

The Islamic State's Challenge to the International System

Written by Christian Cali

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CHRISTIAN CALI, AUG 21 2014

The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, or "Islamic State", is a square challenge to the international system. Simply, it is the most brutal, most determined foe of the civilized world since the end of the Second World War. The State is actually stateless: it is a cross-border phenomenon with leadership that is translating its military momentum into recruiting momentum in order to firmly root the proclaimed Caliphate from northern Iraq through eastern Syria and beyond any border. Its rapid rise and strength presents a challenge to the Westphalian era of international affairs. This article, based on months of monitoring of ISIS communications, explores the implications of the new State and identifies the trends in international affairs that facilitated its rise.

The Islamic State is a challenge to the entire international system. The State very simply follows transnational Sharia to a T. Its leadership rejects practically all of the international norms built over decades in the post-First World War era and founded on the sovereign state system dating to the Treaty of Westphalia. The ancient philosophy of the Islamic State and its transformation into a cross-border entity is not reconcilable with the state system upon which most international relations theory is constructed.

Considering the group's brutality, we tend to become distracted by its propaganda and intent to spread fear, but another core matter of concern is that this element is becoming the first modern transnational movement with a home base that it is fanatically determined to retain. This makes the entity completely unwilling to negotiate within the international system or act as a rational actor in anything resembling how international relations practitioners are accustomed to framing inter-state affairs.

Yes, the Islamic State is brutal in a medieval way, but it is defensive about argumentation rooted in Islamic theory. The fighters of the Islamic State seem to fear death less than any adversary I can fathom – they simply have accepted that path and attribute death to God's will. Yet, they seem upset and stirred on social media fora when they are challenged based on history or theology. Islamic scholars and Islamic historians should take note, and there should be a collective effort by capable scholars to firmly debate the principles of the State. If anything, such an effort may help stem the rising tide of new recruits.

At the end of the day, their movement is one of "Muslim honor" – they truly believe the only way to restore the glory denied to so many generations of Muslims is to return to the origins of the religion (*sala*). These origins are keys to the philosophical debate, yet a matter best not addressed in detail by the west.

The Islamic State will not relinquish control of its territory unless its members are captured or killed. The new "Caliphate" is organized into about nine states that cover land along portions of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, such as Ar Raqqa, Nineweh, Kirkuk, etc. The members of ISIS firmly believe that this is a city-organized Caliphate and have organized it as such. Any nation within the established international system, including western states, that challenge the existence of the Islamic State will become its enemy and subject to retaliation.

Most likely, the Islamic State will strive to possess weapons of mass destruction and the means to employ such weapons.

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The Islamic State is not at all static in terms of membership and for the near future will likely attract thousands more recruits principally from the Middle East, but also from all regions of the world.

To understand how this burgeoning state has come to challenge the international system, one must understand the interplay between key trends that have allowed it to fester:

Syria

The savage civil war in Syria catalyzed the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria into a completely cold-blooded organization. Its fighters are battle hardened, have endured great hardship, and allowed the organization to develop a cadre of tested commanders who inspire new recruits. The Syrian conflict was and is so awful that generations of youth in that torn country are susceptible to previously incomprehensible fanaticism.

The Youth Bulge

About 65 percent of the population in the Middle East region is under 30, which has fed into the Syria factor (above).

Prisons

There is just something toxic about prisons in the region – they have basically served as schools for radicalization. In what is now standard procedure for jihadist groups, prisons are “liberated” to free their compatriots when the extremist movement takes new territory.

Decentralized Communications

The transnational nature of modern communications allows for borderless support. Fifty years ago, it would take some time to understand that an Islamic State was calling for engineers to emigrate to the Caliphate; now anyone with access to the internet can become a potential recruit. The Islamic state communicates in a very “flat” manner – its operational objectives are freely posted on Twitter or justpaste.it.

Corruption and Repression

The recruits to the Islamic State are reactionaries against the establishment in mostly Middle Eastern countries, where they view “hypocrites” (*munafiqeen*) as illegitimate and corrupt. Those members that reside in western countries report feeling trapped and outcast, which results in their own self-repression and isolation.

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This is not the adversary of 2006-2008 Iraq; this is a more fanatical, more entrenched, better equipped force that has a radical commitment to the territory it has captured. Each day, the Islamic State throws a barrel of gasoline onto an already raging sectarian war that may plague the Middle East for decades.

About the author:

Christian Cali is a U.S. Foreign Service Officer currently assigned to Washington, DC. Before joining the Foreign Service, Cali was a counter-terrorism desk officer and military officer with two tours in Iraq and deployments to Afghanistan and Haiti. Christian holds a bachelor's from the University of Michigan and a master's from the Fletcher School. These views are written in a private capacity and are not necessarily reflective of U.S. policy.

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