

# ISIS: THE DANGERS FOR ISRAEL

---

Efraim Inbar

---

For several years now, the Middle East has been in turmoil. The traditional Arab statist political structure that long had dominated the region has by and large disintegrated, while radical Islamist groups have proliferated.<sup>1</sup> Of these, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is now the most potent. Over the past year and a half, it has cut a bloody swathe through the region, conquering large segments of Iraq and Syria and imposing a brutal and bloody orthodoxy in its wake. Its characteristics—that of a guerrilla army, a Sunni political movement, a millenarian cult and an administrator of conquered territory—make it a dangerous revisionist actor on the regional, and the world, stage.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, ISIS has primarily been successful where there is a political void and in areas populated by Sunnis. By and large, it has refrained from ventures in places like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which possess robust and capable armies. Indeed, when ISIS has met with well-organized opposition even at a substate level (such as Kurdish militias), the group's performance has been substantially less convincing.

Moreover, the attention of ISIS has been focused to date on establishing a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and for good reason. Conquering Damascus and/or Baghdad, the capitals of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires, respectively, will resonate in the Muslim World, and draw still more adherents to its cause. Therefore, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and, beyond that, Saudi Arabia and its holy religious sites, are also appealing.

As such, Israel is not the focus of ISIS rhetoric or attention, even though the group—like other radical Islamists—harbors a profound theological hatred for the Jewish state. Likewise, it has paid only passing attention to the Palestinian arena, placing greater importance on Iraq, Syria and several other theaters. When it has, its per-



EFRAIM INBAR, a professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University, is director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He also is a Shillman/Ginsburg fellow at the Middle East Forum.

spective has been clear; the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas is accused of collaboration with the Jews, while its Islamist opposition, Hamas, is dubbed a tool of Shi'ite Iran. Instead, the organization has sought to foment more individual, grassroots violence; in October 2015, ISIS issued several propaganda items calling on Palestinians to perpetrate more attacks on Israelis.<sup>3</sup> Later the same month, the Islamic State released for the first time a clip in Hebrew warning Israelis that they will face mass slaughter.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, Israel's concerns over the potential for organized ISIS activity within the country (or in the Palestinian Territories) are still minimal—at least for the moment. Rather, the more significant threat posed by the group to Israeli security can be found on the country's geopolitical periphery.

### **The threat from the north**

There is a possibility that ISIS might eventually be able to carve out an area of control along Israel's borders, particularly on the Golan Heights, where the Syrian state is losing control. An ISIS military presence along Israel's border would allow it to conduct terrorist attacks within Israel itself, and to initiate a war of attrition against the country through the use of mortars and short-range missiles. To forestall this eventuality, Israel has already built a new fence on the Golan to make incursions into its territory more difficult. In addition, it recently reorganized the IDF deployment in that area in order to meet new challenges. Moreover, collaboration with Jordan is underway to prevent additional ISIS inroads in South Syria. The Druze enclave in South Syria (Jabal al-Druze) is also an ally in forestalling such a possibility.

In the worst case, southern Syria could become another "Hamastan." But it is important to note that Israel has been successful in containing Hamas in Gaza to date. In fact, Israel has refrained from

a more muscular response to Hamas only because it has an interest in perpetuating the divide between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Such restraint, however, surely would not apply to a future ISIS entity; Israel would possess far greater freedom of action, and would not hesitate to use force to maintain deterrence.

Yet, so long as ISIS is not attacking the Jewish state, Israel has no reason to take direct steps to curtail its activities. After all, in Syria today ISIS is fighting the Assad regime and Hezbollah, both of whom are proxies of Israel's main mortal enemy, Iran. As such, ISIS can be said to be acting in concert with Israeli interests in Syria, although—should it succeed—its long-term vision for the country (and for neighboring Iraq) is deeply dangerous and antithetical to Israeli objectives.

### **The destabilization of Jordan**

ISIS likewise could try to expand its caliphate into the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, whose rulers claim to be the descendants of the prophet Muhammad. A conquest of Jordan would put ISIS on the border of Saudi Arabia, which controls the most important Muslim holy sites (Mecca and Medina). Yet, the fall of Jordan to a military onslaught by ISIS is unlikely due to the might of the Jordanian military, which is both capable and well-resourced enough to withstand any conceivable onslaught by the organization.

As a result, the group's preferred method of achieving control of Jordan is likely to be through subversion. It could partner with the Jordanian Islamist movement and disgruntled Palestinian elements in the Kingdom to try and put an end to the Hashemite dynasty. Here, Jordan's security services can probably manage a domestic Islamist threat, at least for a time. Indeed, the country successfully weathered the currents of the "Arab Spring," which included signifi-

cant Islamist activity aimed at the Jordanian regime. Yet there is no guarantee that in the long run the Hashemites will continue to rule the territory east of the Jordan River.

All this matters a great deal for Jerusalem. Jordan is an important buffer state and strategic partner for the Jewish state. It has the longest existing border with Israel, and is the closest foreign nation to the country's heartland. The Jerusalem-Tel Aviv-Haifa triangle, where most of Israel's population lives and where most of its economic infrastructure is located, lies only a short distance from the Jordan River (which is situated just 20 kilometers from Jerusalem).

### **ISIS in Sinai**

Some of the Islamist groups in the Sinai have already sworn allegiance to ISIS, most prominently Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. For the moment, however, the main efforts of these elements are directed against the government of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in Cairo, which overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated regime of Mohamed Morsi in the summer of 2013.

