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THE COLLAPSE OF ISIS IS IMMINENT AND INEVITABLE. THE QUESTION IS: HOW WILL IT HAPPEN?

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Al Baghdadi's major strategic failure has been his choice of the Fertile Crescent as the region for the establishment of his Khilafa. His dream of reestablishing a Sunni caliphate with roots in Iraq and Syria will eventually be crushed by the field's realities and only exposes his own lack of knowledge about the region. Not that a Sunni leadership would be impossible to carry on the lands of the ancient Omayyad and Abbasid's caliphates, but rather the intransigence and intolerance he, and his followers are using in order to realize it.

The main shared characteristic of the Fertile Crescent, despite the water resources that are greatly jeopardized today by foolish state policies, is the societal composition of the lands. There is not a single country, belonging to this set that is not composed of important and various minorities, in terms of religions, sects or communities. Creating a climate of violence, bordering on defiance, it has been a historical reality, particularly in the past centuries, that those communities have often opposed if not battled each other. Indeed, until al Baghdadi came along, never has any one community within these countries claimed a greater entitlement than the others to live in the land that they shared and even when they fought against each other, they never denounced their opponents as illegitimate.

For one reason, all the countries share a strong nationalistic sentiment that spreads within every stratus of the States as well as every community. al Baghdadi took the bet that in these Sunni majority countries he would enjoy a great support. First, in a brand new 2003 Iraq that foolishly marginalized the huge Sunni minority, then in Syria where this faith has long been kept away from power. He thought that

the sentiment of revenge and past glory would have given him strong roots in order to achieve his “mission”.

How Long Will Baghdadi's Gamble Work?

What Baghdadi didn't quite understand, is that he decided to settle in the very region that promoted pan-Arabism, not pan-Islamism. This particular Crescent has been for centuries the host of many beliefs, many faiths and many visions, all gathered together thanks to a pride of being the lands of wisdom, science and cultures. From Egypt to Iraq through Syria, not a country would be ashamed of its glorious History and its contributions to civilization. The unity that allowed these communities to live side by sides in good times and bad has been the unfailing conscience of belonging to these lands -allowing pan-Arabism to strongly shape and anchors in mentalities.

A few days ago, on the 20th of August 2014, a video appeared on [YouTube](#) in which an Australian radio anchorman claims to host the “overall military commander of the Islamic State,” Abu Omar al-Shishani who likes to boast that “everyday a couple of hundred [of fighters] from Europe come” . Abu Omar, whose real name is Tarkhan Batirashvili, is himself from Georgia and his war name al-Shishani stands for “the Chechen”. It is difficult to verify if **this “Shishani” is truly from Chechnya or Georgia which nonetheless underscores the reality of IS: an organization consisting mainly of foreigners with the exception for some in leadership positions.**

In order to understand the great frustrations al Baghdadi is about to face, it is important to understand the component of ISIS. ISIS is Al Qaeda in Iraq's outgrowth lead by Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden. After his death, Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri took over leadership, followed by Iraqi Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi and then by the actual leader of the Islamic State, Iraqi Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The relations between ISIS and al Qaeda as well as with the Syrian jihadist group Al Nusra front have been chaotic for months, culminating to a complete divorce and sometimes to direct [confrontations](#). In this fight, ISIS prevailed eventually over the Nusra Front in Syria. Until 2013, Al Nusra was the most successful force among the Syrian opposition. Now, Al Nusra is much more discreet thanks to the competition it faces from ISIS. This could also be one of the reasons the Western communities as well as the regional States did not firmly attack the nascent ISIS power, as it appeared that the mujahideen were doing a far better job at getting rid of the each other.

Thus far, Baghdadi's strategy has been to position his group in poor and rural zones in Iraq and Syria in order to exploit the frustrations of the forgotten Sunni population that have been specifically targeted and marginalized by Bashar al Assad and Nuri al Maliki respectively. It is undeniable that these rural societies embraced the cause of jihad, not because of the faith promoted by them even if they share the same dogma, but rather because of the promises of the destinies it could bring to them.

Though it is easy, it is to regard the conflict taking over the region solely in terms the Shia-Sunni religious divide, the reality is far more complex: as the main objective for the population is equal treatment and fair political representation within the stratus of governments.

This is the reason why in 2006, the “Sons of Iraq” movement emerged in the Iraqi province of al Anbar. In this western region of Mesopotamia the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi lies, strongholds of the Iraqi Sunni tribes of the Dulaim, the Shammar and many others composing the Tribe confederation. These tribes are also spread among Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Their unity relies on people rather than lands and they have never accepted the Sykes-Picot division of the Near East as they have roots and families across every border of the area.

