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**Think wisely
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OPERATION JOURNEYMAN 1977: A PERSPECTIVE ON CONVENTIONAL NAVAL DETERRENCE

References

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- ⁷ CAB 130/997 Minutes of DOP Committee, 21 Nov. 1977.
- ⁸ PREM 16/1504, Mulley to Callaghan, 17 Nov. 1977.
- ⁹ PREM 16/1504 Owen to Callaghan, 18 Nov. 1977.
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- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
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The Future of ISIS: A Joint US-Russian Assessment

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OVER the past two years there have been many academic analyses and intelligence assessments regarding the rise of ISIS and its apparent successes. Interpretations have varied, in some cases quite significantly. Some researchers have attributed responsibility to Washington, while others have seen al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) as the driving force behind the emergence and growth of ISIS. The overall fallout of these varying views is that it is a far more difficult and complex process to comprehend what caused the emergence of ISIS in 2006 and its claims to be a state.

Syria and Iraq lie at geostrategic crossroads, where the Sunni and the Shi'a worlds intersect. From the south to the north there is the main Sunni line, from the Gulf countries to Turkey. The Shi'a area stretches from the east to the west, and consists primarily of Iran and Hezbollah. Syria and Iraq have mixed populations, and until the beginning of the 20th century both these countries had secular regimes, with mixed populations of Sunni and Shi'a communities coexisting in similar economic and sociopolitical conditions.

The growth of ISIS

The role of ideology and doctrine in the Middle East should never be underestimated. The struggle between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims has not ceased since the 7th century. The ruling regime, whether Sunni or Shi'a, is what determines outcomes, irrespective of population and Moslem demographics – Bahrain, for example, is a Sunni state, though it has a Shi'a majority.

ISIS appeared just after the Iraq parliamentary elections of 2005, initially in January. The Shi'ites obtained the overwhelming majority in the National Assembly. In January 2005, the two main Shi'a parties obtained 180 seats (the Kurds receiving 75 seats, the rest 20). These results led to a wave of criticism, and the elections were repeated. In spite of an increasing number of Sunni votes, the Shi'a United Iraqi Alliance got 128 seats out of 275 (Kurds 53, the Sunnis altogether 58).

The civil war began as the Sunni population would not acknowledge the legitimacy of the elections. The main role was played by terrorist groups. In June 2005, Washington began a 'Together Forward' operation, which finished in October, and immediately after that ISIS appeared. ISIS consisted of some elements of the terrorist groups defeated in the civil war, including AQI, and other subdivisions and generals of Saddam Hussein's army. These groups differed but they also had things in common.

Some have argued that they fought a common enemy – the Americans – and aimed to expel them from Iraq. However, what is much more important is that they are all Sunnis. The very name of a new group, Islamic State of Iraq, marked a key common and unifying claim – to create a state in Iraq, and this state had to be a Sunni state with a Sunni political elite.

There was also an external factor which helped them to join together. This was sponsorship from the Gulf countries. The emergence of ISIS is not directly related to the Washington government, to AQI, or to economic factors such as poverty, but more to the support from the Gulf and, in particular, from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The political and economic background for this is based on the key factor that Saudi Arabia has always claimed to be an indisputable leader between the Sunni communities, and is a Sunni regional leader. Although Qatar had intensified its connections with European countries in order to increase its GDP, Qatar still needed to have a Sunni key relationship to the north. Syria was ruled by the Alawi kin and tended towards Iran, and Iraq had a strictly secular regime and a Shi'a majority in population. As a consequence the Gulf countries such as Qatar felt a strong need for a separate Sunni state.

The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein had excluded a chance to cooperate with his regime, which good relations between the Assad family and the Iranian government did allow. The political instability in Iraq in 2006 led to the momentum for a Sunni organisation with a clear political course towards creation of its own state. The Sunni state lying between the Gulf and Turkey had to facilitate laying a gas pipeline from Qatar to Europe and also divide the Shi'a geopolitical and theocratic space into two unconnected parts. This view of a new Sunni state solved the Saudi problem of political leadership.

Syria, primarily agrarian, and Iraq, an oil producer, would not challenge Saudi and Gulf state economic supremacy.

