

EXPERT VIEW

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Jihad on the Horizon

The ISIL Threat from an Israeli Perspective

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KEY POINTS

- ISIL is a major threat to the West for several reasons:
 - their establishment of physical base shifts the focus of global Jihad to the heart of the Middle East, threatening Western-aligned Arab states and further destabilising the region at large;
 - the movement's drawing in and inspiring of thousands of radicalised Muslims in the West and the virtual network connecting them across the globe;
 - the danger of a developing competition for prestige between ISIL and Al Qaeda through attacks on the West.
- A realistic assessment leads to the conclusion that the goal of "destroying" ISIL is not viable at this stage, due to the lack of ground forces available to fully roll ISIL back, especially in Syria, as well as inherent tensions between Sunni and (Iran-affiliated) Shiite forces, both supposed to fight ISIL.
- However, the ISIL challenge on the ground can be significantly reduced and ultimately defeated. This requires a coherent strategy, clear goals and resources to meet them. ISIL's weaknesses should be exploited, including being spread thin geographically, significant military shortcomings, fragile local alliances, and being surrounded by hostile forces.
- Even so, the deep sociological and psychological causes of ISIL's appeal for so many young Muslims represent a long-term challenge that must be faced with comprehensive strategies.
- Israel is fully aware of the dangers posed by ISIL, and supports the US-led international coalition, but from an Israeli perspective, it is the Islamist (mostly Shiite) Iran-led axis that still poses the more serious and immediate threat. Israel is concerned lest the shared interest the West has with Iran to roll back ISIL blur the West's view of the threat posed by Iran itself, with its nuclear ambitions, to regional stability. That said, there is reason for Israel to be concerned about ISIL:
 - First, it is slowly approaching some of Israel's borders, with Salafi Jihadists present in the Sinai, on the Golan, on the margins in the Gaza Strip, and even (though to a marginal extent) within Israel's Arab population.
 - Second, ISIL is striving to gain influence inside additional countries neighbouring Israel such as Jordan and Lebanon, with Jordan's security an issue of particular importance for Israel.
 - Third, over the long run Israel is very much on ISIL's radar and might later become the focus of its attention.
 - Fourth, the danger is already here of ISIL/Jihadi terror attacks Jewish targets in the West.
- Israelis debate internally whether the ISIL phenomenon is a reason to defer political initiatives in the Palestinian arena which may open the door to more Jihadi elements on its borders, or whether the lack of political initiative increases the chance of escalation and radicalisation in Israel's immediate vicinity.
- Regarding Hamas, whilst Israeli leaders stress the existing ideological overlaps between Hamas and ISIL, the two differ in that Hamas combines Islamist-Jihadist beliefs with Palestinian nationalist sentiments. In fact, Israel prefers Hamas as a de facto power in Gaza – presenting a clear address and a force which could be deterred and contained – as opposed to having to contend with uncontrollable Salafi-Jihadi groups.
- A comprehensive strategy to address ISIL should incorporate the following principles:
 1. **Boost the military campaign:** The military campaign needs more resources, including a constant, robust cycle of intelligence and targeting and more building-up, training and support for local forces.
 2. **Recognise the nature of the Islamist problem:** It is important to better understand and address the deep-rooted sociological and psychological factors in Muslim societies – in the region and in

the West – which fuel the Jihadist phenomenon with thousands of recruits.

3. **Do not give Iran a pass:** The war against ISIL should be fought with a long term view for the future of the region, including a clear eyed view of the threat posed by Iran and its agenda for regional hegemony based on anti-Western values, Shia dominance and nuclear capabilities. The desire to secure a nuclear deal with Iran and join hands in fighting ISIL should not obscure these concerns.
4. **Support liberal pro-Western actors:** More attention and support should be given to liberal, pro-Western elements such as Jordan and the Kurds.
5. **Encourage deepening ties based on shared interests between Israel and Sunni powers:** It is important to act on converging interests between Israel and Western-aligned Arab states in the face of both Iranian/Shiite Islamist and Sunni Islamist/Jihadist ambitions and work, after Israel's upcoming elections, to create a regional framework for stopping the deterioration in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

INTRODUCTION: GRASPING THE DEPTH OF THE CHALLENGE

Entering 2015 with the challenge of ISIL (the Islamic State, also known as ISIS and Da'esh¹) topping the international and regional agenda, it is worth asking what we knew about this group a year ago. In January 2014, ISIL had already swept over Fallujah in western Iraq, marking a major territorial conquest. Yet most people in the West woke up to this unprecedented challenge only in the summer of 2014 after ISIL surprisingly took Mosul, the second biggest city in Iraq with well over one million people, declared an Islamic Caliphate, renamed itself 'Islamic State', and started beheading Westerners.

