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Assessing the ISIS threat one Year Later

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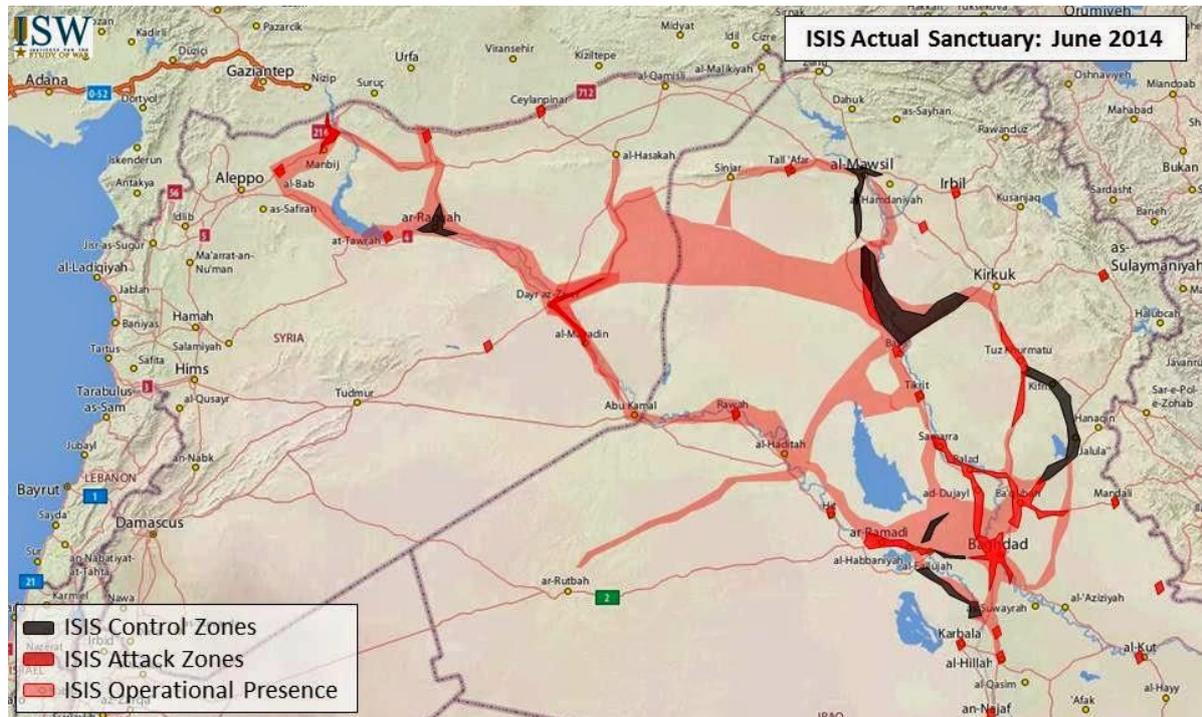
A year ago the world witnessed the swift advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. Though the emergence of the group was somewhat expected for those who have been following the regional developments of the past years it caught most of the world by surprise. At the same time, its brutal tactics, military victories, resilience, evolution and extreme ideology have led many to characterize it as the greatest regional and international security threat at the moment or the most dangerous Islamist threat contemporary history has seen.

Since June, 2014, ISIS managed to capture large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria thus abolishing, in certain locations, the Syria-Iraq border which the group does not recognize, along with the other great power-imposed borders in the region. In the course of the past year the “borders” of ISIS have changed (see maps no.1 & no.2) because of advances, retreats and the involvement of the international anti-ISIS coalition as well as local actors such as the Iraqi Kurdistan Peshmerga forces, the Syrian Kurdish YPG and various Shia groups in Iraq and Syria.

