Post-ISIS Middle East: What is next for the Region?

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Introduction

In a little over three years after IS/Daesh declared its 'caliphate', it has been dislodged from its capital, Mosul. Its fleeing fighters blew up the al-Nuri mosque, where Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi, in an infamous sermon, declared the establishment of ISIS[1]. Across the border, the United States of America along with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has been waging a months-long bloody battle against it in Raqqa, its de-facto Syrian capital[2]. While, Russian and Syrian forces and Shia militias have broken the siege of pro-government areas and the airbase in Deir ez-Zor and driven out ISIS from considerable areas it once controlled[3]. Prior to this ISIS was defeated in norther Syria by Kurdish forces and in Iraq security forces along with Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-trained militias routed ISIS in Fallujah, Tikrit and Ramadi. Both were supported by US Special Forces and aerial strikes.

These important security developments have generated plenty of speculations regarding the impending doom of ISIS and as to what a post-ISIS Middle East will look like. This research article is an attempt to assess the evolving security dynamics in Middle East in the backdrop of recent ISIS defeats and the prognostication of its imminent end. It discusses whether the physical dislodgement of ISIS from areas it has controlled for some years predicts its complete annihilation as a terrorist group, as one of the enduring traits of terrorist organizations in recent years has been to revive themselves in different manifestations. How could ISIS potentially reinvent itself as a movement? What options does it have? Moreover, this article also highlights the lurking tensions among different states and

ethnic groups that have been glossed over by the urgent threat of ISIS. Now as ISIS is being physically displaced from both Iraq and Syria, these potential fault lines are re-emerging.

Genesis, Evolution and Future of ISIS

The recent territorial setbacks to ISIS have prompted some to surmise whether they portend an end of ISIS. Significant, no doubt, the physical dislodgment of ISIS from its strongholds is, but the history of jihadi extremism suggests that these groups have shown tremendous capacity to mould, adapt and reinvent themselves, emerging in new incarnations.

After fighting Soviet Union, Al-Qaeda left Afghanistan and found a safe refuge in Sudan only to come back to the Islamic Emirate of Taliban, when the latter ended the civil war in Afghanistan after routing the different factions scrambling for power in post-Soviet era. American invasion of Afghanistan and its awesome military might battered and pounded Al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan, killings its leaders, attacking its bases and dismantling the networks it had been building for some time. Al-Qaeda seemed doomed[4].

Operation Iraqi Freedom lent a new lease of life to Al-Qaeda. Musab al-Zarqawi founded Tawhid wal-Jihad(Monotheism and Holy War) in Iraq and conducted its first terrorist attack in August 2003 against Jordanian embassy in Baghdad[5]. Initially constituting a minuscule force fighting American invasion, this group would later make a coalition with Baathists and Iraqi army, both dismantled by Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) headed by Paul Bremer, ultimately metamorphosing into Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Presenting itself to embittered and disenfranchised Sunni minority in Iraq as a resistance force, AQI initiated a reign of terror and sparked a civil war by attacking

Shia shrines[6]. Dominating the insurgency in Sunni heartlands, Al-Qaeda in Iraq would take over Fallujah and other Sunni majority provinces. The same group then mutated into Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), which was defeated in 2006-7 by American forces along with Sunni tribes[7].

But this was more a temporary retreat than a complete defeat, as the later events would demonstrate in Iraq. The withdrawal of invading forces in 2011 combined with the corrupt government of Nouri al-Maliki, who headed an essentially sectarianized political arrangement, provided an opportunity for members of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) to reemerge. American-trained Iraqi army proved to be a house of cards before the juggernaut of ISI. The fleeing personnel left behind Humvees and Abram tanks and huge cache of arms[8].

In the meanwhile, Syria was on the verge of a civil war, when peaceful protests in 2011 were confronted with brute force and violently quashed. The militarization of Syrian uprising gave militant and jihadi groups a new platform to expand their tentacles. Islamic State in Iraq was no exception. Exploiting a situation in which Syrian government forces were stretched and there was a want of unity among rebel forces' Islamic State in Iraq took control of eastern Syria, later expanding to Palmyra and northeast Syria. It first worked under Al-Qaeda but rifts erupted between them in 2014 and they split[9].

Such violent jihadi groups, besides their ideological pull, prey on chaos, mayhem, lawlessness, disenfranchised communities and unstable states. They combine to provide them easy recruits and safe sanctuaries. Islamic State and its predecessor, Al-Qaeda, both found germane grounds in such circumstances in Middle East. So, the physical displacement of these groups in cities and towns should be complemented by an inclusive political vision, a strong state evoking confidence among populace in its

capability to protect them. The territorial setbacks for ISIS are real and have come at a huge cost for both civilians caught in the crossfire and security forces and militias, but enduring peace can only be ensured when political, social and ideological sources that sustain these groups are addressed.

