

CREST

After Islamic State

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REGIONAL GUIDES TO LIFE AFTER ISLAMIC STATE

JOAS WAGEMAKERS

JORDAN

IF THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS) IS DEFEATED AS A TERRITORIAL ENTITY, THE MAIN ASPECT THAT SETS IT APART FROM AL-QAEDA – ITS CLAIM TO BE A STATE WITH ACTUAL TERRITORY – WILL BE GONE. THIS MEANS IS WILL NO LONGER BE ABLE TO INVITE MUSLIMS TO JOIN ITS PROJECT IN SYRIA OR IRAQ, BUT WILL BE FORCED TO RELY ON TERRORIST ATTACKS AROUND THE WORLD.

This shift in IS's policies can already be seen, but is likely to increase as the organisation loses more territory. From that point on, several scenarios are possible.

One scenario is that IS continues to operate as an alternative to al-Qaeda, with its local branches in countries such as Libya and Nigeria. Given that both organisations will have roughly the same goals, they are likely to merge. Another scenario is that IS will dwindle and al-Qaeda will rise again. Still another option is that they will continue to be rivals, with IS continuing to try to set up a state. Any of these scenarios, and potentially others, are possible.

Given the tensions between al-Qaeda and IS and the inhibitions that some IS-supporters are likely to have had about IS's increasingly violent policies, any future efforts to set up an Islamic state are likely to be slightly different. There is a strong sentiment among many Jihadi-Salafi scholars and leaders that an Islamic state is a very good thing in principle, but that it should not be executed the way IS did it.

This analysis of the situation may result in more careful ways of going about establishing an Islamic state the next time an opportunity arises. In other words: for Jihadi-Salafi critics of IS, the collapse of the latter has the potential to be a major 'I told you so' moment.

In Jordan, there is the additional difficulty of intra-Jihadi-Salafi rivalry. The two main Jihadi-Salafi scholars in the country (and probably in the world) – Abu Qatada al-Filastini and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi – have been strongly against IS from the beginning.

A large number of Jihadi-Salafi activists, however, disagree with them and still have fresh memories of the rivalry between their local hero – Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi – and al-Maqdisi. While they see the former as a brave fighter who was willing to walk the talk, the latter is seen by them as an armchair jihadi who, when push came to shove, was not willing to support the jihad in Iraq.

Moreover, al-Maqdisi often stressed the need to set up an Islamic state, rather than just engaging in attacks without

lasting results. When IS came along, it seemed that a sustained effort to do what al-Maqdisi had always wanted – setting up an Islamic state – was finally being made, yet al-Maqdisi again refused to support it because he saw IS as the epitome of the "extremist" policies that he had always rejected.

To some supporters of al-Zarqawi, this was proof that al-Maqdisi was hypocritical and not supportive of Jihadi-Salafism. To al-Maqdisi himself, however, the fall of IS is likely to be seen as proof that he was right all along. Due to the extent of support for both positions, neither of these narratives is going to become entirely dominant in Jordan, with both co-existing uneasily for some years to come.

Dr Wagemakers' research, at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, concentrates on Salafi ideology and groups, especially in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian territories.

REGIONAL GUIDES TO LIFE AFTER ISLAMIC STATE

MICHAEL AXWORTHY

IRAN

The fall of Islamic State (IS) would be a success for Iran. It would remove a dangerous enemy close to Iran's borders. It would also strengthen Shi'a allies in Iraq and help Syria as well as being one in the eye for regional rival, Saudi Arabia. But it would not be an opportunity to push for regional hegemony.

What one thinks about the motivation and stance of the Iranian regime affects perceptions of how it will react to the collapse of IS. The Iranian regime is often characterised as a hegemonic, expansionist power that supposedly uses Shi'a communities elsewhere in the region as an instrument for its own ends.

This characterisation is not plausible for two good reasons. First, Iran is not set up as a militarist or expansionist state. Iranian defence spending was 2.3% of GDP in 2012 according to the Swedish International Peace Research Institute – a typical yearly figure over the last decade or more. This is comparable with the UK – although the Iranian figure could be adjusted up by as much as .75% to include spending on the Revolutionary Guards. Saudi Arabia spending in the same year was 7.7% (10.4% in 2014), Israel 5.7%, United Arab Emirates 4.8%. Outside of the region, the figure for the US was 4.2% (for the Soviet Union in the 1980s – a truly militaristic state with which Iran is sometimes compared - 15-17%).

Second, if Iran were to seek to increase and exploit sectarian tensions for its own interests in an all-out intra-Muslim conflagration, Shi'as and Iran would lose – Shi'as are only 12-15% of Muslims worldwide.

The Iranian regime, like most others, wants (in priority order):
 1 To secure its own rule within Iran.
 2 To protect Iranian national security.
 3 To protect Iranian and (where feasible) Shi'a interests outside Iran.

FOR SHI'A MUSLIMS ... DEFEAT OF IS WILL ALSO BE A RELIEF. BUT THEY WILL BE ANXIOUS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Iran's defence and security posture is essentially defensive, but doesn't always sound defensive. This is primarily down to the heritage of revolution and revolutionary rhetoric, especially under the former president Ahmadinejad. It is also due to Iran's stance toward Israel.

Central to Iranian thinking (and any sound understanding of Iran's position now) is the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Iran was invaded at a vulnerable moment, and it had few allies (only Syria, and Israel to some extent).

By the end of the war Iran was isolated, and felt it was facing a global alliance of overt and covert enemies. The lesson drawn by Iranians was that Iran could defend itself and uphold self-determination (important for Iranians given a long previous history of invasion and humiliation) but only from its own resources. It could not, and cannot trust external powers to help, or even to keep their word.

A further lesson from the Iran-Iraq war is relevant. In 1982, having regained the territory lost to Iraq at the beginning of the war, the Iranians had a choice – whether to accept a ceasefire, or to continue the war and remove the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein from power.

After much debate, they chose the latter (encouraged by over-enthusiastic Revolutionary Guard officers). However, they overreached themselves, endured six more years of ultimately fruitless warfare with hundreds of thousands killed and more disabled. They were forced ultimately to accept a ceasefire on similar terms to that available in 1982.

Most Iranians, regime supporters or not, now accept that the decision to continue the war in 1982 was a mistake. That lesson of the perils of overreach and the wisdom of a more defensive posture will be uppermost in the minds of the regime leadership as they consider Iraq after IS.

For Shi'a Muslims more widely in the region, defeat of IS will also be a relief. But they will be anxious about what happens next. They will be concerned as to whether the defeat of IS will deepen the bitterness of Sunnis in Iraq that made possible the rise of IS in the first place.

The removal of IS will not remove the root causes of the rise of groups like al-Qaeda, Taliban, and IS in the region, and there is a risk that a new version of al-Qaeda or IS will bubble up.

Dr Michael Axworthy is a senior lecturer at the University of Exeter. From 1998-2000 he was the Head of Iran Section in the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office.