

DEFEATING ISIS: MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

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Brussels, May 28

“ISIS will be the winner if the civil conflict in Libya continues. And DAESH (Arabic acronym for ISIS) wants the civil war to continue!” United Nations Special Representative to Libya Bernardino Leon said at a news conference adding that DAESH is likely to win while Libya is in danger of collapse.

On May 24 Hizbullah chief Nasrallah warned that if the Lebanese state fails to oppose ISIS, Hizbullah would fight to prevent ISIS taking a foothold in Lebanon. Addressing Lebanon 's Christians, Nasrallah asked: “Who will protect your women from enslavement and your churches from destruction?”

Militant Islamist groups such as Boko Haram have recently pledged alliance to ISIS, uniting across the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

And what if ISIS, having available billions of dollars, call on its followers in Pakistan to purchase a nuclear device through weapon dealers with links to corrupt officials?

ISIS

ISIS grew out of the chaos and sectarian hatred unleashed at the end of the Iraq war. ISIS governs a territory stretching from Aleppo to Fallujah, being a state of its own with administrative buildings, courts, street signs and newspapers. Having established a caliphate, an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, ISIS maintains that is the duty of all Muslims to emigrate to it and renounce the citizenship of any other nation, while waiting, after a period of renewed Islamic conquest, for the final showdown and victory with the Crusaders.

US intelligence estimates there are around 31,000 ISIS militants, 2/3 of them being foreign fighters.

ISIS is financing itself through oil extraction in eastern Syria and Mosul, smuggling, racketeering and kidnapping, donations from wealthy individuals and from private jihadi networks in the Gulf, and the looting of hundreds of million of dollars from Mosul's banks.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is emerging as a social and political movement in many Sunni areas, filling a void in the absence of solid national identity and security. At the same time it responds brutally to any other Sunni group, militant or civilian, posing a challenge to its supremacy.

To make sure people are scared of its deeds, ISIS conducts a sophisticated and horrific propaganda campaign made up of innovative principles of public relations and images of mass executions (with terrified and unarmed captives brutally killed after digging their own graves). ISIS propaganda is paying off in the battlefield: its media campaign achieves the desired outcome when demoralized enemy soldiers, terrified of ISIS, shed their uniform and flee.

A central goal of ISIS is expansion. By conquering key cities in Iraq and Syria, it is building a broad colonial empire across many countries. A year after announcing its expansion goals, it is operating or has cells in more than a dozen countries.

The Modus Operandi of ISIS

Once in control ISIS impose strict Shariah Law. But unlike some other jihadist groups, it seeks to actively govern, providing services like water, roads and a judicial system. Unlike Al Qaida, whose modus operandi is simply inflicting terror on the West, ISIS seeks also geographic, territorial power through the caliphate (based on medieval, barbaric ethos) destined to include Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Lebanon....

Beside meeting the enemy formations on open ground, another tactic is to disrupt a community from within. ISIS infiltrates local groups, often using intimidation to influence community leaders and establishing sleeper cells that emerge at critical moments. The invasion of Ramadi relied on local sleeper cells.

ISIS cells surfaced in Aarsal, Lebanon, when local rebel groups rose up against the government. Analysts believe that ISIS is building networks in Saudi Arabia, in Algeria and in Yemen in order to cause uprisings.

ISIS is also a master in absorbing sympathetic groups: about three dozens jihadist groups across at least 18 nations have pledged support or allegiance to ISIS. Most are small, but they have networks in areas new to the militant group.

As for Libya, Western officials say that the country has become a key militant training ground because jihadist groups in all three regions have aligned ISIS.

After seizing Palmyra, ISIS blew up Tadmur Prison, used by the Syrian government to detain and torture political prisoners, a strategy designed to represent the Sunni Muslims who feel besieged by the Shiite-backed governments in Syria and Iraq, portraying itself as the only guardian of Sunni interests.

Horrific and barbaric, as well as skilled at high-tech propaganda, ISIS is gaining ground with its brutal methods.

ISIS leaders have proven to be masters of modern day terror, developing a strategy based on fighting hard and successfully, scaring the enemy with inhumane brutality and releasing high-quality video of their pitiless murders aimed at gaining support from angry young Muslims looking for revenge on the West following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The many recent acts of terror committed in Europe could, unfortunately, make European governments and people treat all Muslims in Europe as suspicious and dangerous: then the jihadists and terrorists will have achieved an important goal. The West has to remember that though terrorism cannot always be prevented, it can always be defeated by refusing to do what the terrorists want you to do .

Is ISIS winning?

We cannot take for granted that, being ISIS so inhumane and brutal, it is just a matter of time for it to be defeated. But what if ISIS is not only defeated but possibly expands its territory? If ISIS is just able to survive, this could, anyway, be called a victory for the caliphate.

