ISIS: Many Faces, Different Battles

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The United States entered the battle against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) after much hesitation and yet rather suddenly. After refraining for long months from intervening in the conflict in Syria by supporting the moderate—that is non-Islamist—forces, the Obama administration rushed into action after ISIS overran Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, in June 2014. It was a quick, emotional decision that was neither backed by an overall plan on how to tackle the organization nor even by a clear understanding of its many components.

Even now statements by administration officials reveal a degree of confusion about what needs to be done to degrade and eventually defeat ISIS. The organization, the administration insists, cannot be fought by military means alone. Political steps in the form of the formation of inclusive governments are also necessary, as is educating young Muslims attracted to Islamic extremism about the real values of their religion. In reality, some aspects of ISIS can only be defeated by military means. Politics plays a role in defeating ISIS, but political solutions will need to go way beyond what the United States is now con-

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sidering. And draining the swamp from which ISIS attracts supporters by spreading a tolerant vision of Islam is a task for which the United States is not even remotely qualified and would be wise to forego.

ISIS has at least three components, and policies that might help against one of these components may make attempts to combat the others more difficult. First, ISIS is a proto-state that controls territory in both Syria and Iraq—I will refer to this territory-controlling organization as the Islamic State. The boundaries of this state are contested and the degree of actual control the leadership has on the territory is unclear; there are probably pockets of hard control and areas where the hold of the leadership is tenuous. But there is no doubt that there is a state in the making in parts of Iraq and Syria—a caliphate according to its leaders. This is the aspect of ISIS that has received the most attention. The United States and European countries only overcame their hesitation to re-enter the Iraq and Levant quagmire when ISIS overran Mosul. Nevertheless, this localized territorial state is not the most threatening aspect of ISIS, except for people living in or close to its territory.

Much more dangerous is the second aspect of ISIS as part of a network, or networks, of radical Islamist groups that operate across the Muslim world and beyond. The success of the Islamic State and the attention it has garnered by controlling territory have created an incentive for other groups to declare their allegiance to it. It is rarely clear what declaring allegiance means in practice. Does it mean that the organization receives orders from ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and does his bidding? Does it mean that the group coordinates some operations with ISIS while essentially maintaining its autonomy? Does a group that declares allegiance receive financial support or conversely pay tribute? Does ISIS channel foreign fighters to it? Or is declaring allegiance simply a means for a group to increase

its visibility and jihadi legitimacy? Most probably, no answer fits all organizations.

Third, ISIS is something even vaguer than these networks. For lack of a better term, I will define it as "ISIS as a state of mind": the accumulation of grievances and resentment, anger, frustration, youthful idealism, religious fervor, and the desire for an exciting alternative to a drab life without a future. This state of mind attracts thousands of young men (and some women) from Muslim countries and the West to go fight in Syria and Iraq, or to carry out terrorist attacks in their own countries in the name of vague ideals and uncertain goals.

The three aspects of course are related but not in ways that are always clear. When angry young Muslims travel to Syria or Iraq, they do so to join a specific organization called ISIS. But when they return to mount lone wolf attacks in Western countries, they do not necessarily do so under order by ISIS or any other organization. And if the Islamic State was defeated and lost its territory, other radical organizations would probably stop declaring their allegiance to it and flock to another group, as others in the past turned from al-Qaeda to ISIS. Most importantly, the different aspects of ISIS cannot be fought with the same means.

ISIS as a Proto-State

Fighters belonging to ISIS overran Mosul, the capital of Nineveh Province, on June 10, 2014. ISIS already held a large part of western Syria. It had also occupied parts of Anbar Province in Iraq, including much of Fallujah and Ramadi, since January 2014. The United States remained paralyzed with indecision. In Syria, it did not want to support the Bashar al-Assad government against ISIS—in theory the United States was committed to Assad's demise. In Iraq, it had increased shipments of Hellfire missiles

and drones and was discussing the possibility of providing more Apache helicopters. However, the Iraqi government had not mounted a serious effort to reassert its control over its lost territory, making such assistance moot. The sudden fall of Mosul and the collapse of the Iraqi military forced the Obama administration to increase its engagement and eventually launch bombing raids on ISIS-held positions in Iraq and Syria.