The recent gains by Iraqi security forces and its allied militias and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), no doubt, demonstrate the capability of these ground troops, more so in the case of former, whose battalions and companies, totaling many thousand personnel, ignominiously fled before a few thousand ISIS fighters in Mosul in 2014[10]; but their success might not have been possible without the support of awesome American aerial power and its Special Forces. American firepower has played an instrumental role in dismantling bases and networks of ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. The role of American airstrikes has been indispensable in tipping the balance against ISIS. It is taken with a bit of skepticism that Iraqi security forces with their budding capacity are strong enough to take on ISIS on their own, without seeking American support, creating an apprehension that ISIS may return in a new incarnation, rendering the fragile gains squandered should US forces dramatically leave the battlefield[11].

Options for ISIS

One of the distinguishing features of ISIS as a terrorist organization has been its control of large physical spaces. It established its credibility as a strong militant group, with a committed cadre that could stake on government forces and survive setpiece battles. But it also made it more vulnerable when faced with stronger powers and greater technology. Drones, thermal imaging and jets made its strategy of waging a

conventional battle a liability, as was illustrated in the battle of Kobani in northern Syria in 2014. American firepower with Kurdish militias on the ground took a huge toll on ISIS. The recent weekly newsletters of ISIS and its battle tactics in Raqqa indicate that it is evolving its fighting strategy. Al-Naba, its weekly newsletter, acknowledges the mistake of giving conventional battle to stronger forces, in the process depleting its hard-earned arms as well as ammunitions and fighters. Moreover, in the battle of Raqqa, ISIS has been careful to form small groups in each district to engage Syrian Democratic Fighters (SDF), rather than fighting like a conventional army of a state[12]. After losing its territories, ISIS might resort to classic guerilla warfare in both Syria and Iraq. It started as a guerilla force, biding its time and preying on chaos and disorder prior to gobbling up half of Syria and one-third of Iraq.

In addition to its physical control of territories in Iraq and Levant, ISIS has been able to expand its ideological tentacles. Chechen Islamists pledged allegiance to ISIS and established four *walayas* (Governates) in Caucasus[13]. In Libya militant groups affiliated with ISIS command fighters, ranging from two to ten thousand, depending upon which intelligence or international reports one cites, control a space of 120-mile. Splinter groups of Taliban, Jamaat ul-Ahrar[14] and Boko Haram of Nigeria too have sought ideological support from ISIS[15]. And in Afghanistan they have a substantial presence in the east of the country[16]. Will foreign fighters go to a new battlefield? Will ISIS itself seek a new sanctuary in these areas?

As discussed before, Al-Qaeda was the predecessor of ISIS in Iraq and initially the latter fought under the flag of Nusra Front, affiliated to Al-Qaeda until July 2016, and in Syria before their rift in 2014. Nusra Front has rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the most important component of Hayat Tahrir a-Sham, a

coalition of Syrian rebel forces, controlling the Idlib province in northwest Syria, one of the last remaining rebel-held provinces[17]. In recent weeks, it has been pounded by Syrian and Russian firepower[18] and America too has targeted Fateh al-Sham since late 2014[19]. Can the corresponding pressures by Russia and its allies and America and its partners on Fateh al-Sham and ISIS respectively, prove to be a potential gel for both terrorist groups? Yes, they have serious differences as to their different visions of caliphate and battle tactics, but a marriage of convenience between them should not be ruled out. Did not Iraqi security forces and Baathists, purportedly secular in outlook, become bedfellows with Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Holy War) to fight invading forces?

Reading the Potential Fault lines in Post-ISIS Middle East

ISIS seems to be at the end of its ropes. But the 'vanishing' threat of ISIS brings into fore the geo-political faultlines lurking in the back and glossed over for quite some time under the need of eradicating ISIS. The fight against the latter has cloaked geo-strategic interests of many regional states and ethnic groups. As the menace of ISIS recedes, these fault lines surface.

The clear manifestation of this is the referendum in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq[20]. The referendum was as much about Kurdish peoples' aspiration to have an independent state of their own as it was to extract substantial leverage from Baghdad and international powers, more specifically America, with whom Peshmerga forces have fought to drive out terrorist groups in northern Iraq, in a post-ISIS Middle East. The common threat of ISIS and American tutelage brought Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga together, temporarily putting under the carpet their differences and

mutual distrust. But as ISIS sneaks into the deserts in western Iraq, the sources of tension between Erbil and Baghdad come out into the open. These are largely to Kurdish demand to exports its own oil, conflicting claims over Kirkuk, and most importantly Barzani's demand to make Iraqi Kurdistan an independent state[21].