In fact, what became ISIL was there years earlier in different forms, seeking to revive the historic, puritanical nature and glory of Islam through violent Jihad. Originating in Iraq in the early 2000's and rooted in its Salafi-Jihadist ideology (turning into an Al Qaeda franchise in Iraq following the US invasion), it gradually developed to become – following the collapse of the old regional order – the most noteworthy and dangerous of all the Salafi-Jihadi groups now mushrooming in the weak and failed states of the Middle East.

WHAT IS ISIL AND WHY IS IT DANGEROUS?

ISIL seeks to revive the power and glory of Islam, as it interprets it, and to spread its message and influence in the Middle East and wherever there are Muslim communities. It promotes adherence to strict Islamic rules and enforcement by the sword. Speeches delivered by its charismatic leader, Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi, convey the desire to restore the "dignity, might and rights" of the (Sunni) Islamic "nation" ("ummah") by constant violent Jihad – considered a personal obligation of each and every true Muslim – against the nation's enemies, Muslim and non-Muslim.

Inherent in the message is the need to create a new geographic centre of gravity for the Islamic nation

¹ ISIL is abbreviation for The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; ISIS is abbreviation for The Islamic State in Iraq and Sha'm (the Arabic name for the historic Levant); Da'esh is the Arabic acronym for ISIL. Since declaring itself a Caliphate this new entity calls itself the Islamic State, indicating its desire to not limit itself to Iraq and the Levant.

and to constantly expand it, while recruiting Muslims from across the globe. In this context Islamic State has put a lot of focus on the Muslim communities in Europe, given their growing numerical size and influence, Europe's relative proximity and importance to the Middle East, and collective memories of the historic Muslim role in parts of the continent.

This concept, strongly informed by the opportunities afforded by the regional turmoil, drove ISIL to part ways with Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has functioned as an underground network focusing on diffuse, subversive, destabilising terror attacks against the "far enemy", namely Western countries supporting "apostate" Arab regimes which were also targeted. In order to create the new centre of gravity, ISIL conquered roughly a third of Syria and Iraq (an area nearly as big as the UK), erasing the century-old colonial borders between these countries. This territory has served to establish the Islamic State as a political entity with an administrative structure complete with flag, currency and identity cards. They have used this to revive the historical concept of an Islamic Caliphate (a single authority by which all Muslims are bound), where they cruelly enforce strict observation of Islamic laws whilst attempting to engage in state building and provide governance (with significant failings according to reports) to the local population (estimated at 5-6 million people). At the same time, ISIL wants to use its territory as a base to attack the "near enemy", focusing on the weaker or Western-aligned states in the Middle East, and further expand.²

Moreover, with the help of a strong propaganda machine promoting an image of Islamic resurrection and invincibility, especially via online social networks, Islamic State managed to attract Sunni Muslims from about 90 countries to physically join it or swear allegiance ('Bay'a') from afar. Loyalists abroad have spread the message, recruited activists or carried out terror attacks, especially in Europe, prompted by ISIL's vigorous campaign of incitement. Groups in the Sinai, Libya, Algeria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia have

declared themselves provinces ('Wilaya-t') of the Islamic State and others (e.g., in Afghanistan and Pakistan) have sworn allegiance or may soon join. It is not clear what exact relations exist between the "provinces" and ISIL's core operation in Syria and Iraq, beyond the latter's symbolic and media control. However, some of these affiliated groups in Libya and Sinai have proven effective in their destabilising activities.³

According to most estimates, ISIL now fields at least 25,000 combatants, more than 50 per cent of whom are from outside Syria and Iraq – unprecedented numbers of Muslims joining the Jihadi cause. Nearly 3,500 are from Europe; mostly from France (over 1,000), the UK, Germany and Belgium (over 500 each). The momentum of territorial conquests enabled ISIL to also acquire significant weapons and equipment from the Syrian and Iraqi armies. These include heavy weapons such as tanks, armoured vehicles, ground to ground rockets, anti-air weapons and even some aerial vehicles (though it is not clear to what extent the latter are usable).⁴ ISIL has tried basic cyber warfare and has even showed interest in acquiring chemical capabilities.⁵

Islamic State is considered the richest Jihadi group in the world, making a fortune by seizing oil fields and selling oil, alongside income from wheat products, ransom money and some donations. With its wealth ISIL has been able to fund governance and military and terror operations, and offer a good monthly salaries to young Muslims from abroad.