Mosul fell not because ISIS overpowered the Iraqi Army, but because the Iraqi Army did not fight. Its strength was sapped by corruption, the political appointments of officers, and the attraction of its Sunni members to ISIS. The military units stationed in Mosul and Nineveh Province fled back toward Baghdad, surrendering almost the entire province and their weapons to ISIS. By late 2014, the United States estimated that only 7 to 9 of the 14 Iraqi army divisions that existed—largely on paper, it turned out—before the collapse were still in conditions to engage in combat to some extent. In January 2015, a sober Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was still admitting that it would take three years to rebuild the Iraqi military. The only serious resistance came from units of the Kurdish *peshmerga,* which moved quickly into territory it claimed beyond the official boundaries of the Kurdistan region and found itself trying to protect a 1,000-km border against ISIS.

Building on its military success, on June 29 ISIS changed its name simply to Islamic State and proclaimed the beginning of a new caliphate that would eventually unite all Muslims under the religious and political leadership of a descendant of the Prophet. Although the revival of an all-embracing caliphate was a chimera, the possibility that the Islamic State would succeed in expanding its boundaries appeared real at the time. Even Baghdad appeared threatened initially.

ISIS was serious about building the new state. Captured documents, accounts by people who man-

aged to escape, and other information that inevitably surfaced suggest a systematic effort to address the problem of state building. It included extracting resources to finance the war through extortion and smuggling of resources; developing the organization necessary to do so systematically; and using that organizational capacity to install the rudiments of state administration, such as a bureaucracy.[1] Indeed, available information suggests a striking parallel between the building of the Islamic State and that of European states, according to the provocative and somewhat cynical thesis set forth by historian Charles Tilly.[2] The Islamic State is a horrible construct, where rule is harsh, individuals have no rights, and punishment is severe. It is nevertheless a state in the making.

The proclamation of an Islamic state governed by shari'a and the tangible proof that its leaders intended to continue expanding its boundaries mobilized the United States and an international coalition. By early August, the Obama administration had started limited bombing of Islamic State targets, particularly in Iraq where Kurdish *peshmerga* on the ground were already trying to stop the organization's advance.

In reality, the threat posed by the Islamic State was much more localized than the reaction of the United States and the countries that joined it in the fight suggests. The formation of the new state was undoubtedly a tragedy for the populations directly affected: over 850,000 people were internally displaced in Iraq as a result, a large part of them religious minorities. In Syria, new waves of refugees brought the total number since 2011 to 3.7 million. The Islamic State has imposed brutal control, extorting money, seizing properties, and imposing harsh punishment on those who violate their orders and their interpretation of shari'a—new horror stories continue to surface.

For the Iraqi government, the formation of the Islamic State meant the loss of a significant part

of its territory—as much as one-third, according to some estimates—and, as importantly, a deep humiliation—the Iraqi Army, which had a frontline strength of over 200,000 when the United States left, was in such disarray that it could be routed by a few thousand ISIS fighters.[3]

But for the rest of the world, the creation of a territorial state is not the major danger emanating from ISIS. Testifying in front of the Senate Homeland Security Committee on September 10, 2014 Francis X. Taylor, the Department of Homeland Security's Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis, declared he was unaware of any specific credible threat to the U.S. homeland from the Islamic State.

Furthermore, the Islamic State as a territorial entity is the aspect of ISIS that has the greatest chances of being defeated. The aura of invincibility the organization gained during the summer of 2014 has largely dissipated. Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, Iran-backed Shi'a militias, and to a lesser extent some units of the Iraqi Army have been able to stop the advance and even regain territory with the assistance of U.S. airstrikes. Even in Syria, where a complicated three-way war is being fought among the Syrian Army, the Islamic State, and the weak non-Islamist opposition, the Islamic State has been halted in Kobane by a combination of local Kurdish fighters, *peshmerga* from Iraqi Kurdistan, and U.S. airstrikes.

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This does not mean that it will be easy to dismantle the Islamic State. In all battles, progress has been slow, with ISIS fighters repeatedly mounting new attacks in areas that appeared liberated, including around Kirkuk, the Mosul Dam, and Sinjar. Nevertheless, Diyala Province is now back in the hands of the pro-government Shi'a militias, and the Kurds control not only their autonomous region but also much of the surrounding territory they claim as rightfully theirs.

In the fight against the Islamic State, the United States and other members of the coalition can make a difference. The fight is essentially a military one and politics plays a secondary role. There is no conceivable political concession by the Iraqi or Syrian governments that will make the hardcore of ISIS give up. Possibly, major political concessions on the part of Damascus or Baghdad might convince some people who support ISIS because of grievances against their governments to rethink their position. Some Sunni tribes and former Ba'athists in Iraq fall in this category. But there is no evidence at this point that any game-changing political deals are in the making.