With the exception of Israel, all other regional and international powers have opposed the referendum for an independent Kudistan[22]. Iran has closed its borders with northern Iraq[23], while Turkey has warned it that Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) would starve if it closed it ports to Kurdish exports. Most of Kurdish oil goes through Turkish port of Ceyhal and Israel is its main importer. Iraqi and Turkish forces have both jointly conducted military exercises in the wake of this referendum[24].

In the eastern Syria, America and its partners and Russia, Iran and Syrian government forces are fighting ISIS in al-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor respectively. But the 'Scramble for East' is not just to annihilate ISIS but to have control over border areas with Iraq. Since the Syrian uprising, it would be first time Syrian state would have control over its eastern borders. Moreover, this would enable Iran to have a contiguous link from Tehran to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus. This power play has brought Shia militias in direct confrontation with American forces.

American policy, at best, is ambiguous. One of its purported foreign policy goals in Syria in recent times has been to deny Iran this contiguous link, which could possibly threaten its allies in the region. Jordan and Israel are averse to the prospect of Iran or its supported groups having a physical presence in their immediate neighborhood. But America has halted its CIA and Pentagon-led programs to support rebel forces that includes groups that have a presence in these regions[25].

American Special Forces are fighting with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against ISIS in Deir ez-Zor. It is an open secret that People's Protection Units (YPG) is the predominant group in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and is affiliated to People Workers Party (PKK), declared a terrorist organization by Turkey, US and EU. For Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), American aerial cover and the presence of American Special Forces on the ground not only help them defeat ISIS but also secure Kurdish majority regions from across the border attacks by Turkey and potentially from Syrian government. The indispensability of American forces in Syria for Kurdish object of having an autonomous Kurdish region in the north explains their consent to fight alongside America in Al-Raqqa, an Arab majority province. This has soured Turkish-US relations. In August 2016, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield to clear ISIS from Jarabulus, but its geo-strategic rationale was to deny YPG to have geographical contiguity among its three cantons of Kobani, Qamshla and Afrin in northern Syria[26]. As a counter-measure to American snub of severing its ties with YPG, Turkey has come close to Iran and Russia and has been an instrumental part of recently concluded Astana talks, which established four de-escalation zones in Syria[27].

As America inches close to its goal of defeating ISIS in Syria, the future dynamics of its relations with both Turkey and Syrian Kurds gain greater importance. What incentive does America have to perpetuate its support to Kurds after the ISIS has been defeated? Will Syrian Kurds be marooned and left in the lurch just like Iraqi Kurds, who were instigated by America to rise up against Saddam only to turn its back when the dictator unleashed brute violence on them? An autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria is a common threat to both Syria and Turkey; how will Peoples Protection Units (YPG) ensure the survival of its three cantons in the absence of American forces?

Will America be able to dance a delicate balance by giving tacit assurance to Kurds without further antagonizing Turkey? The significance of these questions increases manifold because Syrian Kurdish forces are represented neither in Geneva peace talks nor in the Astana Pact. They rely on their benefactor to maintain their autonomous cantons in northern Syria.

Conclusion

ISIS is now a shadow of its former self; it has been driven out from most of the areas it once controlled and its experiment in governance has been a disaster. Iraqi forces have come a long way from their debacle in Mosul in 2014. For the first time in many years, Syrian government with the help of Russian forces and Iranian-supported militias is trying to consolidate its gains by expanding east and confronting ISIS. To put it succinctly, ISIS is all but defeated both in Syria as well as in Iraq. But the capacity of terrorist organizations to revitalize and revive themselves in ever-evolving manifestations should be cause for caution and reason enough to take the prognostications of an imminent doom of ISIS with a pinch of salt. It is important to bear in mind, ISIS nurtured in the chaos and disorder resulting from the two broken states. Iraq and Syria have somehow managed to bring in a semblance of stability and the governments of both states display a level of confidence not seen few years back, but this semblance of stability and peace is largely attributed to foreign intervention. Both Syrian and Iraqi governments would have been unable to turn the tide against rebel forces and terrorist groups themselves without Russian and American firepower. This military turnover has yet to be complemented by an inclusive political vision. As long as political disenfranchisement and social discontent remain, enduring peace will elude both countries.

It is also important to take into account the fact that Jihadi landscape in Middle East is much more than ISIS. Even, if ISIS is defeated tomorrow, Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups will still dot the map of this region, especially in areas that are war-torn and crisis-prone. Moreover, the territorial setbacks for ISIS have pushed to the surface the geopolitical rivalries of different states and ethnic groups. Unless managed amicably and politically resolved, these differences could possibly prove to be a new source of conflagration in the region.

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Endnotes

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