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The World as Seen from Raqqa

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Summary

In an attempt to understand the psychology of the West's adversaries in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, this briefing asks the question, what does the wider world look like when seen from within the Islamic State group? Setting to one side the enormous political and economic deficiencies of the 'host' countries of the Middle East, it examines some of the contemporary and historic perceptions of the West's relations with the Islamic and Arab worlds, and how these may have influenced IS strategy, particularly its 2015 shift from territorial expansion to attacks on and within Western states.

Introduction

Al-Qaida has now been largely superseded by the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the new movement is proving to be uncomfortably resilient. In such circumstances it is a useful analytical tool to visualise how the world might appear from an IS perspective. This can all too easily prove controversial because it appears to give more credibility to a brutal and uncompromising movement than it even remotely deserves. Even so, it has a value and is an approach that should not be dismissed if one wants to try and understand the reasons for the resilience and use such reasoning to aid in developing policies that are more likely to ensure its decline.

This briefing seeks to do just that, and takes as an example the view of the world as it might be seen through the eyes of an utterly convinced supporter of the movement in Raqqa, the movement's de facto capital in northern Syria, who might be engaged in the planning of its operations.

Context

In the past eighteen months IS has come under sustained air attack from coalition forces in many thousands of air strikes that are claimed to have killed well over 20,000 of its supporters. Given that most reports of the paramilitary strength of the movement suggest active forces of around 30,000 at any one time, one would expect the movement to be near collapse by this stage. In practice it certainly has suffered some reversals in Iraq but far fewer in Syria, and is making clear progress in Libya while attracting the support of movements across North and West Africa and South Asia.

There is little evidence of much decline in the recruitment of supporters from outside the immediate Middle East, although their movement into Syria and Iraq appears to have become more difficult in the last year, and the conclusion of most analysts is that IS is nowhere near facing defeat. Given these circumstances the attitudes within IS may be assessed in terms of internal organisation, historical perspectives and more immediate circumstances.

Organisation

The movement as it exists in Syria and Iraq has three components with considerable overlap. Central is the religious dimension, especially within the leadership ranks, and this is based on a very narrow and rigid interpretation of the Wahhabi-orientated purist tradition within Sunni Islam. This is eschatological in looking beyond this life and believing that individual lives are merely part of a much greater divine purpose. This religious outlook permeates the other two components, albeit variably.

The first of these is the considerable paramilitary expertise born of years of fighting in Iraq and Syria as well as Libya, Chechnya and Afghanistan. Most significant are those Iraqis who fought and survived the shadow or dirty war with the elite Special Forces of the coalition's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), especially over the period 2004-2007.

The second is the cohort of technocrats who organise the economy in the areas under IS control. Many of these are ex-Baathists from the Saddam Hussein era in Iraq, including some who remain bitter at their exclusion from employment from the time of Paul Bremer's leadership of the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 and 2004. Many of these paramilitaries and technocrats may be deeply religious, with some of the former developing that outlook when imprisoned in Iraq, but others are more secular if mostly imbued with a hatred of the foreign occupiers in Iraq and, more recently, of the pro-Shia policies of post-Saddam Iraqi governments, especially that of Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014).

Historical Perspective

A broad historical perception of Western control extends far beyond the Middle East and South Asia and persists even more than half a century after the end of the colonial era. This builds on a sense that the colonial period was one of outright exploitation which still has a major power legacy, even if that is seen as being shared with local elites. This is poles apart from a common outlook in Western states that they represent more advanced forms of organisation and are, put simply, "the good guys" in an unstable world.

The old West African quip that "the sun never set on the British Empire because God didn't trust the British in the dark" may raise a smile now but represents a view that would have been entirely foreign to British society during the colonial era. Moreover, this world-wide perception of Western control extends markedly to the United States to a degree that would have been entirely unrecognised by the supporters of the Project for the New American Century a couple of decades ago, just as it no doubt is by Trump, Cruz and others in the current presidential contest.

Across much of the Middle East the belief in the insidious nature of external influence is aided by the artificial division of the region a century ago during the Sykes-Picot era, and the later failure of Arab Nationalism and the subsequent rise of autocracies, often with their excessively close links with Western states, particularly among the oil-rich western Gulf States. Furthermore, Israel is seen as a Western construct which persistently acts with impunity against its Arab neighbours and the millions of Palestinians under occupation.