ISIL is a fanatic, xenophobic entity, vehemently anti-pluralist and anti-liberal. It targets Muslims who stand in its way or belong to other denominations (Shiites, opposing Sunnis, Kurds, Yazidis, Allawites etc.), and has killed more Muslims than non-Muslims. Christians in the Islamic State have been given the choice to convert, pay a special per capita tax (Jizya) or face death. As in Afghanistan, holy shrines and ancient artifacts are smashed. Women are treated as objects and slaves. Special attention is given to

² ISIL's maps portray the vision of expanding from its currently controlled territory in Syria and Iraq to the greater historical Levant and ultimately farther away to territories with sizable Muslim communities.

³ See Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Model", *Washington Post*, 28 January 2015.

⁴ Some reports indicate the use by ISIL of a drone in the battle of Kobani.

⁵ The US recently intercepted and killed an ISIL chemical expert and reports indicate the possible use of chlorine gas by ISIL in Kobani.

indoctrination of the next generation and whole branches of knowledge have been erased from the education system.

ISIL poses a series of threats which are set to increase if the movement is not checked. First, it has shifted the epicentre of global Jihad from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to the heart of the Middle East, having a profound destabilising impact against the background of crumbling and weakening state frameworks. Not only does it deepen the disintegration of Syria and Iraq and the associated humanitarian catastrophe, but – alongside other Jihadi groups – it also spreads a destabilising influence to other countries in the region especially Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt (Sinai) and Libya, posing a threat also to Gulf states and elsewhere. Additionally, this Jihadi trend further exacerbates the regional turmoil by stoking violent sectarian tensions, especially between Sunnis and Shiites.

Second, it threatens stability in the West because of the thousands of young Muslims from Western states who are attracted to it. Those who physically joined it, and gained some military experience, have the potential to wreak havoc upon returning, as has already happened in several cases. Others in Europe and elsewhere have carried out terror attacks in Islamic State's name or under its influence without ever having spent time in Syria or Iraq. Being a movement with which significant numbers of Muslims are identifying, and being part of a virtual global radical Islamist network, exacerbates ISIL's threat far beyond its physical borders.

Third, there is the danger, indicated by some Western intelligence reports, of a competition for prestige between ISIL and Al Qaeda and its affiliates, both in the region and regarding attacks in the West or against Western targets. In the recent attacks in Paris, even though it is not clear whether the perpetrators were actually sent by any group, those who attacked *Charlie Hebdo* swore allegiance to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while the terrorist who attacked the kosher supermarket swore allegiance to ISIL.

FIGHTING ISIL AND ITS APPEAL

Against these threats the US is leading a broad international and regional coalition encompassing dozens of states. In assessing the unfolding struggle it is important to realise that this is not merely a physical struggle but also, and no less important, an ideological one. The Jihadists seek to challenge both Western civilisation, and Muslims who do not subscribe to their extreme beliefs. Islamic State's notion that "the Islamic State is here to stay and expand" ("A-Dawla Al-Islamiya baqiya wa tatamaddad") is faced with President Barack Obama's declared goal to "degrade" and "defeat" it (a scaled back version of the original goal of "ultimately destroy").

A hard look at realities leads to the conclusion that "destroying" ISIL is not viable in the foreseeable future. The major (though not the only) key to doing so would be to physically roll back and ultimately take away its territorial base, yet there is no ground force willing or capable of doing so in the face of a resilient enemy. It took a local force, air strikes and more than four months just to drive them out of Kobani. The US will not place boots on the ground, the Iraqi army is still too weak, Kurdish forces are focused on defending and consolidating their territories, Iranian-backed Shiite militias exacerbate sectarian tensions in Iraq through murderous anti-Sunni acts and local National Guard forces in Iraqi Sunni provinces are yet to be formed as an effective fighting force. Syria, where Islamic State's 'capital' Raqqa is located, is torn between Assad's forces backed by Shiite groups, and numerous rebel groups, often fighting one another. Building up the Iraqi army and Syrian moderate opposition forces is slow and being done only on a small scale. Even if ISIL is rolled back in Iraq (opening the question of who will take over) it can still fall back on its territorial base in Syria, where there is no force to defeat it and to reunite the country.