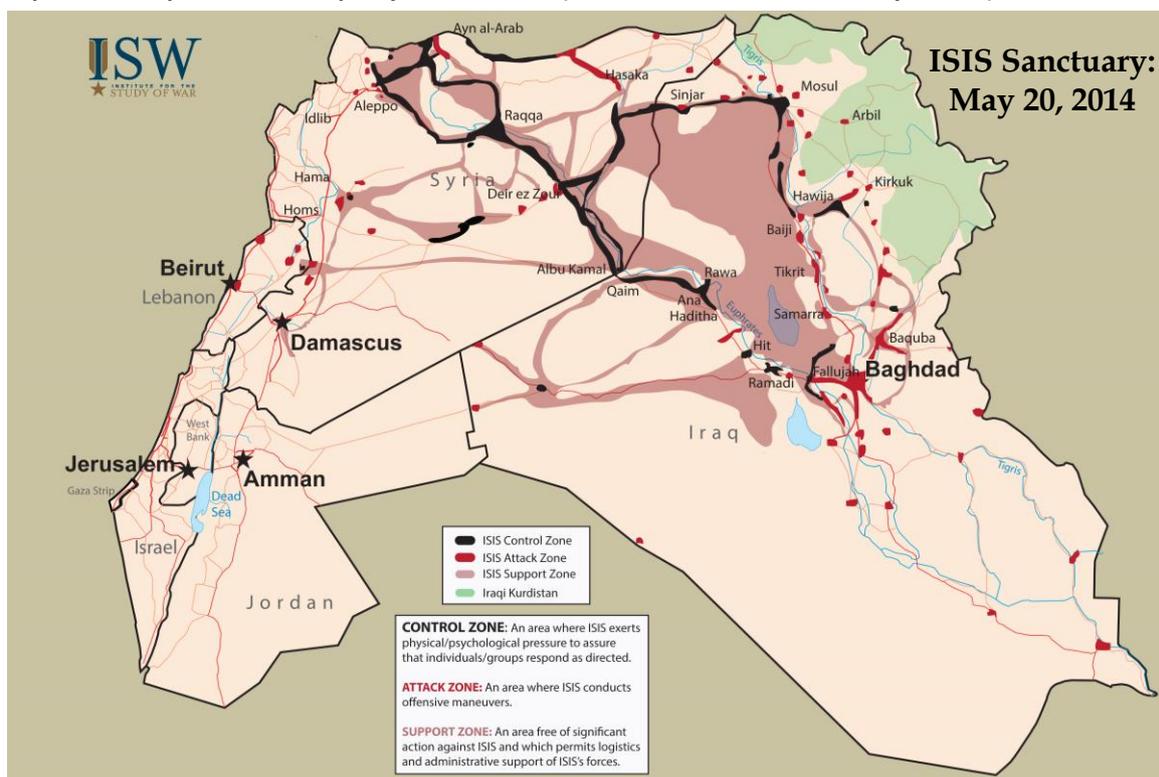
Given the dynamic with which ISIS launched its attacks last year, and the failure of the Iraqi and Syrian armies to respond adequately, one would assume that ISIS today would have been in a much more powerful position; that it would have even entered Baghdad and Damascus. Although the two capitals have been under this threat, ISIS has not had such great successes. To be sure, the group is not losing, but is not winning either. It has indeed increased its territories both in Syria and Iraq but the amount of territories controlled by ISIS does not correspond to the amount of population under

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the “governance” of the self-styled Caliphate. That is because the periphery of both Iraq and Syria, where most of ISIS’s presence is located, is scarcely inhabited and characterized to a great extent by desert terrain.



Map no. 1: ISIS presence in Iraq & Syria, June 2014 (Source: Institute for the Study of War)



Map no.2: ISIS presence in Iraq & Syria, May 2015 (Source: Institute for the Study of War)



Moreover, the recent counter-offensive of the Iraqi army with the help of Iran-backed Shia groups and Kurdish forces resulted in the defeat of ISIS in Tikrit which came with some territorial losses. Similarly, in the months-long dramatic battle of Kobane on the Turkey-Syria border, the Syrian Kurds with the help of the Peshmerga and other Arab groups managed to fend ISIS off thus preventing it from controlling another strategic location.

The Transformation of the Threat

In light of the above, it seems that although ISIS remains a security threat of great importance it will not be able to easily achieve its goals as is increasingly up against a multi-front resistance comprised by international and regional actors. The result is a war of attrition that affects and delays not only ISIS but the other groups as well. It also creates an environment where groups and actors of different or even conflicting interests align temporarily against ISIS. This dynamic might shift the balance of power against ISIS but it will eventually, especially in a post-ISIS Middle East, give rise to a situation where each group will claim its own share of power and territory thereby leading to more conflict and instability. This side-effect of ISIS has already manifested and it will attain a more central position to regional developments as the time goes by.

On a different level, it can be suggested that ISIS is no longer the greatest threat that the region is facing. Rather, the very precedent of its existence and the transnational character and capabilities of its extreme ideology are perhaps the most worrisome reality. More specifically, ISIS has managed to attract other Islamist extremist groups to pledge allegiance to its Caliphate and self-proclaimed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, with examples such as Libya's Ansar al-Sharia and Nigeria's Boko Haram. These groups and their operations are not new but they came to the fore because of their association with ISIS. Similarly, isolated persons or small groups in different countries of the world decide to pledge allegiance to ISIS and commit acts of terror as "lone wolves." This allows ISIS to claim responsibility and take credit for these attacks.



So far ISIS has claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks in Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Pakistan and Australia, among others.

Given this global-scale success of ISIS, it is very likely that should ISIS dissolve, other ideologically-similar groups will seek to take its place in an effort to further their goals or cause disruptions and destructions in the region, the western world and beyond. The threat of foreign fighters going back to their countries around the globe will also keep being of high risk as they may try to create or join local extremist clusters.

