

MARCH OF THE

Osama bin Laden, the late leader of al-Qaeda, dreamed of the return of the 7th Century Islamic Caliphate that once stretched across the Middle East and North Africa. Such aspirations were a dream in the face of the realities of geopolitics – or so everyone thought. Sunni al-Qaeda, after it was driven from Afghanistan, was superseded by its successor al-Qaeda-in Iraq. While the former had a very global anti-Western agenda, the latter was far more a regional player with an overtly anti-Shia stance. Similarly, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula also emerged as regional players, tapping into the historic split between Shia and Sunni Islam.

While many commentators, including this one, assessed that al-Qaeda was a generational movement that would eventually lose steam, few could have foreseen that it would morph into something far worse; or indeed that the Arab Spring would fail to address the discontent feeding militant Islam. In fact, frustration over the failure of the Arab Spring has antagonised the Shia-Sunni split to new-found levels of violence.

The new boy on the block known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – abbreviated to Islamic State, IS or ISIS, is proving to be more than a worthy successor to bin Laden's original al-Qaeda. Experts argue that the Islamic State is not so much a state as it is a terrorist organisation with an Islamist agenda. But, over the last few years, it has been carving out a very disparate kingdom across the Middle East and North Africa firmly ruled by Sharia law.

It is clear the Islamic State is thriving off the carcasses of failed states in an arc stretching from Libya to Yemen. Thanks to weak central governments, the reality of an Islamist body politic taking power is coming to pass. In the summer of 2014, ISIS declared a caliphate in the territories of Iraq and Syria under its control. The caliphate's leader is called "Caliph Ibrahim", better known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In response, Western governments have been treating ISIS as if it were a state by conducting air strikes against military targets within the vast tracks of land it seized across Iraq and Syria.

The caliphate has a firm hold in the Middle East (including the Arabian Peninsula), as well as North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. In war-torn Syria, ISIS continues to dominate the agenda and has effectively paralysed any Western desire to broker a peaceful solution between the rebels and President Assad's regime. The group has proved particularly adept at stealing recruits from other Syrian Islamist factions – most notably Jabhat al-Nura. It is a policy it has been repeating in Libya.

The caliphate is capitalising on the Shia-Sunni civil war, and powerful regional players are fuelling this conflict – with Saudi Arabia championing the Sunnis and Iran backing the Shia. In Iraq, the ISIS victory was almost

certainly facilitated by the defection of the Sunni elements of the Iraqi armed forces and the flight of Shia recruits south. The very fact that the Iraqi military has not been able to conduct a decisive counter offensive across the country is clear testament to division within its ranks. The Shia-dominated Iraqi government knows there is no easy way to placate Iraq's disaffected Sunni minority. In the meantime, the caliphate continues to fill the vacuum.

Islamic State, despite its setback at Kobane in Syria, continues to launch attacks in Iraq. The boldness of these attacks apparently knows no limits. For example, during the second week of February IS fighters attacked al-Baghdadi, a town just 5km from the Ain al-Asad base where 300 US Marines are training Iraqi soldiers. The town lies west of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province. Ramadi was once a stronghold of al-Qaeda-in-Iraq. Recent fighting has also been going on in the vicinity of Mosul and Kirkuk.

As in Iraq, ISIS has shown surprising military resilience in Syria. The group held onto the Syrian border town of Kobane for four months. They were only driven out by the combined strength of the Syrian Kurdish Popular Protection Units and Iraqi Peshmerga fighters after the town was subjected to more than 600 US-led air strikes. The Kurds took back control of Kobane, which dominates a key crossing into neighbouring Turkey, at the end of January. The Battle of Kobane left more than 1,000 ISIS fighters dead and destroyed or damaged 3,200 buildings.

This hardly looks like a knock out blow against ISIS, which simply took a tactical decision to abandon the town and strengthen its defences in another strategic border crossing, Tal Abyad, 65km to the east of Kobane. It is unclear if Kurdish operations were aid by the British military team in northern Iraq, which has been training and arming the Peshmerga fighters in Erbil. Publicly the UK gifted 40 heavy machine guns, 200 binoculars and four battalions' worth of body armour and helmets. These are hardly going to sway the balance of power, however. Of far greater utility to the Kurds and the Iraq government



©Getty Images

“The Islamic State is thriving off the carcasses of failed states in an arc stretching from Libya to Yemen.”

THE CALIPHATE



is intelligence gathered by RAF Reaper drone flights.

