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The Islamic State is reshuffling balance of power in Middle East

Though its threat to the US and Europe is exaggerated, the IS' regional ambitions are tipping scales against Iran

by John Batchelor

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The Islamic State (IS), led by warlord Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Mosul, Iraq, is a long-term threat to the stability of the Middle East. It is unlikely to launch transnational threats against Europe or the United States unless provoked into specific acts of revenge, and therefore warnings by U.S. officials about IS terrorist operations overseas are overwrought.

The IS' regional effects are considerable. Chiefly, the IS has already succeeded in reordering battle lines and forcing the hegemony of Iran and Saudi Arabia into scrambled accommodations.

For example, Tehran is now supporting the Kurds of Irbil with weapons and intelligence, my sources report. In fact, Tehran is supporting the Kurds far more than the U.S. despite the boasting by Washington that it has launched approximately 100 airstrikes against IS forces. The Kurds are said to be short of everything except courage, and so far, the U.S. has not supplied the arsenal that the Kurds need to confront IS militants armed with the weapons they captured from the fleeing Iraqi army.

Tehran's immediate concern is to contain the IS by reinforcing the Shia militias defending Baghdad with support from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and by providing a

backstop to the Kurds in the north. Tehran is threatened by the feverish popularity of the IS' Takfiri ideology, which views anyone not slavishly obedient to the IS mission to recapture the 1,000-year-old caliphate called Abode of Islam to be hostile. Tehran sees such jihadism as capable of reviving Sunni extremism into a movement strong enough to offset its own Shia extremist ambitions and believes IS militants are capable of wrecking decades of its work shaping the region. The long-term battle for regional hegemony may well be fought in the recruiting arguments in Sunni neighborhoods from Amman to Cairo, Tunis to Madras and Paris to London. The crimes evident in the sadistic videos of IS mass executions of prisoners on social media are surprisingly as much for terrifying populations as for attracting young men to rally to the black flag of Takfiri jihadism.

At the same time, the battle of the two Islamic states does not preclude compromise. For example, the IS is landlocked and must depend on the consent of Tehran for supplies and access to the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean. Tehran and the IS, I am told, share the east-west roads through Iraq and Syria. This permits Tehran to resupply Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus: Tehran pays for its passage with weapons. The east-west arrangement also permits the IS to ship its oil trucks past the Assad regime defenses to market in the Damascus-to-Beirut corridor.

Makeshift alliances

The IS enjoys alliances of the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend variety. Both Turkey and Qatar, led by strong-handed and strategic ministers, support the IS with money and supplies in order to bolster their ambitions to establish a Sunni-led alliance that can roll back Tehran's Shiite ambitions to dominate the region. For Ankara, this is part of the Neo-Ottomanist school under newly elected President Recep Erdogan. For Qatar, the gambit represents open competition with Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Gulf.

The IS is well on its way to integrating strategically into a quickly changing landscape of competing regional powers.

There is compromise in this makeshift alliance as well: Turkey and Qatar support the Sunni militias battling the Assad regime and its Hezbollah and IRGC allies. This contributes to an inherent tension, because the al-Nusrah Front in the Syrian civil war is at odds with the IS, whose militants now fight in both Syria and Iraq. The Nusrah front is not to be discounted as an adversary, because it retains the allegiance of the ferocious Chechen Brigade. Some Chechens, in fact, have gone over to the IS, and I am told a major Chechen commander was recently killed in battle against the Kurds.

The so-called Free Syria Army is held in low regard as a fighting force by both Ankara and Doha. When Washington speaks of supporting a coalition of the Free Syrian Army, the Kurds and the Iraqi military's special forces, this is more aspirational than operational. The ethnic groups in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars, such as the Kurds, the Ismailists and the Yazidis, are not looking to offer military capabilities to the U.S. so long as Washington maintains its demand that its favorites in Baghdad dominate governance.

The Abode of Islam

The Islamic State's primary mission is to build a strong foundation in what it refers to as the Abode of Islam. The plan: Sweep away Jordan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Jordan is the next target after consolidating gains in Iraq and Syria, because Jordan's territory offers access to the northern tribes of Saudi Arabia. From there, its dreams are wildly ambitious: Lead a campaign that will range from Jerusalem all the way to the Iberian Peninsula in order to recapture the caliphate of Cordoba lost in 1492. The IS, according to Israeli political and military sources, is recruiting on the West Bank and in Gaza to launch attacks on Israel.

The U.S. and Europe are distant targets compared to the Islamic State's immediate enemies and plans. Nevertheless, U.S. officials are discussing airstrikes and combined operations to blunt the IS offensive. The White House's castigation of the IS as evil and a cancer after the beheading of kidnapped journalist James Foley has encouraged political leaders from both parties to comment angrily on the black-robed and masked jihadists in IS propaganda videos. Republican Rep. Paul Ryan wants Barack Obama's administration to provide a plan "to finish off" the group. Democratic former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a presumed presidential aspirant, has suggested that the White House failed to stem the IS when it chose not to intervene in Syria. Obama has warned Baghdad about the IS — telling them "the wolf's at the door" — and suggested that the U.S. needs "effective partners on the ground" to combat its ascendancy. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey has speculated that recent U.S. airstrikes have broken the group's momentum.

None of these political statements, however, describe military facts on the ground. The IS is well on its way to integrating strategically into a quickly changing landscape of competing regional powers that are planning swiftly and violently for a future without an effective U.S. presence.