

The Enemy is ISIS

A specter, that has taken material form, is haunting the world, the specter of Islamic terrorism, embodied by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS or Daesh in Arabic). The countries of the world, all rational political entities, groups, and individuals, must enter into an alliance to exorcize this specter and to end all the corporal forms it has taken.

ISIS is the newest adult version of a distorted Halloween, a determination to perform "trick," mischief against all if no "treat" is forthcoming. Fourteen years after September 11, 2001 the world faces this new type of terrorist movement, a formidable organization that began as an unknown scission of the familiar al-Qaeda group but differentiated itself from that group and carried out a commando attack in 2006.

Though it changes its name from time to time, ISIS is different from all other terrorist organizations in the world not only in its excessive brutality in the desire to eliminate all "impure" elements but also in two other ways. It is the first terrorist group with ambition to establish a government, a state on political and administrative lines.

The rapid development of ISS led it to embody the classical form of a state and to influence actions throughout the world. Hopes by many in the West that the "Arab Spring" would bring reforms and a more peaceful atmosphere have vanished. Instead, ISIS has reinforced the manifestations of Islamism, Salafism, or extreme ideology with an emphasis on jihad, that have grown as is now apparent in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. Because of ISIS, crimes committed in the name of religion are now the norm.

The second difference is the insistence by ISIS that all jihadist groups in the world must accept its authority, and

many in fact have done so.

Justifications or excuses for engaging in Islamist violence are always the same: rejection of western values; economic, social, and political problems in Arab countries; failed or fragile Muslim states, including Libya, Iraq, Mali, Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen; frustration with corrupt rulers; religious sectarian differences among Muslims; animosity towards Christians; antisemitism and hatred of the State of Israel; tribal rivalries; or simply opportunism. The last is clear as in the case of Iraqis who were officials during the rule of Saddam Hussein and have joined ISIS in managerial and executive positions.

The increasing danger for the whole world is that the influence and actions of ISIS have spread into northern Africa and into western Europe whose contours are being changed by immigration, conversions to Islam, Islamist propaganda, and terrorist actions of which the attacks in Paris on Charlie Hebdo on January 7, 2015 and the Jewish supermarket on January 9, 2015 were the most startling.

Since its appearance, ISIS has increased its control of territory, changed its name a number of times, and in June 2014 proclaimed itself a state, a Caliphate, which had been abolished in 1924, led by the self appointed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi with a capital in Raqqa, Syria. The Caliph, supposedly a literal descendent of the prophet Mahomet, governs a theocratic state in accordance with Islamic law.

By its creation of a Caliphate, ISIS is destroying the arrangement of states founded after the end of World War I, with its ambitions to create a greater Arab World. Its control over territory, some 81,000 square miles with a population of more than 10 million, means in effect the end of the states of Syria and Iraq within the boundaries established after the end of the Ottoman Empire.

ISIS is a potent military force, with an array of weapons: tanks, artillery pieces, armored vehicles, Humvees, anti-aircraft guns, and surface to air missile systems. It is also the wealthiest terrorist organization, with financial resources coming from assets from Iraq banks, sale of oil and antiquities, ransom from kidnapping, special taxes on religious minorities, robberies, smuggling and racketeering.

It has created a formal, if not always realistic, formidable central political and social structure, not only with an army and a war council but also with ministries, police force, judicial system, media outlets, and educational system, and a system of provincial governors regarded as emirs heading vilayas. Former members of the regime of Saddam Hussein are well represented among the officials. ISIS has benefited by appearing to be much less corrupt than neighboring Arab states.

With its captures of Fallujah , Iraq in January 2014, Mosul, Iraq, in June 2014 and Palmyra, Syria, in May 2015, ISIS became an important player, militarily and politically, in Middle East affairs. With these successes and the failing states in the area, the face of the Middle East, not only in Iraq and Syria, has changed both symbolically and geopolitically.

Its highly sophisticated and successful propaganda and videos has had two effects. One is attracting at least 25,000 foreigners, especially youngsters, from more than 100 countries who have accepted its religious ideology and its violent jihadist activities, and who are prepared to die for it. That attraction has dramatically increased as the increasing number of volunteers shows. It is arguable that the very violence of ISIS, its series of massacres and beheadings, has helped attract those volunteers.

Yet it remains a mystery why young people, often integrated in a tolerant western society, even if suffering some

discrimination, should be eager to fight and murder for a brutal Islamist regime. At least 5,000 of them are Europeans or Americans, who as home-grown terrorists pose a danger to security in their own countries if and when they return.

The other effect is its authority over groups outside Iraq and Syria who challenge the existing regimes. They stretch from Nigeria to the Philippines, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Indonesia. This territorial influence poses a danger to the whole world. Among the considerable number of groups adhering, formally or otherwise, to ISIS are Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansar Dine in Mali, the Nusra Front in Syria, the Islamic State in Gaza, the Mujahedeen Shara Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, the Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (which was responsible for the murder of the four Americans in Benghazi).

ISIS is a ruthless state, with its strict interpretation of sharia law, its use of executions, crucifixion, amputation of parts of the body as punishment, and use of chlorine gas in an attack against police officers in Iraq in October 2014. Cigarettes are banned as are public demonstrations. Women wear full veils and are forbidden to take the pill. Homosexuals are persecuted. Secret police see that rules are obeyed.

ISIS by evidence of its very brutality has attempted to instill fear, both by its military actions, and by its destruction of the cultural heritage of the past , temples, statues, monuments, artifacts that challenge its own ideology.

It is unfortunately true that western attempts to counter Islamist groups have not always been successful. Yet the western response remains inadequate and disappointing. Obviously the West does not want to engage in military adventure, but the task of ending ISIS, both empirically and in the war of ideas, is imperative. This is also a task for all Muslims who cannot accept the religious extremism and the brutal violence of ISIS , and who are concerned with reform of their own societies, in religious as well as in social ,

economic and political terms.