



## Iran Remains the Threat in the Middle East

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 272, October 19, 2014

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The novelty of the Islamic State, as well as the magnitude of the threat it poses, are greatly exaggerated. Iran remains the main threat to stability in the Middle East. Its journey toward a nuclear arsenal must be stopped.

The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) on the battlefields of the civil war in Syria, and its subsequent spectacular successes in conquering parts of Syria and Iraq, have grabbed international attention. The gruesome pictures of IS's barbaric beheadings supplied to the international media has only added to IS's notoriety. The Islamic State's quest to establish a new bloody Caliphate became a cause célèbre.

Many pundits have decided that the Islamic State is fundamentally changing the Middle East and they grope for new strategies to meet the challenge. In reality, however, the novelty of the Islamic State, as well as the magnitude of the threat it poses, are greatly exaggerated.

This organization is a reflection of the rise of radical political Islam in the Middle East over the last decades. Islam has always been a central component in the identity of the peoples of the Middle East. While Egypt, Iran and Turkey succeeded in maintaining a strong ethno-statist parallel identity, most of the Arab states have failed to instill statist identities through their education system. This means that primordial identities, tribal or sectarian, usually were stronger than the demand for loyalty by the particular states.

Moreover, many of the Arab states failed to modernize and deliver basic services, allowing for alternative Islamist structures to do a better job in providing education, medical and social work services to the impoverished masses. It is worth noting that the Muslim Brotherhood was established as early as 1928. Ever since, it has developed grassroots by trying to take care of the masses, while subverting the statist order in Muslim states with the goal of building a new Caliphate. Pan Arabism – a popular ideological inclination among the Arab elites – also undermined the legitimacy of the statist order, reinforcing Pan-Islamist impulses. Among the Shiites, the religious zeal turned Iran into an Islamic Republic in 1979 that has been trying since then to export its version of radical Shiite Islam.

For decades, it was the security services, probably the only well-functioning governmental agency, which provided stability, law and order. But maintaining a monopoly over the use of force was a challenge that has not been met successfully by the statist order established after the end of World War I and it has been disintegrating for quite a while. We have seen a failed state develop – where there is no monopoly over the use of force, but a myriad of militias – in Lebanon since the 1970s. In Yemen, there was a civil war in the 1960s which created much instability to this very day. Somalia is the best known example of a failed state. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority turned into a battlefield among competing militias almost immediately after its establishment in 1994. Strong dictators held Libya and Iraq together, but when they were gone these states became failed political entities. The Assad republican dynasty seems to have gone in the same direction.

Therefore, the Islamic State of today, which displays religious extremism and transnational tendencies, is the result of historic dynamics in the fledgling Arab civilization. Any long term look at the performance of the Arab states could reach the gloomy conclusion that their societies are doomed to poverty and political instability for a long while yet.

While the military and political successes of the Islamic State seem remarkable, its achievements are taking place in a political limbo with no real power to oppose it. The Islamic State has not faced yet any real test in state building and in overcoming violent opposition. Therefore, it is probably much too early to conclude that the Islamic State is able to govern and impose law and order in the swaths of land it has conquered.

Will it be spared the typical processes of fragmentation taking place among radical groups? Can the Islamic State take on Turkey or Iran – the rising powers in the Muslim Middle East? Can this organization be more dangerous to Israel than Hamas – a sister radical Sunni entity?

If the Islamic State is able to consolidate its conquests into a coherent state and turns south to take the energy riches of the Gulf, then it might become a real strategic actor. But any progress toward such a scenario will galvanize tremendous opposition by the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia. Then the huge amounts of petro-dollars will be able to buy some security in the face of such an imminent danger. Even a confused Obama administration might eventually figure out what is at stake.

Therefore, the current situation does not yet warrant a change in the strategic assessment. Much of the fragmented Arab world will be busy dealing with its domestic problems for decades, minimizing the possibility that it will turn into a formidable enemy for Israel or the West.

It is crystal clear that the Iran-led Shiite axis remains the main threat to stability in the Middle East. Iran's journey toward a nuclear arsenal – a true game changer – must be stopped. Unfortunately, the gullible West seems to continue to appease Iran, while the "threat" of the Islamic State serves as a welcome diversion.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity  
of the Greg Rosshandler Family