ISIS has managed to advance and conquer notwithstanding more than 4,000 airstrikes and the likely death of 10,000 ISIS militants, but how many civilians have been killed in the process? ISIS takes cover in densely populated urban alleyways and fight from them, so that a regular army resorting to aerial bombing or heavy artillery fire necessarily causes civilian casualties.

ISIS is successfully exploiting the situation by bolstering its propaganda efforts, stressing that any attack is inevitably killing or injuring Muslim civilians. The group activity relies on its ability to attribute civilian casualties to its coward enemies (afraid of confronting ISIS with boots on the ground), stress the “Crusader threat” and defend the group's legitimacy. In short, the more civilians die, the more events can be internationalized, and the wider the appeal of ISIS can become.

Bombing alone with air forces is not enough and putting together a sizable army appears hard as US is unwilling to accept, after Iraq and Afghanistan, more deaths, while the Arab states are unlikely to create such an army. But what if the Kurds cease to fight against ISIS and the Iraqi army dissolves? The conquer of Baghdad by ISIS or its insulation would mean that the war against ISIS is unwinnable. The only possible way out is that Iran plays an open role in taking on ISIS but Saudi Arabia will never accept such a move, risking to have Iranian forces along its border.

How to defeat ISIS?

Without more forceful international action against ISIS and a political program to empower Sunni (they must be given a greater role in their own governance), support for ISIS will grow. Defeating ISIS needs a comprehensive approach. Most Sunnis do not support ISIS harsh interpretation of Islam, or its brutality, but some are becoming more susceptible to ISIS political talk about protecting oppressed Sunnis. With the sectarian polarization of the region, ISIS could win more hearts and minds because under the skin of every single Sunni there is a tiny Daesh.

The problem is that US lacks a strategy. Obama hoped that limited air strikes, combined with US support for local proxies (Peshmerga, Iraqi security forces, Sunni tribes and Free Syrian Army) “would degrade and

ultimately destroy” ISIS. The morale among ISIS fighters is high: notwithstanding a dramatic escalation in American air-power support for Iraqi forces in the area of Ramadi, the capture of the city, the capital of Anbar province, 80 miles west of Baghdad, is an important turning point in the conflict. With the recent gains by ISIS, US is tinkering with tactics and weapons. Anti-tank missiles are on their way from Washington to Iraq, to destroy American tanks and armoured vehicles that ISIS took from fleeing Iraqi soldiers.

Conclusions

Obama will need to increase US commitment in a measured way: he cannot rule out the “ground forces” option as this would reduce US leverage and raise questions about its commitment, considering also that thousands of ISIS foreign fighters could return to commit acts of terrorism in their homelands.

Greater US involvement can galvanize US allies to commit more resources to the fight. While mobilizing support from Sunnis in Iraq and Syria as well as from Turkey, Obama should dispatch more military advisers, special operations forces and Forward Air Controllers (FAC, to call in airstrikes and to improve the combat capacity of US proxies). He has to exert political pressure stressing that decent Muslim are supposed to rise, confront and destroy ISIS themselves, fueled by a sense of collective fury at the way it abuses Islam for nefarious gain.

If this plan is not implemented ISIS, left unchecked, could expand into Libya, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia: with the deteriorating situation a major ground war involving US troops becomes more probable. By contrast, this strategy, while incurring greater short-term risks, enhances the odds that ISIS will be defeated as the caliphate depends on holding territory to maintain its claim on legitimacy. If its fighters are pushed back from their territory, its status as a caliphate is eroded. An achievable outcome is to defeat or neutralize ISIS, ending its ability to control significant territory and reducing it to, at worst, a small terrorist group with limited reach.

When hope is present, a terrorist will translate belief into action (hope rises with the perception of military success) but, as hope is removed, even the most ideological enemy will become passive. The apathy that followed Osama bin Laden 's killing suggests that terrorists can lose hope after the death of a single icon.

To defeat radical Islam, non-military actions are also required to counter its ideology such as disrupting its finances and disseminating alternative messaging.

Preparation for nation building will then be key by guaranteeing the Kurds that their gains will not be jeopardized and offering greater autonomy to the Sunni, representing the most powerful engine of attraction for ISIS recruits . Sunni allies in the region will be reluctant to work with the US until it has a Syria policy, and Sunni tribes in Iraq will not confront ISIS unless they believe the US will stand by them.

The subsequent dispatch of international peacekeepers under UN, EU or NATO mandate could also be envisaged.

It was George W. Bush who started this misadventure in 2003, but Obama had time to devise a strategy to cope with ISIS. His message “Don't worry, I've got this under control!” was a failure to communicate.

President Obama has to realize that, at this stage, he cannot be considered the smartest man in the room while ISIS , having a real smart and long term program, is not playing checkers but chess.