When Al Qaeda settled in the al Anbar province during the 2003 US invasion, they hoped to find support by denouncing right away the Sykes-Picot divisions as a “filthy” Western plan to dominate Arabs destinies. This particular vision resonated among the tribes who fought the Western forces with all their hearts. But eventually as Paul Bremer was trying to create an Iraqi unity government, the tribes’ enthusiasm toward Al Qaeda’ fight decreased while the tribes hopes to be heard in Baghdad increased: their main objective. Surely al Qaeda’s command should have been astonished to see the defection, as it relied on a spiritual persuasion while the Iraqi Sunni only fought for their civic rights.

The Sons of Iraq or Sahwa as they are known were part of the famous Sunni Awakening movement, a coalition of tribes created to fight back al Qaeda whose strong presence in the al-Anbar province in 2005 was worrying to the tribes. The same ones that would fight side by side with some al Qaeda affiliated personal against the Coalition Forces in both deadly battles of Fallujah a year ago, were taking up weapons against their previous allies that started to jeopardize the tribes unity. However, al Qaeda back in 2004 did not yet mutate into ISIS and remained a “small player”. But the leading “team” was roughly the same. Funded and equipped by the US, the Sahwa enjoyed a great deal of victories and eventually prevailed against al Qaeda. The terrorist organization members were so angry at the Sahwas whom they considered treacherous, that they specifically targeted ex-Sahwa members a few months later in pay back operations, calling them “traitors among traitors”.

However, political miscalculation compounded by Baghdadi’s personal ambitions ruined it all.

The Geographical Reasons

Despite the fact that without the Sahwa, the al Anbar province would never have gotten rid of al Qaeda’s threat and the fact that it was the tribes who had shed their blood to face opponents that even Maliki’s own Iraqi forces couldn’t vanquish, Maliki didn’t grant the tribes what was agreed upon and kept on ignoring them. With the tribes feeling abandoned, Baghdad’s policy would now be considered the tribes’ major opponent. Leaders of the tribes such as Ali Hatem Prince of the Dulaim, who almost got killed by Al Qaeda, would henceforth oppose Maliki’s governance. First, it was through the political process and then eventually by taking up weapons. Following the US withdrawal in 2011, for his part, Maliki tried to take control of the al Anbar province where locals had organized sit-ins and protests against his power.

The turning point of the current ISIS crisis started on the 30th of December 2013. A year before during December 2012, the Sunni Ministry of Finance Rafi [Hiyad al-Issawi](#), who survived 3 different [attacks](#) in two months, found refuge in Fallujah among the tribes while “150 of his guards and staff members had been arrested”. The tension in the political arena was already high since in 2011, the Sunni Vice

President Tariq al-Hashimi had to flee Baghdad and find refuge first in [Iraqi Kurdistan](#) and then in [Turkey](#), facing an arrest warrant for murder. Numerous figures were accusing Maliki of a political witch-hunt against his opponents - resulting in a shared distrust toward Baghdad.

[Sit-ins and protests](#) took place in al Anbar province particularly in Fallujah and Ramadi where the locals considered the Iraqi police with defiance. [Demonstrators](#) asked for the release of Sunni prisoners as well as equal jobs opportunities. In order to gain support in face of the Sunni social claims, Maliki decided to use a stronger vocabulary, making accusations that these demonstrations were orchestrated by Al Qaeda elements that aimed to destabilize the country. However, the movement gained little support out of the Sunni community as Basra based Shia leader Moqtada al Sadr stood by the demonstrators.

The 30th of December 2013, Iraqi police decided [to intervene](#) in order to disperse the sit-in in Ramadi and resulted in exchange of fire that left at least 10 casualties. The tension has been palpable during all the month of December, when 4 policemen were killed in Fallujah, but the 30th was the real trigger. Suddenly the tribes woke up and Fallujah blazed.

The current situation in Iraq has been directly caused by this incident: since then the violence escalated dramatically. The tribes decided to fight the Iraqi government and in this fight they have found in ISIS a useful ally. Fighting the same opponent yet not for the same reasons.

Tribes' fighters enjoy an US made and provided equipment that they inherited from the Awakening period. Humanly outsizeing ISIS, they are in fact the ones who gained numerous battles on the road toward Mosul. Through their journey, they found others allies like ex-baath personals led by [Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri](#) or other conglomerated factions such as Hamas in Iraq or the 1920 Revolution Brigade. A disparate coalition of forces that allows the insurgency to grow dramatically. This strange unification of forces is yet not driven by the same goals. Some are just Saddam's nostalgic, or rather the positions they enjoyed under his rule, others want Maliki to step down, or rather political rights and representation, and some want the Sharia law, a world caliphate or rather a way to have a realm without deserving one and benefiting from a chaotic situation to realize their childish dreams.

