

wheat, or oil and foreign currency. It runs sewage, water and electricity systems, including dams and power plants. Local expertise and existing state structures are employed under IS oversight in all these undertakings, which then are expanded to include more complex systems such as education.

IS is serious about its governance, but the model it follows is rather light in scope. In addresses to tribal leaders it demands oaths of allegiance offering in return a catalogue of services including: respecting property titles, and reversing unlawful dispossessions (potentially important given Baath policy record in that regard); investing in services important to Muslims; providing security and stability; ensuring availability of food products and basic commodities; reducing crime rate; responsiveness to demands of the citizenry.

Rudimentary urban systems and functions are thus continued under IS rule, albeit often operated at low efficiency. Shortages of electricity, gas and oil are common and the problem is bound to aggravate due to –apart from obvious impact of the security situation– lack of long-term planning and reliance on immediate, shortcut solutions.

IS has been able to generate sizeable incomes but not a stable revenue base. From what is known about its finances, it relies mostly on selling off, often to its declared enemies, various resources it now controls – notably oil and electricity, but also antiquities, weapons, even slaves and, more prosaically, wheat – with donations from abroad covering only 5% of expenses. Another important source of income is confiscation of property belonging to members of religious minorities and other groups it considers as enemies (and so adding an economic motivation for persecution of Christians and Yezidis). The ‘taxation’ system it tries to introduce is arbitrary and piecemeal, resembling more an extortion racket than a permanent fiscal mechanism.

IS’s approach to economy is thus basically extractive and based on little more than looting, with emphasis on ghanima (spoils of war) clearly visible also in the publications of the group. Desire to seize control over more key resources (oil fields, water dams, power plants) clearly motivates much of IS military activity. It is aware of its need for constant expansion and new looting opportunities to survive and grow on.

## **VI. LIMITING FACTORS AND PERSPECTIVE OF DECLINE**

As we have seen IS model is exploitative and predatory. In addition to extorting from population it preys on other armed groups being easily the most ruthless and extremist of all, intercepting their funding, equipment and fighters. Only rivals deeply embedded in local tribal context can withstand the military pressure and be immune to take over attempts. Currently IS seems to be approaching limits of its ‘natural’ expansion – it has shown that it can operate beyond its territorial base, but it can thrive only in an environment of Sunni-majority areas and even there only if it can muster a degree of support. ISI failure to do so was the root cause of its eclipse, but IS position now is considerably stronger and so simple repetition of the 2007-2010 events seems unlikely.

As the rival Sunni insurgency groups were disrupted or weakened post-2011, some of their leadership now remaining in exile and distrust of the central government runs high, in Sunni areas of Iraq there is little viable alternative to the limited model of administration and services IS provides. Continuing privatization of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, increasingly fought by nebulous networks of militias, not regular forces makes return to a semblance of state authority unlikely in foreseeable future.

Iraqi army disintegrated in face of IS advance and rebuilding its capacity could take years. The immediate task of holding IS advance against key areas falls more and more to Shia militias, trained and equipped by Iran with tacit US approval. In Syria, the regime's armed forces suffer from shortages of manpower and the burden of securing territory falls to irregular formations ranging from shabiha gangs to self-defence units of local communities to foreign (Iranian, Afghan, Iraqi) Shia fighters. Opposition is similarly fragmented. This background means that urban and rural systems steadily deteriorate, creating a governance vacuum and making a modest degree of stability and security offered by IS seem attractive, at least until a viable counter-offer becomes available.

Important limiting factor to IS growth potential is its explicit promise of constant victory as both proof of legitimacy of the Caliphate and new sources of revenue needed to maintain the state. In its present setup IS needs to grow in order to survive. Faced by airstrikes and approaching the limits of its habitat it most probably will not be able to expand its zone of influence much beyond present limits. In consequence, rolling back of some services and programs it tries to run, or even dispersal of some of the foreign fighters is likely. But even if it starts to fold and wither, IS will retain territorial control and potential for destabilizing areas both within and beyond its perimeter, making attempts to dislodge it time-consuming and costly.

Even if IS collapses, continuing degeneration of urban and rural systems, if not reversed by introduction of sustainable services and reconstruction programs, will only increase perceived victimhood of the Sunni community prompting it to embrace the sectarian narrative even more strongly. Institutional decay, weakness of state, exhausted and demoralized population, saturation with weapons and pervasive culture of violence – all processes to which IS has contributed, but had not initiate – will lower 'barriers to entry' for future aspirational jihadists to carve out their areas of control. Wide areas of Iraq and Syria risk becoming no-go zones for generation, situation in southern and eastern Afghanistan serving here as a poignant memento.

