

14TH KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST

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THE ISLAMIC STATE AND THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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Executive Summary

- The Islamic State (IS) possesses an efficient, well-trained military, and a leadership willing to use high levels of brutality. As such, it poses a long-term challenge to the Middle East. The organization views itself as a state-building project and its ‘Caliphate’ – its (pseudo-)state-like infrastructure – appeals to parts of the Sunni population in Syria and Iraq.
- IS has focused on establishing its ‘Caliphate’ and the fight against ‘near enemies’ in Syria and Iraq. In future, however, the organization is likely to present an imminent threat to members of the anti-IS coalition in the West and the Gulf States.
- It is impossible to defeat IS with military means alone. Consequently, sustainable political agreement between competing religious and ethnic groups is essential. Only the Iraqi Sunnis will be able to deprive IS of its roots.
- The fight against IS must not be allowed to diminish the resolve of the international community to end the conflict in Syria. A negotiated solution involving all relevant actors is the only conceivable means of reaching a settlement.
- The successful conclusion of nuclear negotiations with Iran could pave the way for regional cooperation in other areas. In order to avert the potentially devastating consequences of a failure of these talks, a second preliminary agreement could provide an acceptable compromise to all sides.

What is the Islamic State willing and able to do?

The regional order in the Middle East is in danger and no actors or strategies are currently in sight that could establish a new order. The collapse of state structures has contributed substantially to the rise of the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS), which has been at the center of international attention since June 2014 when it captured the city of Mosul. The participants emphasized that IS had sought to greatly differentiate itself from al-Qaeda, and had even openly fought against this competing terror network at least since

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had assumed command in 2010. They pointed out that al-Qaeda had operated globally from its very beginnings and had primarily targeted its attacks against its ‘far enemy’ (the United States) and the West in general. In contrast, IS had remained a localized organization focused on ‘near enemies’ in its immediate vicinity. These enemies included states or groups that were perceived as standing in the path of the Islamic State, whether governments (Iraq, Syria), militias (Hezbollah, Iranian Revolutionary Guards),

Islamic or non-Islamic (Christians, Yazidis), Shiite or Sunni (Sunni tribes that oppose IS), Jihadist (Nusra Front) or secular (PYD).

IS views itself as a serious state-building project. Instead of exercising global ambitions, the participants argued that the organiza-

IS CONSIDERS ITSELF TO BE A STATE-BUILDING PROJECT WITH A FUNCTIONING ADMINISTRATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE.

tionization is currently focused on establishing and extending its 'Caliphate' in Iraq and the Levant. They also stressed that although IS still lacked the necessary capac-

ities to plan a large attack against the West, in mid-November al-Baghdadi had announced that IS would no longer be limiting itself to its immediate vicinity due to the air raids conducted by the US-led international coalition. This was said to pose a particular threat to Saudi Arabia, which had previously not been directly at risk from IS.

The participants stressed that al-Baghdadi had developed IS into a novel organization that pursued its goals with unprecedented levels of brutality. The self-proclaimed 'Caliph Ibrahim' was said to have occupied the majority of leadership posts within IS with Iraqis, many of whom had served under Saddam Hussein as officers in the Iraqi army. The participants pointed out that IS was centrally run and intolerant of internal and external difference. This was summarized with the phrase: 'You're either with us, or against us'. The participants also noted that this had led to purges within the organization's own ranks. Several participants stated that IS had no interest in cooperating with other jihadist groups, as it claimed the "monopoly on jihad." They also emphasized that although organizations in numerous Islamic countries had pledged allegiance to IS after it had pro-

claimed the 'Caliphate', these groups had not developed strong operational links to IS.

The participants argued that one of the organization's key strengths was its militarily well-trained and efficient leadership, which was more than willing to act with ruthlessness. IS had committed bank robberies and similar criminal acts, had plundered conquered areas and collected a 'Jihad tax' in the cities within the 'Caliphate' and this largely placed it in a position to finance its own activities. Furthermore, the participants pointed out that whereas private capital from the Gulf States had played a role in its beginnings, this was now of minor importance to the organization's finances. Other key factors to its success were said to include the organization's ability to operate on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border, which was described as only existing on paper, its effective military strategy and sophisticated system of internal and external communication. IS was also viewed as particularly benefiting from the current lack of an appealing counternarrative.

