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## The caliphate vs. everyone else

*The Islamic State is managing to unite once divided global interests*

by Immanuel Wallerstein

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In the endless geopolitical realignments of the Middle East, the caliphate of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) seems to have frightened just about everyone else involved in Middle Eastern politics into a de facto geopolitical alliance. All of a sudden, we find Iran and the United States, the Kurds (both in Syria and Iraq) and Israel, Turkey and Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government, western Europe (Great Britain, France, and Germany) and Russia all pursuing in different ways the same objective: stop the caliphate from expanding and consolidating.

This hasn't yet altered significantly other loci of geopolitical conflicts such as Israel/Palestine and Ukraine, but it is sure to have an impact on them. Of course, all these actors are pursuing middle-term objectives that are quite different. Nonetheless, look at what has happened in just the first half of August.

Nouri al-Malaki has been ousted as Premier of Iraq under the combined pressure of the United States, Iran, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and the Kurds, primarily because he resisted including a significant role for Sunnis in the Iraqi government. And why was that important? Because, for all these actors, it seemed the only way to undermine the caliphate from within.

The United States has committed its drones and a new force of circa 1,000 Marines and Special Forces to safeguard Yazidis and Iraqi Christians from their slaughter (an operation requiring de

facto assistance by Bashar al-Assad), stopping the advance of the caliphate on Irbil — the Iraqi Kurdish capital, where there is a U.S. consulate and a significant number of other U.S. citizens — and probably other things after a currently ongoing assessment in the field. President Barack Obama refuses to indicate an end date for this operation and therefore almost certainly will have left unfulfilled his signature promise for a total withdrawal from Iraq during his presidency.

The Turkish government has closed down the open border for anti-Assad forces into Turkey, previously a key element in their Syrian policy. Former Senator Joseph Lieberman, a known hawk and ardent supporter of Israeli policies, has publicly praised Obama for what he has just done, while the Iranians have abstained from criticizing him. The Saudis, who can't seem to decide on their Syrian strategy, have apparently decided that silence and mystery is the best tactic.

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So what is next? And who is profiting from this realignment? There appear to be three obvious short-term winners. The first is the caliphate itself. The re-entry of the United States into the Iraqi military struggle enables the caliphate to portray itself as the major force defying the devil incarnate, the United States. It will serve to bring many additional recruits, especially from the western world. And one can expect that it will try to engage in hostile activities within the United States as well as western Europe. Of course, this short-term advantage would collapse, were the caliphate to suffer serious military reverses. But it would take some time for this to occur, if ever. The army of the caliphate appears still to be the most committed and trained military force in the region.

A second major winner is Bashar al-Assad. The outside support for anti-Assad forces has always been far less than decisive, and it is likely to dry up even further in the short term, as more and more Syrian opponents line up with the caliphate.

The third major winner is the Kurds, who have consolidated their position within Iraq and improved their relations with the Kurds in Syria. They will now be receiving more arms from western countries and possibly from others, making their military, the peshmerga, into an ever-stronger military force.

Are there clear losers? One, I suspect, is the United States. Unless the caliphate were to crumble in the near future (something that seems most unlikely), this military effort will soon expose once again the limits of U.S. military abilities as well as the inconsistency of their public positions concerning Iraq, Palestine and Ukraine. And Obama will have lost his biggest claim to geopolitical achievement. The U.S. public supports success, not a quagmire.

And there are at least three groups whose immediate future as winners or losers remains unclear. One is Iran. If the United States and Iran are on the same side both in Iraq and Afghanistan, can the United States refuse to come to some compromise agreement with Iran on the issues of nuclear energy? The Iranian position in this negotiation is at least strengthened.

A second is Hamas. The Israelis are already under heavy international pressure to reformulate their positions concerning Palestine. Will this emphasis on the dangers of the caliphate serve as additional pressure? Most probably, but the Israelis will stall as long as they can.

The third is Russia. As I write this, the Kiev government is resisting the entry of Russian trucks that the Russians say is a humanitarian mission to aid the trapped and suffering inhabitants of Lugansk, which is surrounded by Ukrainian troops seeking to starve them into surrender. Is this truly different from the efforts of the caliphate to starve the Yazidis on their mountain top into submission? If the United States and western Europe are in favor of humanitarian aid in one place, can they sustain the position of being against it in the other?

We are living in interesting times.