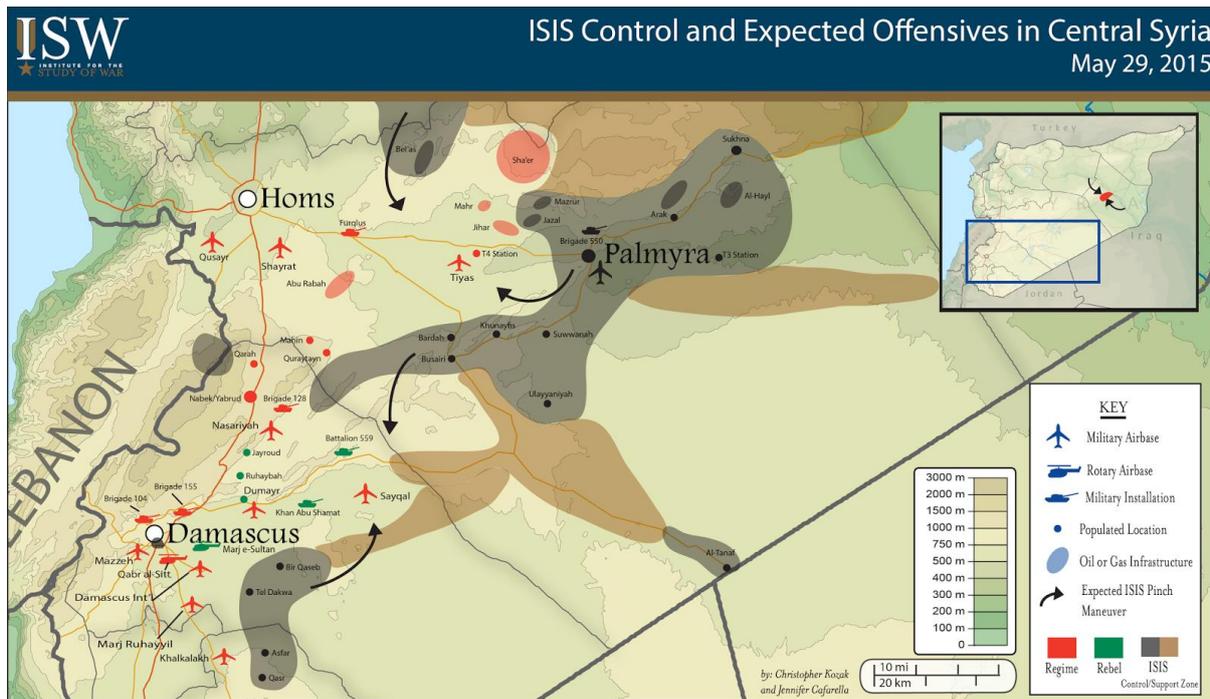
The Insisting Conventional Threat

Beyond the asymmetrical-ideological threat of ISIS, it seems that its conventional-military advances insist on being a great source of concern. Its latest success in Palmyra, Syria, after the withdrawal of the Syrian army, is a prime example. Palmyra is of strategic importance for a number of reasons, including its airbase and natural resources fields. The fact that the Syrian army withdrew can also be seen a success of ISIS and a weakness of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Yet, tactically, the Syrian army would prefer to dedicate its resources to the protection of big urban centers that are more populated such as nearby capital Damascus, Homs, and Hamah.

These are locations that ISIS will be approaching and to some extent encircling in the next weeks and months (see map no.3). Its goal is to establish communication lines between areas of control in and around Palmyra, outside Damascus, and outside Homs. If ISIS succeeds, it will effectively threaten the regime's power centers even as it will be closing in on the Lebanon-Syria borders. At the same time, ISIS will be closer to achieving maritime borders since Homs is 80 km away from the coastline and less than 100 km away from the coastal city of Tartus, where Russia's naval base is located.

Because of these prospects, fears are brewing that, having access to the Mediterranean Sea, ISIS will be able to more easily threaten other regional targets in southern Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Cyprus, North Africa, Greece and beyond. However this will not be an easy undertaking from ISIS's part not only because of the difficulty to attain naval

means but also because of the naval-military capabilities of concerned states such as Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and notably Russia which will not remain idle if its interests in the region are threatened.



Map no.3: ISIS Control and Expected Offensive in Central Syria, May 29, 2015
(Source: Institute for the Study of War)

Conclusions

Overall, ISIS managed to establish itself as an important Middle East actor and to impact the regional balances of power. Having acquired territories and control over them, it could be now seen as a quasi-state entity. In recent years this reality will have significant effects on the geopolitical map of the Middle East while it is very likely that state borders will keep changing. However, despite its success ISIS faces many obstacles, especially in Iraq. Likewise, in Syria, the regime forces, international airstrikes, Iranian forces, Hezbollah, the Kurds and other Sunni groups such as Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra will make it very difficult for ISIS to keep advancing at the same pace as one year ago. With the right approach ISIS could be defeated



within the next two or three years, though this does not entail the extinction of extremist groups or the non-emergence of other ISIS-like organizations.

The future of the Middle East and the long-term implications of the rise of ISIS will depend, among other things, on two main things: a) the demonstrated political will of concerned parties to practically counter ISIS and contribute to the social, political and economic development of the region; and b) their ability to manage or facilitate the goals and interests of the different factions (Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, etc.) that are involved in the conflict, primarily in Syria and Iraq.