IS BENEFITS FROM STRONG FINANCIAL RESOURCES, BUT ALSO FROM THE LACK OF AN APPEALING COUNTERNARRATIVE.

One participant, who had recently traveled to the IS 'capital' of Raqqa, pointed out that IS guaranteed a minimum level of security, provided a partially functioning administration and infrastructure and even permitted economic activity in the cities within the 'Caliphate'. This enabled the organization to present itself as a liberator and protecting power in the (majority Sunni) province of Anbar in western Iraq, and thus secure the support of a sizeable proportion of the local Sunni population. IS was said to have partly given up its administrative structures in areas fac-

ing air strikes by the international coalition, yet it was still upholding these structures in cities such as Deir al-Zor in Syria that have been less affected.

It became clear that the issue of local support for IS also constituted one of the organization's greatest potential weaknesses: its brutality and extremely strict interpretation of Sharia have made IS unpopular in many parts of the 'Caliphate'. Moreover, many people in the region question the organization's long-term sustainability. Although the strengths of IS currently outweigh its weaknesses, many participants argued that it would soon face medium-term problems such as financing its military and terrorist attacks, and paying local administrators' salaries.

How can the Islamic State be fought?

The participants largely agreed that the international coalition's air campaign had stopped the advance of IS for the time being at least. However, the coalition and especially the United States were criticized as lacking strategic goals for Iraq and Syria in particular. Although the US government understood that combating IS also entailed finding a solution to the conflict in Syria, the participants contended that the US currently concentrated its political efforts on the seemingly more manageable situation in Iraq. The approach of the US was described as centered on air strikes, providing support to the Iraqi Kurds, and re-orienting and training the Iraqi army in particular. Since the collapse of the Iraqi army amidst the capture of the city of Mosul, the country's focus has moved to training smaller

numbers of more powerful, rapidly deployable brigades.

Most of the participants viewed the violent recapture of a town the size of Mosul or even the complete destruction of IS as unrealistic if not potentially counterproductive in the near future. Instead, the majority argued that the primary objective in Iraq should be to force IS into the underground. International actors with the necessary military capabilities – such as the United States – could take on the lead role. However, the participants were also clear that such an approach would have to go hand in hand with the strengthening of regional partners. One of the participants emphasized that Islamist extremism could only be overcome in the long-term if the most important Islamic states in the Middle East (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey) were to develop an inclusive form of cooperation. Several participants called on Turkey in particular to provide a more substantial contribution to this aim. Ankara, it was argued, not only believed it could control IS, but prioritized the regional strategic goals of overthrowing Assad and curbing the state-building aspirations of the Kurds.

There was strong consensus among the participants that a political approach was needed in addition to a military solution: Fallujah, it was argued, had clearly demonstrated that Sunni areas in Iraq could not be brought under control with military action alone. Furthermore, delegitimizing IS in the long-term required a sustainable political agreement between competing religious groups in Syria (Alawites and Sunnis) and Iraq (Shiites and Sunnis). In Iraq, this would neces-

THE KEY TO COMBATING IS REMAINS IN THE HANDS OF THE IRAQI SUNNIS.

sitate greater Sunni involvement in political processes. Constitutional reform and greater autonomy within Iraq were viewed as providing possible incentives for Sunni opposition to IS. Most participants agreed that the key to combating IS ultimately lay in the hands of Iraq's Sunnis, but that there was still much that the al-Abadi government could do, even though it was perceived as powerless in this situation.

The participants repeatedly warned against subordinating efforts to resolve the conflict in Syria to the fight against IS. A number of possible approaches to the conflict in Syria were brought up including a no-fly zone, and

EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA MUST NOT BE SUBORDINATED TO THE FIGHT AGAINST IS.

arming and training moderate opposition fighters. However, the participants argued that none of the approaches mentioned promised significant success by themselves. Several participants concluded that a negotiated settlement involving Iran, Russia and moderate forces within the Syrian regime remained the only path to resolving the conflict. The Lebanese model, it was argued, provided an example of how power sharing might work in practice. In contrast, one of the participants explicitly questioned the Sykes-Picot Agreement and proposed providing the various ethnic and confessional groupings with political self-determination by redrawing national borders.