While the US has committed insufficient resources in terms of military assets and airstrikes to match its stated goals, most of its partners have committed far less⁶ or are militarily feeble. Turkey, a key player

⁶ On the UK role see: "The First 100 Days of the UK's Campaign Against the Islamic State (30 Sep 2014 – 8 Jan 2015), CRT Briefing", *Henry Jackson Society*, 22 January 2015.

bordering Syria and Iraq who for a long time facilitated the influx of Jihadists to these countries, participates only half-heartedly since it is bent on overthrowing Assad in Syria, reluctant to empower the Kurds and concerned about Jihadi influence and reprisals in its territory. The US is also caught between contradicting pressures: it regards Shiite or Shiite-affiliated forces (Iran, the Iraqi government and Assad) as implicit partners in the war on ISIL, but by doing so risks alienating Sunni forces crucial to defeating it, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Sunni tribes in Iraq.

In the months since the US formed the coalition and launched its air campaign, as well as a campaign to squeeze ISIL's sources of support, it generally managed to stop ISIL's momentum, by and large contain it, push it back in some areas, hit part of its command echelon, pressurise its financial resources and degrade its capabilities. At the same time, ISIL managed to consolidate its hold on its territories, generate significant financial resources, fight and initiate operations on several fronts and attract an estimated 1,000 recruits a month from abroad. Given the current strategy, partnerships and resources, little more could be expected.

The war on ISIL is therefore a long-term proposition. Given these limitations, it is worth calibrating expectations for the short and medium terms, focusing first on rolling back its territorial base in Iraq, seriously degrading its main pillars of strength and reducing its base of support. This is possible if more resources are applied and Islamic State's significant vulnerabilities are exploited⁷. Among them, the fact that ISIL is spread thin over a large territory and is surrounded by hostile forces, its considerable military vulnerabilities, its fragile alliances with local tribes and forces, who do not share its ideology and are disgruntled by it, and the disillusionment of a growing number of recruits.

The US-led campaign is comprehensive in scope. Alongside the military dimension, wide-ranging pressure is being applied on all of Islamic State's sources of support— financial, operational, logistical

and ideological. Yet one very important component seems to lack a coherent strategy, which is challenging ISIL's sources of attraction. Even if Islamic State is ultimately beaten, its ideological appeal might endure for a long time and permeate through the Jihadi networks. More research is required into exactly why the movement attracts thousands of young Muslims to flock to it, and how to effectively counter this Jihadi appeal.

Existing studies suggest that the phenomenon cannot be explained by mere religious radicalisation. Rather, ISIL seems to hit the right buttons in addressing the dire conditions and core existential dilemmas characterising many Muslim societies, as well as the deep psychological needs, especially among young Muslims, for a sense of significance. Most Muslim societies in the Middle East are experiencing a fundamental governance crisis coupled in many cases by inter-sectarian strife, whilst significant numbers of Muslims in the West experience an acute identity crisis. The organisation's sophisticated media machine offers a coherent, Manichean worldview through religious dogma and a sense of purpose and self-fulfilment through adventure, violence, heroism, martyrdom and partaking in an historic mission. It sends resonant messages about undoing and avenging the humiliation of Muslims, protecting Sunnis against Shiites and restoring Islamic glory through a caliphate,⁸ in the face of a decaying Western society.

In the same vein, ISIL attracts with the image of invincibility, shaped by its swift successive conquests over a relatively short period, and the use and deliberate portrayal of extreme violence and cruelty (mostly symbolised by decapitations but recently also by burning alive a Jordanian pilot), which combine to create a shock and awe effect. ISIL's propaganda films are particularly effective at portraying the movement to its target audience as not only extremely violent, but also extremely slick and even glamorous.

⁷ See Michael Eisenstadt, "Defeating ISIS, A Strategy for a Resilient Adversary and an Intractable Conflict", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Notes No. 20, November 2014.

