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The Rise and Fall of the Caliphates

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A century ago, in 1916, the territories of Syria and Iraq were part of the Ottoman Empire, the last Muslim Caliphate. The Ottoman Empire was defeated by the British Empire in the Middle East and the geopolitical structure of the Middle East, has been designed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916, concluded by two British and French diplomats, Sir Mark Sykes and Georges Picot. The Sykes-Picot Agreement involved itself with the partition of the Ottoman Empire once World War One had ended.

Following the "Arab Spring" and the civil wars in Arab nation states the hundred years old regional structure, designed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement collapsed and a new Caliphate was formed by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi ("Calipha Ibrahim") and his ISIS group.

In 1916 – 1917 the British and French allies defeated the Ottoman forces and occupied the Middle East but not the idea of the Islamic Caliphate. In 2016 a much bigger coalition led by the U.S and Russia fighting the new Caliphate and again the tide of the war is turning against the Caliphate.

Since the mid of 2015, the Islamic state has lost almost every major battle it fought in Iraq and Syria and suffered significant blows in both theaters:

In Syria, supported by the Russian military, Hezbollah and Iran, Syrian government forces achieved multiple victories. The ISIS siege on the government-held Kweires Airbase in northern Syria was lifted in November 2015. The cities of Palmyra and al-Qaryatayn in central Syria were retaken in March 2016.

Syrian rebels with Turkish military support reclaimed part of the Turkish–Syrian border that had been controlled by ISIS.

In the North Eastern parts of Syria, Kurdish militia with U.S special forces and air support, launched three major successful offensives on ISIS-held territories. They retook the strategic city of al-Hawl and the surrounding areas in northeastern Syria in November 2015.

Another offensive reclaimed the Tishrin Dam and the surrounding areas in northern Syria in December 2015. The third offensive was a further advancement from al-Hawl to the city of al-Shadadi and its surrounding areas in February 2016.

Experts estimate that the Islamic State territory in Syria shrunk by about 20%.¹

In Iraq, North of Baghdad, the Iraqi army and Shiite militias retook the strategic city of Baiji in October 2015, where Iraq's largest oil refinery is located. In November 2015, the Kurds retook Sinjar in northwestern Iraq.

In November 2015, Iraqi armed forces with Shia militias liberated the city of Ramadi and additional territories of the Anbar region including the city of Hit.

The Iraqi army declared that it started the campaign to liberate the City of Mosul. The Iraqi army is supported by Sunni Arab tribal forces and U.S air power. So far the northern offensive has limited territorial achievements.

Experts estimate that the Islamic State territory in Iraq shrunk by about 40%.²

The loss of some of its senior leaders - Among them Abu Omar al-Shishani, described as the group's "minister of war", and a senior ISIS chemical weapons operative captured by Iraq-based US commandos and turned over to the Iraqi government.

Haji Iman, a senior ISIS leader in charge of finances for the caliphate, and Abu Sarah who was charged with paying fighters in northern Iraq, were killed in US airstrike.

Financial problems - the US-led Coalition and Russian airstrikes on the ISIS's economic targets caused ISIS financial difficulties.

Air raids have crippled ISIS's oil operations, with 1,200 oil-related targets destroyed and another campaign has targeted ISIS's banks and finances. The U.S.-led strikes have led to a sharp decrease in ISIS fighters' salaries, causing frustration among fighters and decreased recruitment.

Reduced flow of recruits - The global campaign against Islamic radicalization and against recruitment to ISIS and the loss of access points to the Turkish border, and heightened border security on the Turkish side, have significantly reduced the flow of recruits into the territories of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The C.I.A. estimates that ISIS currently has 20,000 to 25,000 soldiers, the lowest force level since the end of 2014.

Summary

In 2016, the Islamic State suffered major territorial losses in Syria and Iraq, is increasingly isolated, and being perceived as in decline. As it comes under heavy pressure from multiple angles in the heartland of the Caliphate ISIS is responding by changing its strategy:

- ISIS terror attacks have increased in about 40 percent, in 2016, particularly in Iraq and Syria.³
- ISIS is resorting to more and more mass-casualty violence (suicide bombings) that killed this year more than 2000 people.
- ISIS is resorting to the use of chemical weapons.
- ISIS is extending its terror activities beyond the area of Iraq and Syria mainly into the European continent.
- ISIS is developing Libya as an additional center of gravity or as an alternative in case of the fall of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

ISIS is responding to the changing conditions by updating its strategy and priorities. For ISIS it is a matter of life and death to maintain its image of the "victorious new Caliphate" and therefore they try to deflect attention away from the problems it is facing. ISIS is trying to operate in a way that will produce new achievements to maintain its narrative of success.

In spite all the efforts of ISIS, in 2016 the tide of the war is turning against the New Caliphate and we can consider it as the "beginning of the end" of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. But even if the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria will fall, the Islamic state will remain as an **idea and as a global terror organization**.

Notes

¹ Columb Strack , Islamic State loses 22 per cent of territory, HIS Jane's 360, March 16,2016.

² Columb Strack , Islamic State loses 22 per cent of territory, HIS Jane's 360, March 16, 2016.

³ Due to territorial losses, ISIS 'boosting attacks' ,Al Arabiya, May 2 , 2016.