The political component to the battle against the Islamic State, which U.S. officials proclaim to be crucial, remains very weak. In Iraq, the "inclusive" government the United States insisted must be put in place is not radically different from the previous

one. New Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has a much more conciliatory and friendly demeanor than the unapologetically sectarian and dour Nouri al-Maliki. The cabinet is multi-sectarian in its composition—but so was al-Maliki's. And al-Abadi is still relying mostly on Shi'a militias openly supported by Iran to protect Baghdad and regain control in Diyala and Salahuddin provinces, which does nothing to gain the confidence of the Sunni population. The proposed National Guard, with provincial units controlled by their respective provincial councils, has not been formed, and the bill that would allow it to be formed has not been sent to the parliament. Adding to the tension, Shi'a militias have been accused of committing massacres of Sunnis in some areas of Diyala Province they liberated from the Islamic State's control. And while the *peshmerga* is the key to winning back territory in the North, neither al-Abadi nor the United States has changed their position toward the autonomy of Kurdistan or control over Kirkuk and other disputed territories. Furthermore, Kurds bitterly complain that they are not receiving the heavy weapons they badly need because all military aid is filtered through Baghdad.

The goal of convincing Sunnis that have backed or at least tolerated the Islamic State because of their grievances against Baghdad thus remains unfulfilled. It is unlikely it will be attained unless Sunnis are guaranteed a real role in governing Iraq, something which probably cannot be done short of allowing the formation of a Sunni region with as much autonomy as Kurdistan. Neither the Iraqi government nor the United States are willing to discuss autonomy. The political battle against the Islamic State, in other words, has hardly started in Iraq, and all gains so far have been made purely by military means.

In Syria, the situation is much worse. Except in the Kurdish north, only the Syrian army is fighting the Islamic State. Six months after the formation of the Islamic State, the United States and its allies have not started training the Syrian moderate opposition and the United States still only provides non-lethal equipment and food rations. The political strategy appears to be collapsing. Faced with the stubbornness of Bashar al-Assad about holding onto power, the evidence that his military is still capable of fighting, and the weakness of the moderate opposition, the Obama administration may be rethinking its policy toward al-Assad and getting ready to make a deal that will leave him in place. Whether or not this is the case, such perception is widespread and obviously weakens the political will of moderates to fight ISIS, because its weakening could strengthen al-Assad.

ISIS, in conclusion can and most probably will be defeated militarily, at least in Iraq. There could be a political component to the battle against it, but it has not been engaged in earnest, neither by the Iraqi and Syrian governments, nor by the United States.

ISIS and the Islamist Networks

ISIS is not only the Islamic State, with its hierarchies and bureaucracy, but also a set of networks that are much more difficult to identify and catalogue accurately. Not only are they complex, but they are in constant flux, as all networks are. ISIS's success in conquering and holding territory created an aura of success and even invincibility on which other organizations sought to capitalize. As a result, a growing number of organizations now claims an affiliation to ISIS, whether or not they actually have a meaningful one.

This is not unprecedented, of course. After its spectacular attack on the twin towers in New York and on the Pentagon, al-Qaeda became a magnet

for radical Islamist groups, anxious to associate themselves with an organization that was, in their eyes, a winner. New groups carrying the al-Qaeda name sprung up in the following years—al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia (also known as al-Qaeda in Iraq), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—and media started talking about "al-Qaeda central" and its "franchises," as if these groups were licensed by the original organization. In reality, this was not the case. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, for example, was a mostly Algerian organization that rose from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC), the most radical of the Islamist groups that had battled the Algerian government in the 1990s. After the Islamist uprising against the government was effectively crushed, the SGPC did not lay down arms, but holed up deep in the Sahara, pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2003 and changing its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb three years later.

The networks that have sprung up around ISIS are equally difficult to define precisely, certainly not on the basis of open sources, but also for intelligence services. Nobody talks of an "ISIS central" and its "franchises," but many organizations have pledged their allegiance to ISIS. The list of such organizations and even individuals is long and in some cases bizarre. The main Egyptian terrorist organization operating in Sinai, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, made headlines when it pledged allegiance to the caliphate on November 10, 2014, changing its name to the Sinai Province to underline that it saw the area, still controlled by the Egyptian government, to be an intrinsic part of the Islamic State. Many other organizations had already pledged allegiance to ISIS, and even more would do so by early 2015. They included Ansar al-Sharia and Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam in Libya, Jund al-Khilafah in Algeria, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid in Indonesia, a mosque in Denmark, a lone man in Texas, a group of radical women associated with Madrasa Jamia Hafsa in Islamabad, the perpetrators of the January 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket in France, and even hackers who broke into the computers of a radio station in Maryland and into the CENTCOM Twitter account. A Caucuses Emirate, supported by a number of commanders from Chechnya and Dagestan, also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Some al-Qaeda-affiliated organizations divided, with segments breaking off al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and turning to ISIS instead. Similarly, some members of the Pakistani Taliban pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, causing the organization as a whole to renew its allegiance to Mullah Omar in Afghanistan.