⁸ Such is the resonance of the concept of caliphate that upon taking over most of the Syrian province of Idlib in late 2014, Jabhat Al-Nusra - a franchise of Al-Qaida and competitor of ISIL - declared it an Islamic Emirate. Boko Haram in Nigeria also followed ISIL and declared a Caliphate.

That is why, among other things, the coalition should strive to vividly portray that ISIL can be defeated, including by posting pictures of ISIL combatants surrendering. That is also why winning the battle in Kobani, on the borders of Syria and Turkey, was so important.

Finally, several Islamic fundamentalist schools, not necessarily violent, should be recognised as laying the ideological foundation for the Jihadists, if in some cases inadvertently, making individuals in several Arab states receptive to its message. This is probably true of the puritanical Wahabi doctrine which is officially endorsed in Saudi Arabia, Salafi doctrines for which Jordan is traditionally a hub, and – as argued by President Sisi – the Muslim Brotherhood which has its origins in Egypt. On the other hand, the Salafi-Jihadists currently do not face organised, legitimate and effective cultural or societal counterforces in the Arab and Muslim worlds.⁹

THE ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE

Israel is fully aware of ISIL's threat, follows it closely and supports the US-led coalition. Nevertheless, ISIL does not currently pose an immediate and overwhelming danger to Israel. It is relatively far away, still not focused on Israel and its loyalists are not yet a major presence on Israel's borders.

From an Israeli perspective, it is the Islamist (mostly Shiite) Iran-led axis that poses the more serious and immediate threat. This axis is no less hostile to Israel and is headed by a major regional power approaching nuclear threshold status. Iran's client Hezbollah sits on Israel's northern border with the strongest non-state military force in the region, including over 100,000 rockets, more than most militaries in the world. With active Iranian and Syrian support, Hezbollah is currently striving to extend its front with Israel also to the Syrian Golan Heights. Notwithstanding the fact that it is heavily invested in the war in Syria (and in Iraq) and is actively challenged by Islamic State and Sunni Jihadists at large, this axis is still considered the biggest threat to Israel for the foreseeable future.

That is why Israel is deeply concerned by what appears to be an emerging US view of Iran as a potential partner in fighting ISIL and in addressing other regional challenges. This approach, in Israeli eyes, is misguided because Iran does not share the Western vision for a pluralistic, democratic, and tranquil Middle East but seeks to advance regional hegemony, Shiite dominance in mixed communities (e.g., Iraq) and anti-Israel policies, while supporting terrorist groups and challenging Western values. This approach could lead to further erosion of the US and Israel's deterrence towards Iran and hence allow Iran to erode the terms of the nuclear deal discussed and afford it more room to exercise destabilising policies and threats of terror, detrimental to Israel's interests, directly or through its proxies.

That being said, there is reason for Israel to be concerned about Islamic State. First, it is slowly approaching some of Israel's borders. It is present in Sinai (represented by the strongest Jihadi group there, Jama'at Ansar Bait-al-Maqdis – now under Egyptian assault – which has targeted Israel in the past) and it is striving to set a foothold in the Golan Heights, where Jabhat Al-Nusra already has a presence. It has a small presence in the Gaza Strip, under strict Hamas supervision, which could grow in time as Hamas weakens, and a smaller presence in the West Bank. In Israel itself, several dozen Israeli Arabs went to Syria to join ISIL (some returned and were arrested) and recently Israel's security services arrested a small cell of Israeli Arabs who swore allegiance to ISIL and started preparing for terror attacks in Israel (including by slaughtering sheep).

Second, the Islamic State is striving to gain influence inside additional countries neighbouring Israel such as Jordan and Lebanon. Of special concern to Israel is the threat to stability in Jordan, whose security is vital to Israel for a number of reasons. Jordan controls Israel's longest border and serves as a buffer to the east from potential enemies. It is one of two Arab states with full diplomatic relations with Israel, and engages in close security coordination both with respect to Jihadist threats and terror threats in the Palestinian arena. Moreover, Jordan has a pro-Western orientation and plays an important regional role in the US-led anti-ISIL and anti-Jihadist coalition. Since the outbreak of the

⁹ Hisham Melhem, "The Time of the Assassins: The Arab world has no counterforce to the murderers in our midst", *Politico*, 9 January 2015.

'Arab Spring' this small, fragile kingdom has suffered from the heavy burden of large numbers of refugees and acute economic difficulties, and is forced to battle the strong appeal of ISIL in some of its urban centres.

