The Caliphates’ Foreign Legion – What will happen to it?

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This monograph will speculate on possible futures of the Caliphate using a six-month horizon, beginning from the point at which the paper is accepted. It will focus on the future of westerners who fight for the Caliphate. In the assessment, the use of the word “positive” means that the Caliphate’s capabilities are more likely to be degraded. “Negative,” as used here, means that the Caliphate’s capabilities are less likely to be degraded. Wild cards refer to possible events that would have a major impact on the status of western fighters in the Caliphate.

Wild Cards

• **The determination of Western powers to destroy the Caliphate** -
  As of October 2015, there is not a coordinated, large-scale, sustained air-land attack, on the Caliphate. Should a multi-national coalition, with military capabilities comparable to Desert Storm, it would likely destroy the Caliphate.

• **The ability of Syrian and Iraqi forces to destroy the Caliphate** -
  As of September 2015, Syrian and Iraqi forces have blunted the expansion of the Caliphate. It is possible that Syrian and Iraq forces, with the probable assistance of Iran and Russia, can destroy the Caliphate. There is no indication that this will happen by March 2016.

• **A shift of tactics stressing Caliphate-ordered or Caliphate-Inspired killed in western countries, rather than encouraging travel to the Islamic State**
  As of September 2015, the Caliphate’s information operations try to persuade westerners to travel to the Middle East. This strategy may shift. As the European Union absorbs hundreds of thousands of displayed Syrian, the security and intelligence services of the countries will become strained. The Caliphate may shift focus and encourage westerners Jihadis to attack sites on the continent.

Possible Status of the Caliphate in March 2016

Below are listed five key issues involving the Caliphate, each of which offers an optimistic and pessimistic scenarios.

• **The Caliphate’s existence.**
Optimistic estimate - An optimistic assessment sees the Caliphate as still existing, but being significantly weakened, unable to expand its territory or being on the defense, being unable to contest a stepped-up aerial attack and possible, if limited, ground attack by its enemies. Its ability to export oil and antiquities is severely constrained. This is a still-existing but increasingly vulnerable and largely contained Caliphate.

Pessimistic estimate - A pessimistic assessment sees the Caliphate as, not only existing, but thriving. It has consolidated currently contested territory; it has welcomed and trained new Western and non-Western recruits; it has replenished its stock of weapons through revenue from oil and annuities sales, increased donations from Muslims, and through the theft of non-Muslims under its control. Their ability to make weapons of denial or significant destruction has expanded.

• The desire of western Muslims to join its ranks. Many Western Muslims have the desire and are willing to make significant sacrifice, sometimes their lives, to travel to the Caliphate. Will this continue?

Optimistic estimate - An optimistic assessment sees the desire of the Western Muslims to join the Caliphate as having waned. Reasons for this include the increased lethality of air strikes, growing awareness in Western Muslim communities of the difficult life styles, the cruelty meted out to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Jihadis will not feel the need to live as Muslims in the Caliphate because of changing Muslim-friendly conditions in the West. Perhaps most ominously, they can act in solidarity with the Caliphate by attacking targets in their home Western countries.

Pessimistic estimate - A pessimistic assessment sees the desire of western Muslims to join the Caliphate as increasing. They are optimistic about the future of the Caliphate and do not envision a stepped-up United States-led campaign as likely. Western countries do not hinder the flow of those who want to leave. The security services in western states are overwhelmed with the summer 2015 influx of Syrian migrants.

• The physical ability of western Muslims to travel from western homes and reach the Caliphate.

Optimistic estimate - An optimistic assessment sees fewer western Muslims able to enter the Caliphate’s territory. Western intelligence and security services are more experienced and better understand the tactics, techniques, and procedures of the Caliphate. They have penetrated the logistical networks. Turkey has cooperated with western powers and has plugged major arteries into Syria and Iraq. European states have followed Norway’s example of expanding the capabilities of the police and security forces in their efforts to break the Caliphate’s recruiting efforts.
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Pessimistic estimate - A pessimistic assessment sees the continuation of the present situation. There will be insufficient barriers to prevent westerners from reaching the Caliphate. Western intelligence and security services. Though the western intelligence and security services have interrupted many attempts to enter the Caliphate’s territory, the Caliphate has devised new means to circumvent choke points.

- The financial ability of western Muslim to travel from western homes and Reach the Caliphate.

Optimistic estimate - An optimistic assessment sees fewer western Muslims able to finance their travel. Some of the travel to the Caliphate has been subsidized by Caliphate-friendly donors. Buses have afford cheaper travel in border areas. But, in March 2016, many buses are no longer available because they are inspected. This requires car travel, which is more expensive. Further, inexpensive hotels are monitored by security services.

Pessimistic estimate - A pessimistic assessment sees the travel cost remaining relatively cheap. Europeans will be able to travel to Turkey or to Greece and continue the caravan to the Caliphate. The Caliphate has placed its operatives in key logistical positions to facilitate travel from the west.

- Ability to live in the Caliphate.

Optimistic estimate - An optimistic assessment sees life for westerners as increasingly difficult. Revenue for billeting, weapons and munitions, medicine and other essential has decreased. The constant fear of aerial attack weakens morale. The military capabilities of the Syrian and Iraqi forces have increased. Internal resistance of Christians and Kurds has become more spirited.

Pessimistic estimate - A pessimistic assessment sees life in the Caliphate as flourishing, by the standards of war zones. The Caliphate continues to provide basic necessities, particularly food, shelter, and medicine for it western fighters. The flight of refugees from Syria has expanded, which has created a vacuum for Caliphate fighters. Because the Caliphate as seen as the “strong horse” in the Middle East, it continues to draw financial support from around the Sunni world.