

## The future of ISIS

Following the defeat in Falluja and the loss of more than 40% of its territory (chipped away by Kurdish groups, Shia militias, the Iraqi army, and US-led airstrikes in Iraq; by Russian and Assad troops in Syria), ISIS is shifting emphasis to terror attacks, the new way to capture global headlines and attention.

Unlike al-Qaeda, which chose difficult and strategic targets such as embassies or the Pentagon, ISIS chose the most vulnerable ones, because this would sow the most terror and do the most human damage.

ISIS is still a government that has resources (money, weapons, experienced officers and veteran fighters) to put behind plots with very motivated people, many of them with European passports.

### ISIS

But how come Isis - or Islamic State, or ISIL, or Daesh – with its medieval ideology could impressively advance over the past two years? Was just the strength of its ideas, its ruthless and technologically modern propaganda and gruesome videos of beheadings? Was its offer of a cause demanding sacrifice, in return, perhaps, for an eternal reward?

Is it realistic to believe that ISIS will endure?

It is worth mentioning that ISIS prospered in Iraq largely as the result of US and UK widespread disorder left after they toppled Saddam Hussein by dispossessing the once-dominant Sunnis; ISIS offered them a way back. Similarly in Syria and elsewhere, the appeal of ISIS reflects a quest for order and revenge quite as much as a religious idea.

This is why military force is not necessarily the only key to its defeat, just as it was not the only key to its victory. When Mosul changed hands in 2014, it was reported to be largely by consent.

However, even if ISIS is past its peak (with Mosul likely to change hands again), mainly thanks to Russia's determination, its astonishing success has given a host of outsiders a pretext for intervention in the Middle East – the real purpose of which is less to defeat this detestable movement than to keep a stake in the unresolved power-play in the Middle East. This is why ISIS defeat in Ramadi and Fallujah should be considered with a new sense of proportion.

So, who is behind ISIS? For sure, the tendency by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to support and arm the rebels with weapons (anti-tank and anti-air rockets, mortars and heavy machine guns) for combating the Assad regime can only create more turmoil and help ISIS to survive. Reportedly Turkey, while being part of the anti-ISIS coalition, would have bought the terrorists oil and organized on its territory the recruitment and training of hundreds of jihadist “freedom fighters” by securing their further passage into Syria,

Then, under the pressure of Europeans and the international community, Turkey stopped supporting ISIS whose terror attacks on its own soil are now the price of playing with a devil and creating a monster that it cannot control anymore.

## Why joining ISIS?

The reasons a European national might join ISIS are disputed by experts. Radicalization is enormously complex and the reasons vary from social and political marginalization of Muslim communities in Europe to the estrangement and isolation inherent in youth, to ISIS propaganda skills in exploiting these trends.

The point is that this is a complex problem that stems from preexisting communities within European societies, not a problem of outsiders that can be solved with anything as simple as closing a border. In Europe, ISIS is building on a crisis of identity and citizenship, particularly for second and third generation citizens of Arab descent.

A number of Europeans are now fighting with ISIS, gaining connections and battlefield experience. As the group weakens in Iraq and Syria, more of those fighters will inevitably return home to Europe. The threat they pose will grow.

But there is a further risk: within Europe, these militants are able to plug into existing organized crime networks, which can help with logistics and supplies as well as with smuggling people across borders.

## The aim of ISIS attacks

The images from Paris, Brussels and Dhaka caused both shock and rage.

When the Islamist killers opened fire, they killed and maimed people who had nothing to do with Western policy in Iraq or Syria, who were guiltless of any provocation or disrespect to their religion.

They killed scores of people who were simply out for a night of fun and entertainment (in Paris) or going to work or abroad (in Brussels) or away on business (in Dhaka).

It was a premeditated onslaught on the very European daily life, by striking places representing our Western culture of democratic freedom, tolerance and equality between the sexes. A culture rejected by the Islamists: where we see personal happiness and fulfilment, they see a behaviour considered shameful or distasteful. Where we see civilisation, they see something they wish to destroy.