Regional Neighborhood: Nuclear Negotiations with Iran

Only days after the extension of the deadline for the E3+3 negotiations with Iran, the participants discussed the likelihood and potential consequences of a successful agreement on Iran's nuclear program. They emphasized that a timetable for

THE SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH IRAN COULD PAVE THE WAY FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION IN OTHER AREAS.

lifting US sanctions remained one of the last unresolved issues. The Iranians believed that Republican-dominated US Congress posed a particular obstacle

to an agreement, and that this situation would be worsened with the increased strength of the Republicans in 2015. However, as the US government only has the capacity to suspend sanctions (lifting sanctions requires congressional support), this issue was viewed as presenting a particularly difficult dilemma. One participant appealed to the European Union to convince the US that a negotiated settlement must have the shortest possible phase of implementation, because the positions of Iran and the US on this issue were still highly divergent.

The participants agreed that Tehran considered Israel and Saudi Arabia as the greatest impediments to current negotiations. However, they were clear that Saudi concerns were not primarily related to the Iranian nuclear program, but to the consequences of an agreement for Iranian influence in the region. Improved relations between Iran and the US were also interpreted by the government in Riyadh as threatening its own position. Nevertheless, some participants reminded that a balanced agreement was ultimately

in the interests of Saudi Arabia. If the negotiations were to fail, according to this argument, Western sanctions would be tightened, and this in turn could strengthen radical forces in Tehran and lead to the radicalization of moderates. This situation would have repercussions for the 2015 parliamentary elections. Furthermore, a lack of agreement would certainly hamper regional cooperation in other areas and could lead Iran to develop a more aggressive approach towards Syria and Iraq, but also to Bahrain and Yemen. In addition, continued or tightened sanctions would clearly have a devastating impact on the Iranian economy.

Several participants stressed the likely positive effects of an agreement, including the fact that it could strengthen moderate forces

in Iran and therefore open up the possibility for cooperation with the West and Iran's Arab neighbors on other issues. Moreover, if a final agreement were to include provisions

that went beyond the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its Additional Protocol, they argued, it could serve as a basis for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Consequently, multilateral cooperation, mediated by the E3+3 states, could prove an important confidence-building measure between Iran and the GCC.

Nevertheless, the participants found it difficult to predict whether the negotiations could be successfully concluded before the new deadline; one participant viewed the chances as "slightly better than 50 per cent." Even if the negotiating partners were viewed as very close to reaching agreement

on most questions, one participant reiterated that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." If the blockade by US Congress or a veto by the Iranian Supreme Leader were to hamper agreement, a second provisional agreement could be a possible means of preventing a complete failure of current negotiations and the associated negative consequences. This scenario would arguably provide a basis for a continuation of 'de facto cooperation' between Tehran and Washington in the fight against IS "with the US in the air, and Iran on the ground."

Looking into the Crystal Ball: Middle Eastern Trends in 2015

The participants concluded by proposing the following possible scenarios for the Middle East in 2015:

1. In view of the dissolution of the regional order neither the countries in the region nor international actors would be able to establish a new order. This could lead to instability to become frozen; a situation that would have a high potential for escalation. In addition, it would result in decreased Western influence, which in turn would lead the West to focus on strengthening its regional partners. Due to the increasing energy independence of the United States, oil would have less influence on the West's Middle Eastern policy, but the interests and potential commitment of Asian powers in the region would begin to rise.

A SECOND PRELIMINARY AGREEMENT COULD PREVENT THE COMPLETE FAILURE OF THE NEGOTIATIONS OVER IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM.

2. Continued conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia could present the main obstacle to better regional cooperation. In this scenario, neither state would be willing or able to overcome the tensions that exist between them. As long as this remained the case, crisis handling in the region would be limited to conflict management. Finding a sustainable means of combating IS would therefore be pushed further over the horizon.
3. Non-state actors such as IS, but also the various Kurdish factions, the Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen could become more influential than states. In this scenario, conflicts and civil wars would increasingly spill over borders and possibly affect the entire region. Although neither state was directly affected by IS attacks or civil war during 2014, this situation could particularly jeopardize the stability of Jordan and possibly Saudi Arabia.

About

The KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST provides a platform for multilateral discussions on foreign policy and security issues relating to the Middle East. It seeks to bring together representatives of important stakeholders on a regular basis in order to foster an open and policy-oriented exchange of ideas. At the workshop in Berlin high-ranking foreign policy practitioners and representatives of leading think tanks gathered in order to discuss current developments in the Middle East.

This summary contains a selection of arguments which we consider to be relevant to the current policy debate. It is being distributed to the participants of the KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST and selected policymakers.

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