Yemen is another ongoing battleground for the Shia-Sunni struggle. The country is blighted by twin conflicts with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Shia Houthis. The latter are vexed by the distribution of power in the country, and this has revived talk of partition. Saudi Arabia is determined to counter Iranian influence in Yemen. But the Houthis are certainly not the servants of Tehran and have their own domestic agenda.

Last summer the Houthis took Sanna, the Yemeni capital, and earlier this year secured the presidential palace, declaring a new interim government. The Sunni Ansar al-Shaira group, which has links with al-Qaeda, was quick to retaliate by bombing and then capturing the town of

Bayhan in Shabwa province, despite a garrison of more than one thousand troops. Shabwa is reportedly an al-Qaeda stronghold.

In North Africa, ISIS has a newly-established foothold in Libya, which is odd as it is a predominantly Sunni country. Libya, though, is split with the internationally-recognised government exiled to Tobruk and a self-proclaimed leadership taking its place in Tripoli. US intelligence indicates ISIS set up training camps at Derna in eastern Libya at the end of 2014. It has also gained a hold in the coastal town of Sirte, where it murdered 21 Egyptian Christians. Suspected ISIS militants detonated three bombs in the eastern town of al-Qubbah in late February in response to Egypt's

Small victory: Iraqi troops celebrate around an Islamic State (IS) flag after regaining control of Diyala province, but the group continues to spread its reach



MARCH OF THE CALIPHATE



*The self-proclaimed
"Caliph Ibrahim", Abu
Bakr al-Baghdadi*

retaliatory air strikes against targets in Derna.

Rather than exploiting traditional friction with the Shia, it appears ISIS is benefiting from the weakness of Libya's traditional Islamist group, Ansar al-Sharia, which controls the city of Benghazi. ISIS will exploit the chaos by seeking further recruits and laying its hands on the country's vast weapons depots. What is worrying is that ISIS militants in Libya have vowed to attack Europe.

Neighbouring Egypt has a highly porous border with Libya and is fighting its own Islamist insurgency in Sinai. The Egyptian militant group Sinai Province (previously known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis) has pledged allegiance to ISIS. Attacks in Egypt escalated after Islamist President Mohammed Morsi was ousted by the military in 2013.

The Sinai Province group has called on Egyptians to oust President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, former commander of the powerful Egyptian Army. The focus for Islamist attacks has been El-Arish, the capital of Sinai. The Egyptian government holds Hamas-controlled Gaza responsible for this. To stop militants smuggling weapons from the Palestinian territory, the Egyptians are creating a 1km security buffer zone along the border with Gaza.

In Africa, Islamist groups, such as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, some with the same ideology and agenda as ISIS, continue to commit atrocities and make in-roads into government-controlled areas. While al-Qaeda has been contained, to some extent, in Algeria and Mali, Islamists continue to run amok in Kenya, Nigeria and Somalia.

The Somali Islamist group al-Shabaab views the presence of Kenyan troops in Somalia, as part of an African Union force, as little more than an "occupation". The Kenyan

military deployed to Somalia in 2011 after attacks in Kenya's Mandera region. Since then attacks on Kenyan soil have escalated, leading to calls for Kenya to pull out of Somalia. In order to punish the Kenyan government, al-Shabaab has been capitalising on the clan tensions in north-eastern Kenya along the troubled borders with Somalia and Ethiopia.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram controls great tracks of the country's north-east and the Nigerian military has proved incapable of defeating it. In February, Boko Haram's war expanded when it conducted its first attack on Chadian territory. Cross-border raids have also been conducted into neighbouring Cameroon and Niger. The Nigerian army's successes at Baga, Marte and Monguno are likely to be short-lived, however. Although Boko Haram's leader, Abubuakar Shekau, has not pledged loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, he has acknowledged him as the "caliph", thereby recognising his primacy in the Islamic State caliphate.

Long-term, Islamic State and its supporters are unlikely to win the war of the caliphate, but it is successfully undermining the fabric of society in every country it touches. Its PR offensive, while crude, barbaric and immoral, succeeds in creating fear and revulsion. As a terror organisation it is at the height of its game – where it will struggle is in holding onto the territory it has taken. Raising, training and equipping large numbers of troops is an expensive and time consuming process. While the governments it seeks to overthrow may be strapped for cash, they have the ability to strengthen their armed forces. They also have powerful friends who cannot sit by while Osama bin Laden's dream comes to fruition.

Anthony Tucker-Jones is *intersec's* Terrorism and Security Correspondent. He is a former defence intelligence officer and is now a widely published defence commentator specialising in regional conflicts and counter terrorism.