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IS Caliphate Two Years After: A Transitional Phase?

By Romain Quivoij

Synopsis

It has been two years since the self-styled Islamic State (IS) announced the establishment of a “Caliphate”. How will this construct evolve and what form would it take?

Commentary

AFTER 23 MONTHS of war the determination of the Islamic State (IS) Caliphate is being put to the test, with a significant decline of its revenues and a total combat casualties estimated to exceed 26,000 fighters since 2014. The United States reported in January 2016 that the group would have lost respectively around 20% and 40% of the populated territories it used to control in Syria and Iraq.

IS has the potential to fight back, especially as its strongholds in the Syrian provinces of Aleppo and Deir ez Zour have not been reconquered yet. However, should the erosion of the Caliphate continue over the coming months, it would be more and more difficult for IS to defend the entity it created against the assaults of its enemies and ensure governance at the same time. Retrospectively, the first two years of the Caliphate might thus be seen as a period of transition leading to the reconstitution of the “state”. It is an open question how the latter could evolve and which forces might benefit from that process.

Loss of Popular Support?

IS, also known as ISIS, based the legitimacy and the credibility of the Caliphate on the Sunni-Shia divide and the power vacuum plaguing large parts of Iraq and Syria. The IS organisation is used to present itself as the defender of Sunnis against the

Shia-led regimes of Baghdad and Damascus. It remains dependent on the active or passive support of Sunnis living in areas under its influence and control.

These local populations stand at a crossroads. The Caliphate provided them with basic services, the administration of “justice” and an embryonic welfare state, but it also brought disillusionment among its “subjects” and exposed the latter to the risks associated with a state at constant war. According to political scientist Myriam Benraad, “[IS] pledged to hand power back to the Sunnis and secure their prosperity ... not only did it not keep its promise but it took civilian populations hostage”.

Territorial losses are likely to lead IS to intensify its “indirect strategy” that aims at forcing enemies of the group to reconsider their military involvement in Iraq and Syria by targeting their civilian populations.

The domestic cost of this approach may nonetheless be high. Sunnis living in the Caliphate are primarily interested in ensuring their security, improving their conditions of life and increasing their political influence. Terrorist activities led or claimed by IS will not meet these expectations and could widen the gap between locals and the “state”.

IS might enforce stricter policies of coercion and repression to reassert societal control, which would further expose the dictatorial nature of its rule and make the Caliphate lose more of its appeal.

Hammer and Anvil

Such a scenario would have positive implications over the long term if a viable alternative to the Caliphate had emerged from the war. This has not been the case so far. Arab Sunni populations are caught between IS on the one hand and different actors they still consider to be hostile to their interests on the other.

In Iraq, feelings of mistrust shared by a majority of Sunnis towards the Iraqi central government as well as their fear of indiscriminate attacks from the Iraqi army and retaliation from Shia militias make a shift of power from IS to Shia forces doomed to failure.

The challenge is even greater in Syria, where a potential but unlikely reimplantation of the Assad regime in governorates it used to control before the civil war would face considerable opposition from Syria’s Sunni majority. In both countries, growing resentment between Arabs and Kurds might sow the seeds of new ethnic clashes.

The campaign against IS is over focused on the objective of military defeat, with little attention paid to post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. This is a shortsighted policy. To be sustainable, territorial gains that are made by anti-IS forces need to be followed by reconstruction, governance and inclusive political processes.

This agenda is severely jeopardised by sectarian cleavages and, in the immediate future, displacements of population who fled fighting. Political scientist Gilles Dorronsoro noted that “the cities of Tikrit, Ramadi and other Sunni bastions passed

under the control of IS are falling one after the other, but they are almost depopulated. Return of inhabitants is very limited”.

From Caliphate to Emirate?

Three factors suggest that al-Qaeda (AQ) and its Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) would be likely to take advantage of a new balance of power.

First, the conflict between IS and AQ/JN has been a major bone of contention within the Jihadist community since the two organisations split in 2013. Setbacks suffered by IS would be an ideal opportunity for JN and its parent organisation to attempt to restore the leadership of AQ.

Second, any failure of the Caliphate as a “Sunni project” could entice JN to portray itself as a more authentic and effective defender of Sunni populations. The group aims at establishing an Islamic “Emirate” that would rely on a harsh interpretation of Sharia law. To this end, JN developed a dense network of rebel alliances and a genuine base of local support in the North-western Syrian governorate of Idlib where it established a low-key but influential presence.

These assets could be used to gain further traction and expand JN’s outreach, provided that the group would be able to overcome internal disagreements as well as feelings of suspicion and animosity expressed among militant factions and parts of the population that are opposed to its objectives.

Third, a protracted loss of momentum of the Caliphate might be used by AQ and JN as a decisive argument in support of the long-term methodology favoured by their respective leaderships. JN took great care in gradually entrenching itself in the opposition and the social fabric of Syrian communities, as opposed to IS who adopted a strategy for immediate action. The latter approach may well be much frailer than initially thought.

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