The expansion of ISIS activity

Why had ISIS been waiting near Syrian-Iraqi borders and why did it begin its expansion only in 2013-14? ISIS could not establish its state only in the Sunni territories of Iraq, as it would have to face surrounding forces – both the Shi'as of southern Iraq and neighbouring countries, and the Kurds. Also it could not connect directly to Turkey, or any sea, so from a strategic viewpoint ISIS, solely in Iraq, had limitations.

When the Western intervention in Syria began, after two years of war, when all conflicting parties and the population became exhausted, ISIS crossed the border and interfered in the war. ISIS needed support from the local population. The idea of a caliphate was created in order to win over peoples in the newly controlled territories.

It is most likely that the main aim of ISIS was to establish a state, and one that had to be internally stable and could be used by the Gulf countries as a bridge between them and the West. The early success of ISIS militarily can be explained not simply by military superiority but more the total fatigue of Syria and Iraq caused by civil disorders and external intervention. However, this very scenario also militated in the other direction – preventing ISIS from gaining stable control in a hugely volatile environment.

The 'domestic' strategy of ISIS seems to be centered on creating a state. ISIS has never tried to break into Shi'a territories – in both Iraq and Syria it now claims to control only the Sunni lands. It has though tried to capture some parts of Kurdistan in order to reach the Turkish border. ISIS's direct territorial control appears to be a basis for developing a caliphate ideology, that makes Syrians and Iraqis tolerate their loss of sovereignty, and influences strongly their theocratic self-identity as an Umar – like caliphate, taking them back to bygone times. ISIS has been criticised for direct violations of sharia. However, none of the key theologians and religious leaders dared to publish fatwa against the regime. It has been only very recently that the Moslem intelligentsia, within the religious leadership, has come out in direct criticism in light of ISIS atrocities of massive proportions, exemplified by the cruel murder of the captured Jordanian pilot.

ISIS as a state

ISIS has claimed some success by creating state institutions. The ISIS regime provides electricity, water, and facilitates building schools and hospitals, roads, and mosques. ISIS aims to control perception – to be perceived by the local populations as an organisation that tends to do best for its people. ISIS would like to have itself perceived by its grass-roots followers, and those who are caught innocently in the turmoil of theocratic cross-fire, as the political conjunction of the material and spiritual, in fulfilment of its people's needs for stability. The reality and the perception have clearly gone dramatically out of kilter as ISIS has spiralled into atrocity after atrocity, driven by an evil creed of violence and mayhem.

ISIS has garnered the involvement of professionals, such as scientists, administrators, engineers and technologists, and economists, to manage its industry, agriculture and trade under ISIS direct control. For example, ISIS became able to operate the dam on the Assad Lake, a thermal power plant near Aleppo, petroleum enterprises, and now it claims to be issuing its own currency. This is critical infrastructure and logistics connected with the Euphrates River. Many ISIS specialists and consultants are from Western countries.

Internal ISIS perspectives and self-assessments are difficult to gauge – as ISIS now faces internal problems. If these problems are not solved ISIS may lose most of its territories under pressure from regional forces, especially now that Jordan has joined the Kurds and independent Syria and Iraq in their struggle. The disagreements between ISIS leaders are unpredictable, and neither Saudi Arabia nor Qatar may be able to control them – this may in due course be a defining factor.

Can ISIS endure?

What evidence is there that ISIS may possibly continue its existence for at least the next several years? The main objective of ISIS is to conjoin the Sunni space. In light of well-organised and coordinated Western opposition with regional allies, ISIS will not be able to spread its territories, marked on its 'future map'. As the opposition in neighbouring countries grows, it is very unlikely that ISIS will be able to go beyond Syria and Iraq.

The short-term objective of ISIS may be to establish contact with the Turkish government, with or without Saudi mediation. The extended cooperation with the Gulf is certainly profitable for Turkey. Erdogan in Turkey is likely to behave very cautiously, as he already did during fighting between ISIS and the Kurds, while recognising the key role of Saudi Arabia.

In Iraq ISIS may possibly try to capture Baghdad. The latter was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate and an ideological and theocratic centre of gravity. Baghdad's fall to ISIS will legitimise the 'state' as a real caliphate in the minds of many Sunnis and may also secure for some time the inner stability of ISIS itself. The fall of Baghdad has an additional advantage: the Islamists will be able to control the Tigris River as well as the Euphrates. This will let ISIS use the infrastructure and fertile lands near the rivers, and provide it with a significant source of water. Water is a rare and precious resource in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia seriously lacks water. An ISIS march to the Gulf does not seem possible in the next few years, as the Shi'a unity identity is much stronger than the Sunni, and the population will defend their homes, security and holy cities (Najaf and Karbala) extremely aggressively.