These are people who behead not just Christians and Yazidis, but Shias and other Muslims who dissent from their interpretation of Islam. They want to spread fear and paranoia. They want to divide Muslim from Muslim – and above all they want to divide Muslims from the rest of the world.

There can be no compromise with this twisted ideology, with this nihilistic, pathetic and narcissistic death cult.

## How to oppose ISIS

A serious approach to combating ISIS requires a multi-faceted strategy. It needs political consensus-building amongst the regional and international players, namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Russia and the US.

While military operations are necessary, the focus should not be only

on the reactive security approach that on its own offers no long-term solution, whatever tactical victories it may achieve.

In Europe, this means accepting refugees fleeing the horrors caused by ISIS and addressing the sense of exclusion and alienation that are driving thousands of its own citizens to join ISIS.

In the Arab region, it means engaging with the root causes for ISIS emergence by tackling the political and socio-economic exclusion of Iraqi Sunnis, addressing the Syrian conflict and working to end the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran that is fuelling the current struggle.

The solution to defeat ISIS is a combination of military operations and political talks to resolve Sunni-Shia divides, as well as an empowerment of local troops like the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq and Kurdish forces in Turkey who have successfully been facing ISIS.

But ISIS, while in Europe is building on a crisis of identity and citizenship for second and third generation citizens of Arab descent, in the Arab region is tapping into a general crisis of malaise with dysfunctional Arab governments. It is injustice and abuse by Arab authorities, and not just poverty, that are driving disenfranchised individuals toward radical extremist ideology. That must be addressed, too.

As for the military side, this isn't simply a counter-terrorist operation. ISIS is a conventional enemy having armour, tanks, artillery: it is quite wealthy, it holds ground and it is going to fight. Therefore this must be viewed as a conventional military campaign requiring the involvement of all the concerned players with the commitments of boots on the ground.

As for the political side, borders could be redrawn in the Middle East: a subdivided Syria might now be the only one that can be at peace. Further moves should be: to stop selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain (how many of those end up in the hand of ISIS?) and to starve their funds to support ISIS.

As for the public information side, it is necessary to oppose ISIS propaganda machine through an effective counter-communications campaign based also on taking down ISIS-affiliated websites and on carrying out large-scale cyber-attacks aimed at halting the flow of ISIS propaganda.

## Conclusions

Defeating ISIS in Arab countries requires basic services, institutions, good governance and the reconciliation of divided communities. That means winning the hearts and minds of Sunni Arabs and addressing their deep-rooted grievances, while also fighting ISIS on the military front.

Western leaders must prove that they really believe that ISIS is a grave moral threat and thus they do not lack the moral resolve to fight it.

The West has the military might to fight ISIS, but not the moral determination. It has the machinery, the men, but it lacks the thing every warrior needs: a deep belief in what he is fighting for, in this case the certainty that our values, our free, open societies, are superior to their backward way of life. We can defend Western ideals only through bravery which is a function of belief; we take risks when we're fighting for something we truly care for.

That of course does not mean there is going to be anything like an easy victory. Progress on the battlefield (regaining territory) is all very well but if peace and stability are to be restored there has to be capable and representative governance in a pacified Middle East. Establishing this in Iraq will be a long-term process. Getting any kind of governing formula in Syria will be also difficult, with the return of huge numbers of displaced people and refugees and the rebuilding of Syria's shattered infrastructure and economy.

But as only a concerted international/regional approach can defeat ISIS in the Middle East, that could also lay the groundwork for reducing regional tensions. The US and Russia could begin to reverse their recent new cold war through shared efforts to extinguish jihadist terrorism. Furthermore, a cooperative approach to defeating ISIS would give Saudi Arabia and Turkey reason and opportunity to find a new "modus vivendi" with Iran. Israel's security could be enhanced by bringing Iran into a cooperative economic and geopolitical relationship with the West, in turn enhancing the chances for a long-overdue two-state settlement with Palestine.