

Opinion & Analysis

1 year on: ISIL still occupies 'vacant lots'

Behind the Scenes

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It has been one year since the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) extremist group, which controls areas in Iraq and Syria, declared the establishment of a caliphate (see ☐) in late June last year. The Yomiuri Shimbun spoke with Chiba University Prof. Keiko Sakai, an expert in Middle East politics, on the current situation and future outlook.

Desperation after dictatorship

The Yomiuri Shimbun: On June 26, exactly one year since the declaration of the establishment of a caliphate, terrorist attacks rocked the Middle East and Europe. What is your reading of this?

Keiko Sakai: Following the start of Ramadan, which began in mid-June, ISIL announced plans to attack other religions, whereupon young people who sympathized with this idea appear to have launched attacks independently. Throughout the region, disaffected young people have been incited by ISIL's proclamations and taken them as carte blanche to carry out attacks, and by calling themselves followers of ISIL created the potential for an extreme and shocking degree of terrorism.

Q: A large proportion of foreign-born people flowing into areas under ISIL control come from Tunisia, the only country since the Arab Spring where attempts at democratization have continued. With its wholesale destruction and brutal killing of people of other religions and sects, what is it about ISIL that appeals to young people?

A: When dictatorships are toppled an easier way of life is expected, but this has not transpired right away. Young people seem to have lost hope after seeing the "roundabout process" democratization entails.

ISIL aims to absorb all of the dissatisfaction lingering throughout the Middle East after the Arab Spring through an outstanding PR approach and by sending out clear messages. This is not Islam as a form of political thought that interprets how to adapt Sharia law to the changing times, but rather a verbatim interpretation of Mohammed's words and deeds in the Koran, which have a direct causal and retributive stance, such as by saying a thief's hands should be cut off and followers of other religions and false idols be



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Keiko Sakai

Sakai, 56, formerly held posts as a researcher at the Institute of Developing Economies and as a professor at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. She also served as chairman of the Japan Association of International Relations. Published works include "Chuto kara Sekai ga Mieru" (The world as seen from the Middle East).

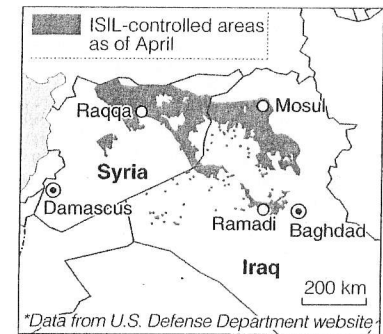
condemned. This is something frustrated young people understand.

Place for Sunni followers

Q: ISIL is trying to break down the existing borders of

Iraq and Syria, and challenge the concept of a modern state.

A: There is no mistake that ISIL's declaration to destroy the existing order and achieve an ideal sovereign state of Islam has shocked the world, but these statements do not conform to reality. Following the turmoil after the Iraq War and Arab Spring, ISIL members merely took up residence in "vacant lots" where Iraqi and Syrian sovereignty has not reached, and have arbitrarily made statements about creating a caliphate. While it is true that some factions within Islamic society are dissatisfied with the sovereign systems created by the West in the Middle East and consider the preexisting Islamic caliphate preferable, it



"Young people have lost hope about the roundabout process democratization entails"

would be too much to say that there is a sudden longing for a caliphate.

Q: What are the characteristics of ISIL?

A: In contrast to Al-Qaida, which attempted to start a global battle against the United States as an enemy of the Islamic community, ISIL members, who are Sunni Muslims, are trying to suppress territories and create in them a sovereign state for Sunni followers. They want to eradicate Shiite Muslims and Christians that they encounter there.

The most salient aspect is its non-state character. In other words, while they talk about a state, it does not fit within the rubric of what we consider a state, or even into the concept of international society. The Taliban wanted to be recognized as the legitimate representative of Afghanistan as a sovereign state, and it emphasized diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. However, ISIL has no interest in being recognized as a sovereign state, nor does it concern

itself with building relationships with other countries.

Must be contained

Q: How should the United States and countries in the Middle East deal with an entity they cannot coexist with?

A: ISIL has managed to create and run a completely different entity based on a mafia-type economy. What other countries can do from a military point of view is to prevent its expansion of its domain of control. By diminishing the "vacant lots" that ISIL finds useful and containing them economically, ISIL can be forced to collapse as a governing body. In this way, just as Al-Qaida's proclamations died out, ISIL's movement will go out of fashion.

Q: What is Japan's role in this?

A: What Japan can do is limited, but one important step is to provide assistance to refugees who have fled to nearby countries. There is the risk of refugees being recruited as suicide bombers, so they have to be looked after by a reliable organization.



Caliphate

A political system where the caliph, considered to be the successor or proxy of the Prophet Mohammed, rules. Based on the viewpoint that sovereignty resides in God (Allah), ISIL justifies its position as the sole just political system.
