

The Nightmare of the Islamic State

The nightmare generated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) is causing turmoil in the Middle East. Everyone affected is now pondering, "Am I awake or is this just a dream?" The new advances by IS in June 2015 have led to the exodus of another 30,000 Arab Iraqis from Fallujah, now in the hands of IS, to the Kurdish area of Iraq. Another refugee problem, seemingly not a concern of the venerable Archbishop Desmond Tutu or Alice Walker, has been born.

One of the saddest misinterpretations of President Barack Obama was his terming IS a jayvee compared to al-Qaeda. IS has seized Palmyra in Syria, and then Ramadi, 70 miles west of Baghdad, capital of Anbar, largest province in Iraq. It has lost some areas to the brave Kurdish forces, and some of its commanders have been killed by U.S. air strikes, but its relentless march continues, and must be stopped.

It is crucial to understand the extraordinary advance and success of this group whose origin can be traced back to the activity of the Jordanian -born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who formed an insurgent al-Qaeda group in 2002, pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and was killed four years later. He was replaced by Abu Bakhr al-Baghdadi who rebuilt and strengthened the organization that proclaimed itself the Islamic State in April 2003, a status that was rejected by the rival terrorist groups, al-Qaeda and the Nusra Front.

The speedy territorial aggression of IS incorporated Fallujah in October 2013, and Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, in June 2014, amounting to control of about 81,000 square miles, the size of the UK. In June 2014 the terrorist group formally declared itself a Caliphate, a demonstration of nation building. It is a state governed in accordance with Sharia

law. It insists that all Muslims swear allegiance to Baghdadi, that they migrate to the territory he controls, that other jihadist groups accept his authority, that non-Sunni Muslims be treated, according to the doctrine of *takfir*, as apostates deserving death, that obstacles to restoring Allah's rule on earth be eradicated, that women wear full veils, that non-Muslims pay a special tax, and that the main enemy is the U.S.-led coalition.

What is disquieting for all the non-believers in the Caliphate is its strength and efficiency. It claims a core of 30,000 fighters who have been joined by 22,000 foreigners from around the world, mainly Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Jordan, and Morocco. It also gets support from Sunni tribes who fear the Shia-dominated Iran.

The Islamic State is well armed; its military capability includes assets of armored vehicles captured from the Syrian and Iraqi armies, 2,300 armored Humvees, tanks, and bomb-proof trucks. It has received funding from private donors, mainly from the Gulf countries, from Islamic charities, but mostly from its sale of crude oil and refined products, kidnapping, robbery, looting, extortion, and sale of antiquities.

In its administrative organization, IS has an elaborate structure of advisory councils and administrative departments that have a wide range of functions: the principle entities are a Sharia religious council; SHURA advisory council; military council; and a security council. The same structure applies in 9 provinces in Syria, and 7 in Iraq. In this administration, former civilian and military officials of the Baath party of Saddam Hussein have been playing a role.

IS proclaims itself a social and political movement. It provides security to Sunni communities located in areas in the midst of conflict, offering itself, while exploiting local grievances, as the only alternative to social collapse in the Arab world. It provides a justice system and other essential

services such as schools, clinics and bakeries so that believers can live in the promised paradise. It purports to be the last line of Sunni defense against the many enemies: the U.S.; the so-called apostate Gulf Arab states; the infidel Nusayri Alawite Syrian regime of President Assad, the Rafida (essentially Shia) in Iran and Iraq who reject the legitimate Islamic authority. It is noteworthy that the rivalry between IS and the Nusra Front takes on a tribal inflection.

IS thus contrasts with the al-Qaeda groups in putting less emphasis on religious argument and emphasizing continued territorial expansion, the use of violence and construction and control of a civil society, while insisting, in Stalinist fashion, that in areas under its control all answer to a single authority. Unlike al-Qaeda, the worldview of IS is the belief that the masses need guidance and a vision of the future glories of the state. In this respect, for IS there is an inherent contest between its passion to implement Islamic law with the attempt to get support of people in the territory who may not welcome the imposition of Islamic law.

The increased danger for the west is that IS, through its surrogates, is expanding its activities. Recent incidents include the bombing a Shiite mosque in Saudi Arabia, seizing control of part of Libya, organizing a bloody assault in Egypt along the Mediterranean coast, and establishing links in Nigeria through Boko Haram and in South Asia, especially through its affiliate IS Khorasan, whose former leader Hafiz Saeed, a former Taliban leader, was killed in April 2015.

It is disappointing that the Iraqi army, which inflates its numbers with ghost soldiers, has done badly in efforts to resist IS. Shia soldiers flee before the aggressive IS that killed 1500 army cadets. It is encouraging that Haider al-Abadi, Iraqi prime minister since August 2014, a Shia English-speaking individual with a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from a British University, has formed an inclusive government and is committed to fighting IS. He helped form an

umbrella group Hashid al Shabi of 40 mainly Shia military forces based in Iraq but assisted by some Iranians, to fight IS. The U.S. suggests Abadi also arm Sunni tribes. For the U.S. the essential problem is that the coalition it has assembled is full of conflicting ambitions, and that Saudi Arabia sees the main enemy as Iran with its regional aspirations.

All opponents of IS must wake up and counter its advances, not only militarily but also from the point of view of security as well as halting information networks, and by skillful use of social media. The danger is that IS is reaching out to the young , through a clever core group that sends message through the Internet, social media, and its very well produced propaganda journal Dabiq. It is instilling fear by its public exhibition of beheadings of prisoners and advocating death of all enemies. One valuable western response to all this is the suspension by social media networks of accounts linked to the IS.

IS is appealing to a critical mass available for radicalization who are affected for different reasons: their envy of the west; their acceptance of an Islamic doctrine of redemption; the attractiveness of becoming martyrs; their acquiescence in peer pressure ; and their swallowing of propaganda proclaiming the power of IS. It has successfully appealed to populations in the East End of London, the *banlieues* around Paris, and villages in the Balkans. In any case the west must both formulate a counter narrative and prevent terrorist messages. It must overcome the seeming appeal of martyrdom and the promise of an eternal paradise that IS proposes.

Western action will again raise the issue of balancing free speech against security, especially since lone wolf recent Islamic murderers were on the periphery of IS and known Islamist networks, and therefore harder to detect. The task is formidable, as is clear from the limitations the British have

experienced where MI5 has 3,000 subjects of interest on its databases but only employs 5,000 to deal with them.

It is tempting to compare IS with the German Nazi regime not only because of the ruthlessness common to both, in the detached attitude towards mass killing, the vandalizing of culture artifacts and the war on cultural heritage, the threat to western civilization, the elevation of the Leader, and the elimination of non-believers. Above all, adherents of both have lost the moral compass that steers civilized people. The west must prevent another genocide. IS must be destroyed before it attempts to emulate the Nazis.

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