Much like IS is significantly stronger and more dangerous than ISI was, we run a serious risk of emergence of an even more vicious and forceful opponent if the problem IS poses is only addressed from a counter-terrorism or military, instead of social and political angle.

## VII. RESPONSE TO IS

Western response to IS's ascension was prompted mainly by events important from the point of view of internal security and answering to the sentiments of public opinion of the West, but marginal in terms of their importance to IS's functioning, – such as the gruesome killings of Western hostages, the increasing presence of Western fighters in the ranks of IS, the plight of Yezidis or the third siege of Kobani, – practically ignoring the wider background of the ongoing conflict.

Efforts understandably taken to delegitimize IS in the eyes of potential sympathizers and dissuade Westerners from joining it (O. Roy's 'we should deflate the image of jihad'<sup>5</sup> is a succinct illustration of this approach) correctly identify 'generational nihilism' as a key motivation but neglected the local –more important– causes of IS's

rise. Westerners comprise after all a small minority of all IS foreign fighters and the foreigners in turn form a minority of its units and recruitment base.

Taking military action in response to IS's threatened genocide against Yezidis and Kurds in Iraq and Syria, while fully understandable on its own, when contrasted with inaction to use of chemical weapons and other atrocities committed against Sunnis during the Syrian conflict allows IS to present potent and potentially resonant narrative exposing Western double standards and preference for 'yezidi Satanism and peshmergan zionism' over 'Islam' (ie. Sunni branch thereof). Indeed, the air campaign in Syria (and in particular its focus on Kobane and airdrops for Kurdish fighters) has already been subjected to criticism by Syrian moderate opposition along similar, though more balanced lines. Similarly, pro-democracy activists have noted that whereas beheadings of two American journalists make headlines, fate of more than 80 Syrian journalists killed by IS generates little attention<sup>6</sup>. French government retaliates for the IS-inspired killing of Herve Gourdel, but who is there to speak for Sunni Arab victims?

Compared with confronting IS ideologically and stopping its military advance, relatively little emphasis has been put into attempts to dislodge it from its social base. In Syria, finding and vetting appropriate partners for this kind of engagement is understandably difficult, given the tangled web of conflict, but also in Iraq US-led efforts to sway former Sahwa fighters have not been too successful. There certainly exist a current of disenchantment with IS rule among many Sunnis repulsed by its ultraviolet style and dictatorial approach. But most political, tribal and military groups are distrustful of the government in Baghdad and have decided to maintain neutrality, avoiding conflict with IS, and denying entry to their strongholds to either IS or ISF. In reality this neutrality is lopsided as IS operatives are able to mount attacks on ISF targets in Baghdad belt areas held by those groups. Only in locations where tribal leaders stand firmly against IS (such as in Ramadi and Dhuluiya) due to prior history of bloody conflict with ISI, it struggles to establish presence.

Of all components of IS, its 'jihadist international' arm is dangerous but relatively easy to eliminate or disperse. Inevitable failure to indefinitely prolong string of victories and high casualty rate caused both by Western focus on the targets belonging to that component and IS's policy of 'vetting' the newest addition to their ranks, will diminish the group's attractiveness. Military progress beyond currently held areas will similarly be stopped and, in places, reversed, as IS's heavy weaponry will be eliminated and likelihood of ground intervention of US or NATO troops grows. The most important, but also the most difficult problem posed by IS's rise, is the fate of local communities after its eventual fall.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

As it was argued the mismanagement of the essential infrastructure and the devastation of urban systems may constitute a greater threat to Iraq and Syria than IS's current terrorist or military potential.

The prevention of lasting socio-economic collapse turning the region into hotbed of instability relies not only on success of anti-IS military campaign (which remains a prerequisite) but much more so on building of inclusive, representative and responsive

6. Ironically, as already noted, IS written material has a similarly clear orientalist / imperialist reading as well.

institutions. This prospects seems far-fetched given the prevailing conditions, but it is imperative to engage with it as soon as possible.

Against all odds, pro-democracy activist networks, local self-defence committees and other bottom-up representative institutions still exist and their inclusion in the political process should become the focus of international efforts. Media campaign aimed against the rise of extremism should be augmented by local voices. Instead of allowing IS to dominate the discourse, or broadcasting our response to it, we should encourage all efforts to give a say to Syrian and Iraqi communities.

#### FURTHER READING

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