Beyond this is a much broader historical perspective which sees the current condition in the Middle East in the context of Islam in relative decline when compared with the regional caliphates of times past. Some will look back just to the Ottoman Caliphate

(1362-1924 CE) but others will recall the first two centuries of the remarkable Abbasid Caliphate (broadly 750-1250 CE) which really was the centre of civilisation in the wake of the collapse of Rome and before the rise of Europe. The fact that the capital of that Caliphate was Baghdad, so recently occupied by “Crusader” forces, does not go unnoticed.

In short, this kind of perspective, with Islam seen as under threat by the West, is a mirror image of the common Western perception of Islam as **the** threat, but to IS supporters they will point to other recent evidence. Central are the Western occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and the military interventions in Libya, Mali, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan and elsewhere, as well as the arming of repressive autocracies. All these actions provide proof of the real intentions of the ‘far enemy’ of the Western states, especially the US.

It all adds up to a radically different world view which is so at variance with that of most Western governments – not easy to accept but necessary to recognise in understanding IS resilience, bearing in mind that from a religious perspective this is a war that could take a century and is one in which the lives of individuals, even leaders, are of little consequence.

Current Environment

Against this background and in the wake of the intensity of the coalition air assault, these very attacks can readily be seen as confirming all the underlying beliefs that IS is the true guardian of Islam, the preparer for a new Caliphate and perhaps even engaging in a potentially apocalyptic conflict with unbelievers.

Yet this is reinforced in very specific ways by current circumstances. At the centre of these is the very impact of those assaults. If one particular air raid kills twenty people in a town in Iraq or Syria, the impact of that extends way beyond the event and has little if anything to do with whether those killed are paramilitaries or civilians.

Any one person killed will have immediate family – husband or wife, mother, father, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins – all grieving and bitter at what has been done by the ‘crusaders’. This is not different from the experience of families of Westerners killed, but is scarcely recognised in the West. Moreover, the death may well be seen as part of a noble war, and will be felt by scores of more distant relatives and friends and publicised and celebrated through the ubiquitous social media. It may well lead to dismay and depression but may also lead to a determination for revenge and retaliation.

Moreover, this feeds into a far more embedded narrative stemming from the more than two hundred thousand people killed, mainly in Iraq and Afghanistan, in wars initiated by the West, albeit partly in response to the 9/11 atrocities. Even 9/11, though, was seen by many as an acceptable response to decades if not centuries of being on the defensive. Furthermore, the ability of IS to recruit from many countries beyond Iraq and Syria, and especially from among diasporas in the West, is seen as proof of an endeavour that stretches across the world and gives hope for a global process of radical change.

Implications

To repeat the point made at the start, looking at the world through IS eyes does not mean in any way accepting it as a valid movement. Instead it may help understand the behaviour of the movement, especially how it responds to reversals. It has been suggested, for example, that there is a specific reason for the recent change in IS

strategy from an emphasis on extending the geographical area of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria to encouraging and even directly planning attacks overseas. This, it is thought, might be a valid motive for the attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis, the killing of foreign tourists in the Sousse resort of northeast Tunisia, the multiple attacks in Paris, the destruction of the Russian Metrojet and the attacks last month in Turkey and Indonesia.

That is one explanation but another, seen from an IS perspective, is that this is merely part of a longer term plan that may have been brought forward but was intended at some stage. Such attacks affecting countries such as France and Russia would have, as their major aim the stirring up of greater Islamophobia, ensuring the marginalisation of Muslim minorities and those affecting the likes of Tunisia and Egypt would also damage their Western-oriented tourist industries causing greater unemployment and consequent marginalisation. In both cases, the intended outcome is, in this rationale, making more young people willing to rally to the cause.

More generally, if we see IS and its world view in the way described here, we have to consider how it might affect our responses. The fundamental point here is the IS view that it is engaged in the historic awakening of what it considers to be true Islam. As such, and as the guardian of that true Islam, the more it comes under attack the more this “guardian” role becomes important. At the very least this suggests that seeing the control and eventual elimination of IS as an operation primarily dependent on military action is gravely misplaced.

The war against IS is barely two years old but it is part of a continuum, beginning with al-Qaida’s 1998 East African embassy bombings and US retaliation in Afghanistan and Sudan, that is heading towards its third decade. As such, it would be wise to be singularly cautious in relying on military action. A far more fundamental rethinking of approaches is necessary even if there is little sign of that at present.

About the Author

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