



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Emerging Challenges November 2017

After ISIS new challenges and conflicts looms

With the ISIS defeat in Mosul (Iraq), Raqqa and in Deir al – Zour (Syria) the Islamic State has lost its proto-state identity. The fall of the Caliphate will reduce the Islamic State’s recruiting appeal and will likely project the group’s into insurgency and terrorism in Syria, Iraq or melt into the local population. Most of the ISIS fighters have already been coming back since the beginning of 2015. Approximately 40% of them have been killed in battle, but an unaccounted for number could move to other failed state, like Lybia and Afghanistan. The evolving situation on the battlefield has opened a new phase with evolving challenges both in Iraq and Syria. With the fracture of the anti – ISIS coalition, an old division emerged again as the Kurdish independence referendum has shown, with Baghdad’s authorities, Turkey, Iran and International Community against the formation of a Kurdish state. The differences between Kurdistan Regional Government and Baghdad as the integration of the Sunni minority in the Iraqi government should be the American priority for the regional stability[1].

In the Syrian front, President Assad, Hezbollah, Iran and Russia are determined to take back the entire country from ISIS, jihadist rebels and the Syrian opposition. The Syrian Army with the Iranian militias and Hezbollah moves forward to consolidate the corridor linking Iran, Iraq, Syria with Lebanon, also known as the “Shiite corridor”. This “corridor” is strategical for Iranian influence in the region which evidencies itself throught the potential transfer of oil, weapons and military forces into Syria and Lebanon. At the same time the growning iranian influence in the region, is a nightmare for the new Hereditary Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman al Saud, who seems to starkly contrast Teheran position in the area.

The evolving order in Syria presents a challenge also to Israeli policy towards the Syrian crisis. According to Israeli analysis, the looming defeat of ISIS is favoring the transformation of Syria into an Iranian stronghold. Despite the US and Russia ceasefire deal in southern Syria (July 2017), in current Israeli assessments, a spillover of direct confrontation in Syria to Lebanon, or vice versa, is a highly likely scenario. Considering these developments, Israel has three identified scenarios for the future:

accepting Iran’s new strategic position in Syria as a given fact;

applying an independent, proactive effort to contain it (a strategy which could eventually lead to a systemic conflict);

accepting an Iranian presence under pre – defined terms.

Regarding the latter scenario, Israel might informally accept a limited military presence of Iran – backed forces in Syria under specific restrictions agreed upon with Russia and the International community (very unlikely scenario, given Israel’s stark opposition to Iran’s power in the area)[2].

The last development seems to confirm the second scenario, with Israel determined to put the position of Iran in Syria at bay, which could lead to the next regional conflict.

[1] Delil Souleiman, *After ISIS, what comes next?* The New York Times, November 4, 2017

[2] Gil Murciano, *Israel vis – à – vis Iran in Syria: the perils of active containment* German Institute for International and Security Affairs, October 2017

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