



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Raqqa Delenda Est: Why Baghdadi's "Caliphate" Should Be Destroyed

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While Iran remains the greatest threat to the region, the continued existence of IS fortifies rather than enervates Iran's quest for hegemony. The destruction of IS should be the first stage in a campaign designed ultimately to isolate and contain Iran.

In a recent [article](#) (August 2), Prof. Efraim Inbar suggested that it would be a strategic mistake to destroy the Islamic State (IS) organization and entirely uproot its territorial base. He raises a cogent point and offers a hard-knuckled, realist point of view. His viewpoint reflects the anguish felt by many in Israel and across the region as they watch the US administration and others get their priorities wrong, by defining Iran as an asset and a potential ally in the war against the so-called IS caliphate.

Inbar is correct that Iran is a powerful state with nuclear ambitions, a strong industrial base, and a serious claim to regional hegemony and the undoing of the existing global order. By contrast, Baghdadi's men – despite their pornography of death and their influence on "lone wolf" attackers in the West – are none of these.

Even so, a strategy that leaves IS bruised but alive would pose serious dangers.

To begin with, the norm that terror cannot be tolerated is a precious one. For years it has been cast aside. Even Israel has found it necessary to accept an

uneasy modus vivendi with Hezbollah and Hamas, in view of the extensive ground invasions that would be required to destroy them.

But both groups have played a part in reducing tensions in recent years, whereas IS remains as murderous as ever. Given the legacy of 9/11, this is no longer an acceptable reality.

Major players in the West, led by the US and now France, have come together in support of a sustained military effort, with plans to liberate Mosul, destroy IS in the Sirte enclave along the Libyan coast, and ultimately take Raqqa and destroy Baghdadi's "state". This is a development Israelis and others should welcome, not disparage.

Specific political and ideological benefits can be expected to result from the fall of Mosul and ultimately of Raqqa, no matter what ultimately happens to purported Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. (His real name is Ibrahim al-Samara'I). This has to do with the very nature of Islamist radicalism.

Islamism is a version (or perversion) of Islam, and attempts by President Obama and others to delink them have debased the discourse on "countering violent extremism." But Islamism is not the only possible version of Islam. It is a relatively new political ideology that claims to compete with other "isms," including nationalism, communism, and other manifestations of modernity.

The Islamists' claim to supremacy depends not on the quality of their religious interpretation but on the force of their actions. Whereas Sh'ia traditions sanctify losers in battle, Sunnis do not. Total defeat on the field of battle would thus lead to the collapse of the ideas for which IS stands.

As to Iran, the continued existence of IS and its horrors is a gift to Khamene'i. He uses it to lure Turkey, blame the Saudis, and justify the ravages inflicted on Sunnis in Iraq and Syria by Iran's proxies.

Destroying IS and replacing it, not by Iran-backed repression but by more enlightened Sunni elements (as US General Petraeus did when he established the Sunni renaissance, or Sahwa, in western Iraq), would go much further towards undermining Iran's appeal than would any damage a weakened IS can continue to inflict.

Will Hezbollah feel safe going after Israel once IS is gone? Not likely. There will still be many angry Sunnis in both Syria and Lebanon who will not be inclined to forget who shed their blood on Assad's behalf.

There is also a regional element that deserves our support and sympathy, and the overt assistance of the Western powers. These are the Kurds, and even more so, the Yazidis, who are marking the second anniversary of the massacres perpetrated on them by Baghdadi's butchers. To leave them with IS as their permanent next-door neighbor is neither fair nor wise. They stood and fought well. They are entitled to see this battle through.

In the case of IS, moral imperatives and realist calculations need not contradict each other. It is the raw "realist" theory of "off-shore balancing," put forward by President Obama and his closest advisors, which laid the foundations for the grand attempt to woo Iran into the new template in the region. Any attempt to portray Iran and IS as balancing rivals will only play into this problematic state of mind.

Instead, it would be best for Israel, side by side with our regional partners in the "camp of stability," to join those within the American security and policy establishment who still see all Islamists – Iran, IS, and Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) – as enemies. Together, these partners should outline a phased campaign that begins with the destruction of IS, moves on to the marginalization of the Moslem Brotherhood, and ultimately isolates the Iranian regime and takes back the gains it made in the name of fighting IS.

Meanwhile, it behooves us to avoid positions that undermine our moral stance. This is what led President Ronald Reagan to the Iran-Contra deal, his one great mistake. It is what clouded the judgment of those who saw a worthy partner in Yasser Arafat, the man behind the murderous desecration of the 1972 Olympic Games.

Moral clarity is essential if Western societies, and particularly the US, are to stay committed. All the more so when it comes to Israel's most vital ally, American Jewry, for whom IS is an embodiment of evil.

Paraphrasing the Roman Senator Cato, it makes strategic and moral sense to say: *Raqaa Delenda Est*, i.e., the capital of the IS state needs to be taken and the organization destroyed.

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