

## ISIS and the New Middle East Cold War

F. Gregory Gause, III August 25, 2014

The territorial gains this summer by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in both those countries have added a new element to the new Middle East cold war that I wrote about in a Brookings Doha analysis paper published earlier in the summer. ISIS rebranded itself "the Islamic State" and declared a caliphate in Mosul. It threatened both Baghdad and Irbil in Iraq while consolidating control over more of eastern Syria and taking its fight toward Aleppo. Its successes have added to its numbers, both in terms of volunteers and in terms of other fighting groups which, while perhaps not sharing its ideology, are bandwagoning with an apparent winner. Its grisly execution of American journalist James Foley riveted world attention, but its successes predated that event by months. American bombing helped to turn back some of its recent gains in northern Iraq, but no one claims that ISIS has been defeated.

In one sense, ISIS is an outgrowth of the new Middle East cold war. The root cause of this region-wide crisis is the failure of state authorities to be able to control their borders and their territories, to provide services to their populations and, ultimately, to forge a common political identity that could be the basis of political community. This collapse of normal state authority has not only occurred in large swathes of Syria and Iraq; it is also occurring in Lebanon, Yemen, Libya and perhaps even in parts of Egypt. In the absence of central government control, local forces emerge, based on sectarian, ethnic, tribal and regional identities, to fill the gap. The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Huthi movement in Yemen and the various sectarian militias in Syria and Iraq are, in their different ways, similar manifestations of the failure of centralized governance in these countries.

But ISIS is different from these other entities in one important respect — it does not have a regional or great power ally. The political vacuums that have opened up in the region are the battlefields of the new Middle East cold war. Iran and Saudi Arabia primarily, but other regional powers as well (Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, Egypt), support local groups in these domestic political fights and civil wars in order to increase their own power, balance against their rivals and advance their ideological agendas. Iran backs Hizballah and various Iraqi Shia militias, as well as the government of Bashar al-Assad and the Shia-led government in Baghdad. The Saudis support both more secular and Salafi groups in Syria fighting Assad, while Turkey and Qatar have supported Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups in Syria. Qatar was the major financial supporter of the overthrown Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt; Saudi Arabia and the UAE support the Sisi government that turfed the MB out. When it looked like the KRG was under threat, both the United States and the EU mobilized to support it.

ISIS does not have a patron, which makes it harder to fit it into the geopolitical map of the new Middle East cold war. All sorts of people want to blame ISIS on one or another regional or great power. Some in the Arab world cannot imagine that so successful a group could emerge without the shadowy support of outsiders, and see the hand of the United States and/or Israel behind it. Given its Salafi Islamist ideological bent, Saudi Arabia is accused of being its sponsor, if not directly then in some ultimate sense. Others have tried to pin the blame for the rise of ISIS on Qatar or Turkey.

None of these theories really bear up. ISIS has certainly drawn support from individuals in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, both in terms of volunteers and monetary contributions. Both the Saudi and the Qatari governments have poured lots of money into the Syrian opposition; it is possible that some of that money ended up with ISIS. But there is no evidence that the Saudi government or the Qatari government is directly supporting the group. By opening its borders to the Syrian opposition, Turkey allowed all sorts of groups to organize and establish lines of supply. None has been able to succeed to the level that ISIS has.

ISIS has not emerged as the force it is because it has a government behind it. It has become largely self-funding, earning revenue from banditry, protection rackets, control of trade routes and taking over lucrative assets like oil refineries and gas stations. It recruits broadly, in the Middle East and North Africa and globally, its very success spurring jihadists and sympathizers to join it. It is extremely well organized and disciplined. One of its great strengths at the propaganda level is that it is not the client of a foreign power. It can honestly represent itself to the Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis whom it governs and upon whom it relies for support (whether active cooperation or passive acceptance) as a guardian of their interests against the sectarian governments in Damascus and Baghdad.

The independence of ISIS, at once a great strength of the organization, is also a weakness. It has the unique ability to unite most of the players in the new Middle East cold war against it. Iran and Iran's allies detest it because of its fiercely anti-Shia ideology. The Saudis fear it as a potential domestic threat, turning Salafism into a revolutionary political ideology rather than the pro-regime bulwark it has usually been in Saudi Arabia. Turkey, the Kurds, the United States, the EU and Russia all stand to lose if ISIS wins. Its recent successes have led a reluctant Obama administration to re-engage militarily in Iraq and the Iranians to push out Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister of Iraq. Washington, Tehran, Baghdad, Irbil, Ankara, Damascus and Riyadh find themselves with parallel, if not identical interests when dealing with ISIS. In the end, the group's undoubted talent in creating enemies for itself will probably do it in, not just among outside powers but also among the very people whom it claims to champion.

But sustaining this temporary alliance against ISIS will take work. Because the regional actors are engaged in a cold war with each other, the temptation to switch focus from ISIS, if it suffers setbacks, to their mutual rivalries will be strong. While American air power and intelligence assets certainly have a role to play against ISIS, the more important task for Washington is to keep the anti-ISIS alliance of convenience working. That means engagement with American allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Kurdish government in Irbil to keep the pressure on ISIS. It means both support for and pressure on the Iraqi central government to get its act together. It means acknowledging our parallel interest with Iran in this matter. None of this is easy, but it is a much simpler task than having to deal with a consolidated jihadist state at the center of the Middle East.