

Krieg gegen das Kalifat (War Against The Caliphate)

Wieland Schneider

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In theoretical terms, a caliphate represents a pre-modern political concept for the political organization of a state, which does not apply principles of separation of power between the different branches of government in a democratic tradition, but implies a combination and falling-together of political and religious leadership. Caliphates assert to stand in line of a direct legacy and continuation with the establishment and founding of Islam in the early seventh century. When the terror organization of ISIL, the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (sometimes also being translated as IS or ISIS, “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”), issued the claim of having (re-)established a caliphate in 2014, in a certain sense a political reality re-emerged with connotations now 1400 years old. While other terrorist organizations, like Al-Qaeda, operate more in formats of an underground organization, ISIL is driven by the desire of forming and building state (quasi-state) structures, expressed in the understanding of having set-up a caliphate. From an ISIL-perspective, only military defeat would drive complete ISIL back into the status of an underground organization.

Wieland Schneider is an experienced journalist and profound Middle East expert, now working for the prestigious Austrian newspaper *Die Presse* for several years, where he is deputy head of the foreign desk (*stellvertretender Leiter Außenpolitik*). For the whole period since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Schneider has travelled extensively to the Arab countries in the Middle East, conducting there empirical analyses on the ground, and drawing these together in comprehensive frames. In the book being reviewed here, the *Krieg gegen das Kalifat (War Against the Caliphate)*, Wieland Schneider successfully refers to the bigger picture, by placing recent develop-

ments and trends in Iraq and Syria into a broader context of understanding. After the collapse of the dictatorship regime of Saddam Hussein, Iraq did not transform into an emerging democracy. In Syria, the early protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad’s government, in 2011, were not allowed to push for more democracy, but were halted by the Syrian government in a brutal civil war, where moderate opposition forces have come under replacement pressures from radical Islamist insurgence groups (most prominently ISIL). Wieland Schneider’s book *Krieg gegen das Kalifat* offers in fact two tales or narratives. (1) The one narrative focuses on the dynamics of ISIL, the factors that have contributed to the growing of ISIL and the announcement of a caliphate so far. (2) The other narrative concentrates on the Kurds, how they extended their degrees of autonomy and self-determination, and how their regions have progressed, at least partially.

The book is structured into six sections: Introduction and conclusion present the bigger picture of development (by contrasting the two indicated narratives). Chapter two reviews carefully the underlying patterns of the current conflict lines. Chapter three reconstructs the conquest of Mosul by ISIL. Chapter four focuses on forces of resistance against ISIL. Furthermore, Chapter five applies an internal perspective for the dynamics within ISIL.

The factor of the Kurds: The Kurds extended their degrees of regional self-governance, in northern Iraq as well as in northern Syria. Their interpretation of culture and Islam is more modest and moderate. The Kurds in Iraq also transformed into having become a power factor. At the same time, the Kurds in Syria are exposed to different external pressures, most notably from Turkey

in the north. Turkey's partial and limited military intervention into northern Syria was aimed officially equally against ISIL and the Kurds (here mainly the groups of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party), but informally the main thrust was against the Kurds. As Wieland Schneider notes: "The government in Ankara decided, to act militarily. However, the main objective was not ISIL ... The main objective was the Kurdistan Workers' Party" (pages 238-239).

The factor of ISIL: According to Wieland Schneider, what makes ISIL so distinct and specific, are (1) the levels of publicly demonstrated atrocities, (2) the introduction of slavery, but also (3) the way, how ISIL managed these approaches in their media propaganda, using social media and videos. ISIL could and does tailor its media messages, depending on and differentiating between media markets, addressing Arab countries or Western societies in various and particular ways. For this, Schneider also introduces the term of "Jihadism" as a form of a "bizarre pop culture" (page 213). All of this feeds into the interest of ISIL to build the quasi-state structures of a caliphate, supported and defended by ISIL insurgent groups in the West, so to strike there directly terrorist attacks. Furthermore, ISIL attempts to diffuse into other Arab countries, most notably Libya. In that sense, ISIL may also be interpreted as a fluid spectrum, ranging from underground groups on the one side, over to state building attempts on the other. These state-building efforts of ISIL make ISIL distinct (and draw a line of difference against Al-Qaeda).

The broader context of the Arab Spring: From the countries of the Arab Spring, so far, only Tunisia managed to follow successfully a path toward more democracy and democratization. By this, Tunisia represents a potential role model for a transformation from authoritarianism toward democracy for the whole region analyzed. A vast majority of the other Arab countries suffered from a decline in levels of modest democracy attempts, when the years 2011-2012 and 2014-2015 are taken as reference points (Democracy Ranking 2016). The latest "Arab Human Development Report 2016", issued by the United Nations Development Program, also indicates several troublesome developments: the "report warns that the policies and practices of exclusion across various fields, the lack of sufficient protection of political freedoms and human rights, weak economic competitiveness and the failure to establish good governance — particularly through greater transparency and accountability — are threatening the future prospects of youth and drawing some into circumstances that hinder their development." Therefore: "This report calls for placing young people at the heart of the development process, which includes providing young people with genuine opportunities to unleash their energy and shape their future" (page 17). Wieland Schneider's book *Krieg gegen das Kalifat* is so important, because it provides a broader perspective and in-depth analysis for Syria and Iraq, also by contrasting so

different phenomena as ISIL's establishment of a caliphate and a growing self-determinism of the Kurds. In a positive scenario, the Kurdish regions can also work in favor of advancing the democratic esteem.

Further references

- Democracy Ranking (2017). The Democracy Ranking 2016. Vienna: Democracy Ranking Organization (<http://democracyranking.org/wordpress/>).
- United Nations Development Program (2016). Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in Changing Reality. New York, NY: United Nations (<http://arab-hdr.org/PreviousReports/2016/2016.aspx>).