Egypt has been battling a long-running Islamic insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula, which has intensified in both scope and lethality since 2013. Islamists there have shown the ability to mobilize and target government facilities and personnel. The Egyptian army, meanwhile, has encountered problems in enforcing state sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

Over the long term, the Egyptian army is likely to be successful in containing this challenge. Nevertheless, ISIS can do a lot of damage in the interim. For example, intelligence sources believe that there is a significant possibility that ISIS or its affiliates planted a bomb on a Russian passenger jet that crashed on October 31, 2015, in the Sinai Peninsula, killing all 224 people on board. Such a terrorist attack harms the tourism to Egypt—an important source of foreign currency.

The existence of Islamists in the Sinai isn't just a threat to Egypt, however. These elements could well turn their attention toward Israel as a second, and significant, adversary. If they do, one obvious target is the city of Eilat, with its port and oil installations. Eilat is the only port that links Israel to South and East Asia. It also serves as the southern point of the land bridge between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea—an alternative to the Suez Canal. As the Israeli economy gradually reorients its exports from Europe to Asia, Eilat has become increasingly important to Israel's economic future, and thus an appealing target for terrorists.

Egypt's determination to curb such attacks is not self-evident. In the past, during the Mubarak era, the country had on occasion turned a blind eye to the use of the Sinai by Hamas in its campaign to bleed Israel. It could well do so again. Alternatively, an effective campaign by the Egyptian army against ISIS will actually expand the threat these elements pose to Israel, by pushing them into the Gaza Strip. While a greater ISIS presence in Gaza portends trouble for Hamas, it will also increase instability there, eroding Israel's already-limited deterrence in the process.

### **A domestic terror threat?**

There is, as well, a possibility that ISIS will be successful in establishing cells among Israeli Arabs. If it does, it could find fertile soil; Israel's security services have identified increased interest in ISIS on the part of Israel's Arabs.<sup>6</sup> To date, several Israeli Arabs are known to have traveled to Turkey to join the Islamic State, and a number were arrested upon their return. The Israeli security services have a good grasp of the situation, and potential terrorist rings have been the subjects of penetration. Nevertheless, the possibility that some Israeli Arabs have evaded the scrutiny of the Israeli security services cannot be ruled out. These

radicals could serve as the basis for cells directed against Israeli population centers and citizens. It is conceivable, moreover, that graduates of ISIS, Arab Israelis and Palestinians in the Territories might quietly cooperate in planning and executing an attack on a high-profile target within Israel.

The appeal of doing so is clear. Israeli Arabs carry Israeli identity cards and their cars have Israeli licenses, which allow them greater access to sensitive sites within Israel. Their familiarity with the Israeli scene is also an advantage in carrying out terrorist attacks.

### One threat among many

Israel's policy toward ISIS so far has been derivative of its outlook on the growing chaos in the Middle East. Israel's government has opted to remain disengaged from the domestic turmoil now taking place within many of its Arab neighbors, reflecting the dominant view that there is little strategic benefit to be gained from becoming embroiled in local or internal conflicts. Moreover, Israel has learned that political engineering is beyond its capability, and that even a superpower such as the United States is often unsuccessful in such endeavors.

Therefore, Israel has adopted the role of spectator except in those circumstances that affect directly and immediately its national security, and those in which Israeli action is necessary to prevent bad outcomes. Instead, its role has been more measured, and limited. It provides Egypt with intelligence on ISIS activities in the Sinai, and cooperates with Jordan in southern Syria. When necessary, it also undertakes preventive arrests within its territory.

As such, Jerusalem is unwilling to be part of the anti-ISIS coalition, even tacitly. In accordance with its national security doctrine, Israel prefers unilateral action rather than operating within the framework of an international coalition.

This does not mean that Israel isn't seized of the threat posed by ISIS. Israel shares the Western distaste for the group's brutality and immorality. It does not, however, believe—as many in the West apparently do—that the military defeat of ISIS will inexorably lead to greater regional stability. Decisionmakers in Jerusalem worry that, in the absence of a larger regional strategy, a rollback of ISIS would strengthen anti-Israel actors and solidify Iranian hegemony.

If ISIS establishes a presence near Israel's borders and several of the scenarios discussed above materialize, then Israel will probably react—including through military measures. But suggestions that ISIS may constitute a bigger threat than does Iran are ridiculous. The threat posed by ISIS is qualitatively different, and inferior, to the challenge presented by the Islamic Republic. It is imperative that, in their eagerness to fight the first of these, Western policymakers do not lose sight of the other.



1. For an incisive analysis, see Yaakov Amidror, "Perfect Storm: The Implications of Middle East Chaos," BESA Center for Strategic Studies *Policy Memorandum* No. 8, July 2015; for the strategic environment following the "Arab Spring" and its challenges to Israel's security, see Efraim Inbar, "Israel's National Security Amidst Unrest in the Arab World," *Washington Quarterly* 35, Summer 2012.
2. James Fromson and Steven Simon, "ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now," *Survival* 57, June-July 2015), 7-56.
3. Eli Leon, "DAESH to the Palestinians: Continue the Terror," *Israel Hayom*, October 21, 2015, 13.
4. Shlomo Zesna and Daniel Seroti, "Daesh is Threatening in Hebrew," *Israel Hayom*, October 25, 2015, 9.
5. Zack Gold, "One Year of the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula," Institute for National Strategic Studies *INSS Insight* No. 758, October 25, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=10852>
6. Zesna and Seroti, "Daesh is Threatening in Hebrew."