

# COMMENTARY

No.226

Thursday, 25 September 2014

## **ISIS: Illusions versus Reality**

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Much has been said about President Obama's strategy to degrade and eventually "destroy" the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Regardless of the soundness of the President's strategy, to ensure greater success in defeating ISIS, three distinct interlinked aspects must be factored in: careful consideration of the root causes behind the rise of ISIS, simultaneous inclusion of socio-political and economic development along with the military campaign, and the real, not illusionary, role and capability of the coalition members President Obama has assembled. Bearing this in mind and acting accordingly will permanently degrade ISIS and prevent it from rising again to pose a serious threat to our allies in the Middle East and Western security in the future.

The rise of many jihadist groups can be traced several decades back to the reigns of corrupt and ruthless Arab dictators who grossly violated human rights, deprived their citizens of social justice, and violently suppressed any opposition with impunity.

Adding to this mix is President Bush's misguided Iraq war, which has ignited the long-dormant Sunni-Shiite conflict, and the violent upheaval in the wake of the Arab Spring that swept several Arab states, culminating with the still-raging civil war in Syria.

ISIS is an offshoot of al-Qaeda (disavowed by them because of their savagery) who converged, among other jihadist groups, into a disintegrated Syria, unleashing the dark-ages forces of Islam in pursuit of their twisted religious historic and cultural agenda that sanctifies Islamic reign.

At the same time, both secular and religious authoritarian regimes in the region have been adding fuel to the fire by supporting one jihadist group or the other financially and with military equipment, while engaging in hate narratives against one another and against the West.

Millions of dispossessed, despairing, and despondent Arab youth are left with no place to go, no hope, and no future. They are consumed with anger and hatred of their corrupt and unresponsive leaders and the West, who acted only when the conditions served its interest.

For these reasons, the military campaign must simultaneously be accompanied by sustainable economic development programs to create jobs and opportunities to give the young hope for the future.

The US, European countries, and the oil-rich Arab states must raise billions of dollars strictly dedicated to that end and give young men and women the incentive to reject extremism and embrace moderation.

Sustainable development projects will not only galvanize local resources, but allow for the development of ownership and a sense of empowerment that builds a social and economic structure from the bottom up. This would allow the people to become increasingly less dependent on government handouts that come with chains and subservience.

We must carefully assess the role and responsibility of each member of the coalition (many of whom remain a mystery) and have no illusions about their importance and efficacy.

Iraq: We should have no delusions about the makeup and effectiveness of the new Iraqi government. Whereas the Kurds will join the military campaign willingly to safeguard their territory and autonomy, the full support of the Sunni tribes is not assured given their long, violent conflict with the Shiite Maliki government over the past eight years.

Before they throw their weight behind the Shiites, they want to know what is in store for them. I maintain that nothing short of autonomous Sunni rule with equitable revenue-sharing from oil with a loose federalism will suffice.

The US must begin to lay the ground for this eventuality, and make it clear to the Abadi government that an Iraq free of violence depends on the Sunnis' conviction that their fight against ISIS will benefit them rather than further consolidate the Shiites' hold on power.

Syria: President Obama's plans to mobilize and train moderate Syrian rebels to fight ISIS will go nowhere regardless of how well-trained and equipped the Syrian rebels may be. They cannot be effective if they must fight on two fronts—ISIS and Assad's forces.

The US must target immediately ISIS fortifications in Syria as well as some of Assad's military assets, especially his air force installations and runways and infantry, to prevent him from continuing to use barrel bombs that kill thousands of civilians indiscriminately.

Moreover, the US should capitalize on the growing sense of uneasiness among the Alawites with Assad, as they are increasingly realizing that there will be no end to the civil war as long as he remains in power.

An Alawite-Sunni axis in Syria is possible once the Alawites are assured that Assad's butchery of the largely Sunnis communities will not be held against them once Assad is ousted and the Sunnis form a representative government.

The American aerial onslaught against ISIS must be overwhelming and simultaneously target ISIS both in Iraq and Syria to prevent them from regrouping, recruiting, and developing new defensive positions and make their recovery extremely difficult.

Saudi Arabia: The war against ISIS is in principle a religious war that transcends the defeat of ISIS. Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia are waging a war by proxy in Syria and Iraq to secure regional hegemony. Their battle is one for survival itself and will not abate any time soon.

Saudi Arabia should have every incentive not only to train Syrian rebels but actively participate in the military campaign. The US must insist that Saudi Arabia dispatch ground troops to Syria to fight ISIS. Although this may help Iran, which is also threatened by ISIS, it will at the same time undermine Tehran's foothold in Syria.

Iran has and will always be part of all regional conflicts by supporting one side against the other. It is illusionary to assume that Tehran can be a part of the solution. It has directly supported Assad with money, military equipment, advisors, and even fighters as he is waging a merciless war against his civilian population.

Iran will stop short of nothing to maintain its foothold in Syria, which the linchpin of the crescent of land between the Gulf and the Mediterranean and is central to Iran's ambitions to become the region's hegemon. Regardless of the ongoing negotiations with Iran about its nuclear program, the US must spare no efforts to keep Iran out of the military campaign in Iraq and Syria.

Turkey: President Erdogan, who is guided by his Islamic convictions, will not help the fight against ISIS and nothing should be expected from Ankara other than lip-service. Turkey has and continues to be the gateway for jihadists coming from all over to cross the Turkish border into Syria and Iraq.

The US should stop covering for Turkey and insist that Erdogan stop the flow of jihadists and end the buying of oil from ISIS, which helps finance ISIS' deadly campaign. The US should warn that there will be consequences if Turkey does not heed American demands.

There are several Arab states including Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, and others who should assist in different capacities in the campaign to defeat ISIS. It is incumbent on the US to

ensure that this war looks, feels, and is an inter-Arab war, with Western powers only supporting the moderate Arab camp while protecting their strategic interests.

To help defeat Islamic extremism, we must condition our future support to any of the Arab states affected by this scourge and insist that they commit to long-term and substantial socioeconomic and political programs. This will give tens of millions of Arab youth alternatives to violence and instead, give the hope and the opportunity to seek a more promising future.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/isis-illusions-versus-reality/>

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