A systematic search of social media and Islamist websites would undoubtedly turn up other examples of groups that have pledged allegiance to ISIS. The real question, however, is not who pledges allegiance, but which pledges are indications of a real relationship and which are simply attempts by groups or

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individuals to give themselves greater legitimacy. ISIS certainly does not issue orders and control the actions of all or even any of the organizations that pledged alliance to it, but there is probably a degree of cooperation in some cases. At the other extreme, some of the groups may not even be directly in touch with ISIS, yet the affiliation is not necessarily irrelevant. When ISIS calls on its followers to launch attacks in the countries where they reside, some may be inspired to heed the exhortation and act on their own. Another question is whether the networks being built around ISIS will last or whether another organization will surface as the magnet for Islamic extremists. ISIS replaced al-Qaeda as the magnet for Islamic extremists, and it is quite likely that it will eventually also be replaced in that role by a new organization.

Territorial losses by the Islamic State may in the long run decrease its appeal to other Islamist groups, but such organizations will not die out if the Islamic State fails. Most such organizations are essentially local. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis may call itself the Sinai Province now, but it is still focused on fighting the Egyptian army and police in Sinai. It may receive some support from ISIS in the form of weapons, money, or even foreign fighters, but it was formed without ISIS support and can continue without it. In fact, 14 years into the war on terror declared by the United States after September 11, there is plenty of evidence that terrorist organizations and networks are resilient, regrouping and transforming when necessary, but rarely disappearing completely. The United States thought it had defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq, but the organization re-emerged as ISIS, for example. Algeria celebrated its victory over Islamist organizations, extended amnesty to former combatants, and declared the war to be over in 1999, and 15 years later it is fighting al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the successor to the supposedly defeated Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat. Indeed,

most extremist Islamist groups have convoluted histories of transformation, resilience, and rebirth as new groups or networks.

From the point of view of Western countries, these networks, murky, shifting, difficult to pin down, represent a much greater threat than the Islamic State as a territory-controlling organization. The Islamic State cannot strike far from its borders. The networks around ISIS, or even groups and individuals inspired by it, can. For all the attention it receives, and the expenditure of money, materiel, and training devoted to degrading and defeating it, the Islamic State as a territorial entity is small, weak, and incapable of inflicting harm on Western countries. Its successes are a testimony to the disarray of states in the Middle East, not to its inherent strength. The threat does not come from the well-defined Islamic State but from the networks of organizations and even from individuals—the difficult to detect and stop lone wolves feared by security services everywhere.

Such networks will not be degraded by military actions or even by political interventions. In the short run, the battle is a painstaking one that only intelligence services can wage by gathering information and keeping organizations under surveillance. Intelligence failures are more dangerous to the United States and Europe than a battle lost in Iraq and Syria. And there is no victory in sight against such shifting networks.

ISIS as a State of Mind

The most intractable aspect of ISIS is the complex of factors that fire the imagination and inspire the commitment of the thousands of young people who are attracted to radical extremism and elect to go fight on jihad's latest front. Today they travel to Iraq

and Syria as they flocked to Afghanistan, Bosnia, or U.S.-occupied Iraq in the past, and will head to some other conflict in the future. People join in these fights for an array of different reasons. Some are political, others are psychological, and some—probably not the most important—are religious. In most cases, people electing to fight in a particular country have no ties to it. The young man traveling to the Islamic State from an American city has a different motivation than the former Ba'athist resentful of the al-Maliki regime.

Many young people that are attracted to ISIS today, or to al-Qaeda a few years ago, are similar to those who in other times and places turned to other radical movements offering both a vague promise of a better world and a sense of adventure. In earlier times, they might have become communists or conversely fascists, gone to fight in the Spanish Civil War, become anarchists, or they could have become gang members in their own country. They join for adventure, idealism, a quest for identification with something broader than their lives, resentment about real or imagined slights. Muslim youth are the most likely to be attracted to ISIS because it is easy for them to identify with it, but the motivation is not always religious. As Olivier Roy found in his studies of young North Africans being radicalized in France, most know very little about Islam and are not particularly interested in learning more.