ISIS relations with Syria will probably stay officially hostile. Syria seems to be safe, as it is impossible for ISIS either to reach the coast or to capture Damascus. Although the situation continues to be unstable, the non-captured territories are inhabited mostly by non-Sunni people – for example, the Ismaili (Nizaris) and the Twelvers in the province of Hama, the Druze people to the south of Damascus, the Christians and, certainly, the Alawites. If there is a possibility for ISIS to conquer Syrian lands, then holding them under control seems to be impracticable. The main aim of Bashar Assad is to exterminate local radical terrorist groups and to stabilise the remaining territories and then to recover the economy in the context of a lost Euphrates.

One of the key critical assessments will remain relations between ISIS, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. ISIS atrocities and its clear divergence from fundamental Moslem teaching will polarise opposition to ISIS, leaving the Islamists isolated and surrounded, facing a demise akin to those 20th-century tyrannies that sought to impose their will by brutal suppression and atrocities.

ISIS may well have masterminded its own downfall – by brutally violating all the norms of human conduct and indeed the very essence of the Prophet's words. Cruelty, inhumanity and sheer violent atrocity have no place in the civilised world, and ISIS will reap the whirlwind of its own making, unifying its enemies with its friends and those who will simply not tolerate inhumanity.

The response to ISIS

The United States, the United Kingdom, Jordan, and their allies in the Middle East and Europe have a clear moral and 'just war' mandate to destroy the hardcore backbone of ISIS that masterminds the atrocities. Destroying ISIS infrastructure, logistics, training camps, weapons supply chain, and ISIS recruitment mechanisms will remain high military priorities, with the highest of all being the destruction of the ISIS leadership and command and control chain. All nations that have unwittingly supplied foreign recruits to ISIS will have to intensify surveillance and detention of foreign recruits, but most of all be extremely aware of the dangers presented by returning ISIS converts trained in ISIS weaponry and explosives, and indoctrinated with the ISIS goals of killing innocent victims, exemplified by recent brutal attacks in Europe. The latter could intensify proportionate to the numbers recruited from the various European countries and the United States.

From a United States perspective, the President may have to commit those key elements of US forces best suited and trained for destroying ISIS on the ground – US Special Forces and their opposite numbers in the UK and elsewhere – regular ground troops may not be appropriate. The US has a hugely capable Special Forces cadre and ISIS is no match for them. What will be increasingly key are new and innovative intelligence sources and methods to provide intelligence to Special Forces in or near real time, backed by ideological and other media tools to influence the hearts and minds of those in ISIS-held territories. Once the ISIS leadership is decapitated and ISIS infrastructure and logistics destroyed, the battle for the minds of those affected by ISIS will begin.

The US pursued at the end of World War Two one of the most far-seeing strategies to turn around a country that had perpetrated the worst kind of atrocities and war crimes in history. She did not follow the Versailles model at the end of World World One. The reverse model was created by George Marshall and the American leadership. Once ISIS is defeated, indeed obliterated, the challenge will be for the US and its allies to find just and equitable ways to resolve the complexities of the Sunni-Shi'a territorial and theocratic space – an extraordinarily demanding task. Respect for these great differences should perhaps echo the words of Admiral Lord Nelson in his prayer before the battle of Trafalgar – 'May humanity after victory be the predominate feature of the British Fleet.' It will require immense humanity to steer through the vastly troubled waters of Sunni and Shi'a.

The challenge is for the coalition of the willing – those countries committed to stopping barbarity in its tracks – to find workable relations with their Middle Eastern friends and allies, some of whom may be reluctant to wage war against their Sunni brothers. Iraqi ground troops have not been to date up to the task. Jordan has very clearly indicated that it will back its abhorrence of brutal cruelty with intensified military action, and in order to sustain a continuous effort Jordan will require US help.

Is it indeed possible for ISIS to survive and progress on its own? This analysis shows that this is most unlikely. The likelihood of an ISIS winning assault on Baghdad is likely to wane. Thereafter ISIS may begin to lose conquered towns one by one, as its opposition, some exhausted by wars, neither needs nor supports a Sunni 'state' amongst the lands of the Shi'a.

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