As for the crowd supporting it, the motivations are as disparate. Between those who had jobs and [lost it all because of the war](#) or the overturn of power and those who never had a job and flying from the West hoping to live a life without working too hard, but just replicating what they were doing in their living rooms playing Call of Duty. This gives the reality of those famous "couple of hundred from Europe come" Shishani is so boasting about. Unstable young kids that will be disillusioned in couple of months and go back even more unstable and lost than when they actually came in. Adventures or psychopathic blood lovers who don't quite realize that they are destroying countries and with it destroying lives. These people will soon enough open to the reality and will prove themselves as being inconsistent on a long term battlefield.

Maliki's Convenient Labeling of Opponents

Since the beginning of August 2014, Maliki is no longer Prime Minister of Iraq and has been replaced by al-Abadi whose election holds much hope for a brighter future. If Abadi acts according to logic and finally respects the minorities, this “joyful” coalition known as ISIS will vanish in no time.

It is undeniable that ISIS grew a lot during the past couple of months. It is also undeniable that the group seized funds and modern weaponry. Yet, it is also true that the tribal fighters taking part in that uprising are easily labeled as “Al Qaeda” or “ISIS”, as it was Maliki’s main strategy in order to drive worldwide condemnation upon the legitimate demands carried out by tribes. Though Maliki is not there anymore, the same labeling strategy is used. Does it mean that ISIS is a really big organization or that genuine ISIS is better at propaganda and managing to drive the lighting spot upon it? A quick look at social media and one can find accounts like Shamalmalahem Media, al Mustaqbal or even al-Furqān Media which displays 60 minutes of high quality documentaries on their successes. With the [Vice series](#) of inside documentaries in Syria’s city of Raqqa, ISIS even showed that they have mastered the art of using mainstream media’s voracious appetite for sensationalism. –leaving no doubt how important the communication battle is for ISIS. A communication battle is not only driven to attract new followers/fighters but also to spread fear and disinformation.

The Number of Recruits and Speculations

Trying to identify the real ISIS hardcore personnel from other groups engaged all together in Iraq today is very complicated. In June 2014, The Economist predicted that ISIS may have up to [6,000 fighters in Iraq](#). Two months later in August, some figures claimed that ISIS is composed of [30,000 fighters in Iraq](#). The vast difference in these numbers could signify several things. First, it implies that ISIS managed to attract more than 24,000 fighters in less than 2 months, to which we have to add that during these 2 months period, never before was ISIS more closely monitored by international community. Second, there is also the possibility that the sources citing these differing numbers are not talking about the same fighters. The highest figure may be mixing ISIS mujahideen together with other groups that are fighting alongside but have a completely different agenda while the lowest figure may be referring to actual ISIS mujahideen who embrace the Caliphate.

It is interesting to note that in the al Anbar province alone, where all the troubles began in January 2014, the Sahwa alone [were composed](#) of more than 30,000 fighters. Of course, all of the Sahwa did not side with mujahideen. The question however, is how much did?

Linking the geographical source of the insurgency, Al-Anbar to Maliki’ labeling of anyone opposing him as terrorists, could it be possible that what we call ISIS fighters are in fact largely tribesmen? Could what is called the Islamic State be a disunited coalition of forces with complete strategies and goals?

If so, what would actually remain of ISIS if the tribesmen gave up, or worse, change sides now that Maliki is down?

What's Next?

This little adventure of the ISIS could end now. First, the money seized in Mosul could be marked and the channels dried up in order to freeze the financial capabilities of the ISIS. Even if profitable now, the oil production fields [could soon be useless](#) for the IS, first because it is becoming harder to smuggle it out even with traditional middle men who wouldn't dare selling this "dirty Oil", as they would be too scared of the international community. What will happen to the ones who find themselves accused of helping the IS? These are usually businessmen, not crazy fanatics and could not seek for shelter anywhere as every country is committed, on paper at least, to crush the ISIS.

