-Islamic State: Another Phase in History of Islamist Power Struggle
“Substance” not “form” matters

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20 October 2014
Over 60 years after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent intensification of nationalism in the Muslim world, Islamists have tried three distinct campaigns to gain power and establish Islamic states in the Muslim world. First was jihad in 1979 against the Soviet Union when Islamists from across the world poured into Afghanistan to join the Afghan Mujahideens in fight against the Soviet Union. Abdullah Azzam, known as the Godfather of jihad, advocated that the Afghan jihad would expand to Palestine and it would empower Islamic governments in the Muslim world. However, after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 from Afghanistan, the jihad campaign failed in fulfilling Azzam’s ambition and left the Afghan Mujahideens engaged in a lingering factional fighting over power instead of forming an Islamic government in Afghanistan. The second campaign Islamists waged was through taking advantage of democracy and it represented an attempt by the Islamists to pay back the west especially the US in its own coin. The Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the 1991, Palestinian Hamas in 2006 and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 2012 ran and won in elections but failed to come to or remain in power, which they argued was due to joint plots hatched by the US and its allies. In the recent years, the third campaign shaped up with Islamists resorting to openly denouncing nationalism in the Muslim world and taking up the revival of Islamic Caliphate. The dramatic rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) is assessed as a step in that direction.

The rise of ISIL now IS (Islamic State) led to a discourse on the typology of Islamist factions making them come across as different and even anti-each other, rather than the essence of these groups- which signifies the overall goal that they pursue- the revival of Caliphate in the Muslim world. IS is an offshoot of al-Qaeda and its falling out with al-Qaeda was not because of ideological but tactical difference - al-Qaeda did not want IS to expand into Syria but IS did not listen. Tactical differences among Islamist factions are likely but that does not essentially mean they cannot resolve them when the time requires or they will stop working towards the shared goal. A case in point is the recent reaction of the Syrian al-Qaeda chapter Jabhat al-Nusra, albeit perceived as rival to IS, to the coalition airstrikes against IS in Syria. It denounced the airstrikes as “a war against Islam” and vowed to take retaliate against the US and other countries involved. The Afghan Taliban, also perceived as a rival of IS because both are claimants of leadership of Muslim Ummah, did not criticize IS; it rather responded to it with a welcoming tone. The Taliban advised IS to remain united and representative of the various Islamist groups in Syria. This tells about the Islamists’- no matter which group and in which country- loyalty to the
broader goal of reviving Caliphate and the Islamist’s trivialization of tactical differences that they developed or may develop in future.

Al-Qaeda’s announcement of its chapter, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) may not be a move to reclaim relevancy in the face of rapid influence of IS but a likely preparation of al-Qaeda to function at a broader region, not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan, after the US-led withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. In addition, as the history has shown that emergence of conflict in the Muslim populated areas or countries paves the way for the Islamists to make inroads into those areas or countries, AQIS could also be assessed as al-Qaeda’s response to the reported plight of the Muslims in Burma and Assam, Gujrat and Kashmir regions of India.

It seems that not an ideological but a tactical distinction of IS steered away attention from al-Qaeda. The rapid territorial advancement in Iraq and Syria allowed IS to be seen as offensive and played a significant role in making it appealing to Islamist groups in other part of the world especially the young generation who have known al-Qaeda since 2001, as a defensive and its leadership invisible. The sectarian stance of IS cannot be a distinction of IS from al-Qaeda. Because al-Qaeda in Iraq and in Syria have been fighting the Shiite regimes. Jabhat al-Nusra is currently fighting the Assad regime and Hezbollah militias in Syria.

What has to be noted is that IS is pursuing “the far enemy-near enemy” concept coined by al-Qaeda after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan to empower Islamic regimes-addressing the question whether the war IS is waging in Iraq and Syria is against Shiite or for Caliphate. The former signifies a sectarian dimension to the IS war and the latter brings in the US and its Muslim allies irrespective of sect- into the Caliphate struggle. A question rises that why not IS started operations in other Arab countries that are Sunni and allies of the US such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirate in pursuit of Caliphate. This could be because Iraq and Syria are countries in conflict and that made these countries first targets of IS operations. The sectarian aspect is emphasized due to the Shiite-Sunni rivalries following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, leading to the toppling of Sunni and the empowerment of rancorous Shiite regimes. However, it is overlooked that if IS were up against the Sunni regimes, they would still fight them to achieve their goal of Caliphate. IS fighting the Kurds, who are Sunnis, is an obvious example.
The Caliphate campaign with IS at forefront of it with ideological support from Islamists in other parts of the world could transnationalize the local conflicts and may lead to the creation of new Islamist groups. However, the existence of the common enemy- US and its Muslim allies- will likely prevent these groups –large and small, new and splintered- from internal fighting. US is involved in fight against all these groups in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan-Pakistan region and in Africa. Both al-Qaeda and IS will remain an inspiration for the local Islamists groups not a dividing factor. In the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, certain groups welcomed IS policies while others pledged allegiance to it but in the meantime they recognize al-Qaeda’s as a key organization to the Islamist power struggle. Shiite-Sunni sectarian violence in countries like Pakistan Yemen and Bahrain may intensify but not necessarily because of the notion that IS war is anti- Shiite but because of a history of Sunni-Shiite conflict and the IS-Shiite faceoff in Iraq and Syria will add fuel to it.

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