Fighting ISIS as a state of mind may be the most difficult battle, because the target is diffuse. The

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Islamic State has to be fought on the ground, village by village, regaining territory and pushing back the frontiers of the proto-state. This does not mean that the battles are easy, but it is at least clear where the frontline is. Fighting ISIS networks means gathering more information on organizations that are morphing and realigning, but are limited in numbers. The battle against ISIS as a state of mind has no frontlines, the danger can be anywhere, and efforts to curb the problem can easily back fire. Exposing young Muslims to more liberal, tolerant interpretations of Islam is the often prescribed solution. It is a good idea in theory but extremely difficult to implement in practice. And in any case it could only work with people whose motivation to join the ISIS cause is primarily religious.

Some countries have had some success in convincing Islamists to abandon violence. Egypt did so in 2002 with the imprisoned leaders of al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the organization responsible for assassinating President Anwar Sadat in 1981. Under pressure from the government, and with the strong incentive of eventually gaining release in front of them, they published from prison a number of treatises disavowing their previous position. They also talked their followers into also renouncing violence. Such an outcome is rare. Saudi Arabia has only limited success with programs to de-radicalize young people attracted to Islamic extremism. The programs, which have been

underway for many years, are quite well thought out. They combine religious re-education with efforts to provide the young men involved with job training, outlets for energy through sports, psychological support, and reinsertion into the community with a job and even a wife. The program is probably as good as they come, although the interpretation of Islam offered as an alternative to jihadi extremism is not a liberal and tolerant one, in keeping with Wahhabi control over religious matters in Saudi Arabia. The program recognizes that the re-education of radicalized youth requires intensive, one-on-one attention and ample resources. And the government admits that it also needs to be backed up by intimate knowledge of the communities the young radicals come from, thus networks of informers and close surveillance. The chances that it can be duplicated elsewhere, particularly on the large scale needed to prevent radicalization, is remote.

And it is an approach that could easily backfire dangerously if Western countries sought to implement any aspect of it. Attempts by any Western government to decide how Islam should be interpreted would cause resentment; it does not take a great effort to imagine the reaction in the United States if the government of a predominantly Muslim country decided to promote a specific interpretation of Christianity's real meaning. And the increased surveillance in Muslim communities that would help spot potential recruits to radical Islamist movements would also increase resentment. Young Muslims in the West already feel discriminated against and under suspicion. More recently, imams in Western countries who are encouraged to promote a more tolerant Islam complain that they are being made responsible for addressing a problem with roots that go far beyond what the mosques are preaching.

There are steps Western countries can take to address the factors that breed support for ISIS and Islamic extremism, but they are indirect, long term, and would probably have limited effect. They are the same steps that any society can take to address social conditions that breed resentment and violence: address discrimination, promote integration, improve educational and job opportunities—all long-term interventions that require the political will and resources few countries are willing to mobilize to address fundamental social problems.

Fighting ISIS

The war against the Islamic State that the United States and other countries have joined since June 2014 is the most visible and in a sense the simplest and most winnable part of a fight against the complex phenomenon represented by ISIS. There are still important unanswered questions surrounding the war, particularly in Syria, but there are already signs of progress, which could be accelerated if the neglected political issues started being addressed.

The fight against the networks of radical organizations is going to be longer and more difficult, and will not end in a clear victory. It is possible to envisage the end of the Islamic State as a territorial entity in the foreseeable future, but not the disappearance of the networks of violent extremist organizations that right now converge toward ISIS but can easily reconfigure in the future. Realistically, fighting these networks means hampering their activities, foiling their plots, and keeping them from striking. Specific organizations can be degraded by tracking their financial networks, capturing some of their leaders, or denying them some safe heavens, but they will re-

emerge in some guise. This is an international fight that requires cooperation among many countries and their intelligence services.

The fight against ISIS as a state of mind is less an international fight and more of a domestic one. The fight has to be tailored to specific conditions in each country that feeds fighters to ISIS and other organizations. International efforts can help in keeping people from traveling across borders but not in drying up the supply of willing fighters. Each country is different in terms of the causes of resentment and even more in the tools they can or are willing to use to address the problem. And this is the battle most countries are least likely to fight because it is, ultimately, a battle against deep-rooted social problems many prefer to ignore.

Endnotes

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