Second, because ISIS doesn't have the capabilities of dealing with the very complicated industry of oil and gas. Oil and gas production is a highly technical activity which requires constant maintenance and care. Huge quantities of money have to be injected in order to make transportation and refining effective. With their conquests, ISIS members have forced specialized workers to flee, and they now have to deal with production alone. Their [attempt to hire](#) qualified personal and their call for help has exposed their limits. They should have taken [Iran](#) as a great example regarding that matter. Facing an embargo the country struggles to keep its oil capacities intact and deeply lack the funds and human resources to succeed in that field. So now imagine facing international blockade instead of Western embargo. This helps to illustrate the difficult situation ISIS has put itself in regarding the resources it hoped to exploit. The situation is so dire that they have barely acquired any profits out of the oil they possess and are now forced to sell it locally to truck drivers, farmers or citizens.

Also, for the first time in this past century, Iran, Saudi, US, Europe, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Israel and the Gulf countries are all on the same page regarding ISIS. Some are more concerned than the others but still, the movement is there. Iran is already intervening in the East part of Iraq. Turkey, a NATO country, will not dare authorize oil coming from ISIS held fields even if this oil has been the main reason of diplomatic tension between Baghdad and Ankara for the past years. Kurds are already militarily engaged and European countries have committed themselves to providing them with weapons. In the meantime, the US has bombed the Sinjar area and Syria [calls](#) for states to collaborate as some [voices](#) in the West call for a dialogue with Assad's Syria.

The game is changing already, but what will definitely put an end to ISIS, would be the tribes fighting them. They are deeply involved in Iraqi and Syrian communities and only thanks to them can IS lose its locals roots. The locals themselves are getting fed up with ISIS, who imposes upon them rules and regulations they barely understand and don't wish to live under. The extremist religious rules implemented by ISIS gravely oppose the way of life of the locals and without the support of the locals, IS stands to lose it all, finding itself being crushed by all sides, externally as well as internally.

These locals embraced the fight against Baghdad or Damascus does not support the deportation or ethnic cleansing of the other communities based on their faiths, for example the Yazidis. After all, they have been living side by side with other sects or religions that they consider to be compatriots not foreigners.

This leads to another great mistake by al-Baghdadi: his reliance on foreign fighters that will eventually be viewed by the local population as invaders. These Afghans, Pakistanis, Eastern and Western Europeans, and Somalis fighters who joined force with ISIS will not be welcome much longer in the

Levant. Populations don't like their lives to be dictated by "know it all" foreigners who think they know more about Islam than they do. Especially in the Levant where two of the most prestigious caliphates took place centuries ago. Iraqi and Syrians have nothing to be taught about Islam by others or worse, the newly converted. It is their ancestors who fought the crusaders, not the ancestors of all these sudden "anti-crusader" fighters.

As the thought "what are they all doing in my country?" grow up in the minds of the locals, it will spell the end for the ISIS and it will vanish as suddenly as it came.

Already, this idea is beginning to make itself apparent, as some tribes announced they would fight ISIS. Soon enough, the popular support for ISIS will flail and with it will the so-called Khalifa.

Forecasts

When ISIS loses its domestic supporters, it will be defeated on the Iraqi ground, and their few forces will have to split and hide within the villages whose inhabitants will not protect them. Bombs will fall onto the last ISIS strongholds while Iraqi militaries alongside tribes will take over Western Iraq. Kurds will deal with the North and will use this opportunity to enlarge their territories, with Kirkuk never up for referendum bargaining again. Mosul will be divided into 3 sectors, the Kurds', the Iraqi army and the tribes that will refuse to withdraw from the second largest city in Iraq in which they have always held a strong presence. Fallujah and Ramadi after many dealings will fall back into the hands of the tribes. Samarra will fall to Sadr or al Hakim's Shia hands and **Iran will** take the opportunity of implementing stronger roots in Eastern Iraq, particularly the Marsh region where it will champion the cause of the Shia fishermen community benefiting from the close presence of next door oil fields.

ISIS leaders will find their way into Syria back to Raqqa. When that happens, a difficult choice will emerge. Or the pursuit of the strikes to put a final end to the ISIS adventure or decide that the group is weak enough. If the latest is chosen, Assad will never defeat completely ISIS and will have to accept a partition of Syria. The greatest losers of the adventure would therefore be the Free Syrian Army that will definitely vanish because of lack of territory left.

In the meantime, Iraqi Kurdish leaders will take the opportunity of separating their territory from Iraq by blaming the country to have brought all the calamities upon them for the past 50 years. It will usher the birth of Kurdish state which will also encompass Syrian part as the latter will still face instability. This will make Kurdistan one of the most resourceful countries in the Middle East and the 1923 treaty of Lausanne will at last be fulfilled.

Naturally, this will eventually provoke others tensions in the region.