Third, it is clear that in the long run Israel is very much on ISIL's radar, and might yet become the focus of its active attention. The very term Sham/Levant includes historic Palestine, which appears on the group's maps. Israel (or the "Zionists" or "Jews") is often present in Al-Baghdadi's speeches and Jerusalem appears on the Islamic State's currency.

Fourth, the danger is already here of Islamic State or other Jihadi terror attacks against Jewish targets in the West. If the murder of four Jews at the Jewish Museum in Brussels by an ISIL loyalist returning from Syria (May 2014) did not serve as a wakeup call, then the recent attacks on the kosher supermarket in Paris and then on a synagogue in Copenhagen surely did. For Israel – defining itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people and considering itself to have special responsibility for the security of Jews anywhere in the world – Jewish targets outside of Israel represent a soft target for Israel's enemies. This threat raises concerns over the future of the Jews in Europe. Some in Israel already lament it and call on European Jews to come to Israel.

The phenomenon of Islamic State is readily used in the internal Israeli debate regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the one hand, there are those who use it to underscore the point that in a turbulent, radicalised environment, Israel should be doubly wary of political initiatives and territorial redeployments which may open the door to more Islamist or Jihadi elements on its borders. On the other hand, there are those who argue that the lack of any political initiative to resolve the conflict increases the chance of escalation and radicalisation in Israel's immediate environments, especially in the Palestinian arena. For Israel, facing elections in the coming weeks, this debate is accentuated following the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks last year, the summer war in Gaza, and recent Palestinian bids to impose guidelines for a solution at the UN Security Council and have Israel investigated for alleged war crimes by the ICC.

Following the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, contended that "Hamas is ISIL and ISIL is Hamas" and that they are "branches of the same poisonous tree." Egypt went as far as making the (unsubstantiated) claim that Hamas actively cooperates with ISIL-affiliates in Sinai. There are indeed ideological overlaps. Like ISIL, Hamas espouses an Islamic-fundamentalist anti-Western (and anti-Israel) xenophobic worldview with a desire to restore the historic prominence and supremacy of Islam. Like Islamic State it proclaims and employs violent means/Jihad as an indispensable tool. Like Islamic State it enforces Islamic laws (Shari'a) in its governed territories, albeit usually not in as harsh a manner. At the same time, there are noted differences. While Islamic State hails from the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine and therefore has no interest in engaging in political processes within existing states or political entities, Hamas hails from the Muslim Brotherhood doctrine of Islamism and pursues simultaneously Jihadi and political approaches. While Hamas ideologically believes in the concept of an Islamic Caliphate, its focus is on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and not beyond. Unlike ISIL, therefore, its policies represent a symbiosis of national and Islamist agenda, and it exhibits more pragmatism in its tactics and use of means. That is why, despite equating Hamas with Islamic State, Israel prefers Hamas to rule Gaza and enforce a ceasefire rather than having to contend with uncontrollable Salafi-Jihadi groups in the Strip.

CONCLUSIONS

It is possible to defeat ISIL. This requires a comprehensive vision for the region, a coherent strategy, realistic goals, adequate resources to meet these goals and long-term US commitment and leadership. Following are some key elements which must inform that strategy.

1. Boost the military campaign

For the military campaign – the most important dimension in the war on ISIL – to be more effective, it needs more resources, including a constant, robust cycle of intelligence and targeting supported by the deployment of joint attack coordination teams. In the meantime, coalition forces should speed up the

training and equipment of local forces designated to fight ISIL and deploy advisory teams on the ground.

While fighting the war in Iraq and Syria, dangerous ISIL metastases in other parts of the region – especially in Libya (now openly threatening Italy) and Sinai – should not be neglected and the West should support local forces fighting them.

2. Recognise the nature of the Islamist problem

As they fight the Jihadi threat in the Middle East and on their own territory, Western powers should start with a clear-eyed identification of the challenge. This is not a general form of “violent extremism”, fanaticism or insanity that randomly afflicts a marginal few. This is an extremist strain of Islam basing itself on deep historic and ideological roots, riding the acute physical and psychological distresses of Muslims both inside and outside the region. British Prime Minister David Cameron has been right to stress that winning means “defeating the poisonous ideology of Islamist extremism, by tackling all forms of extremism, not just the violent extremists.” Not all Western leaders have spoken as clearly.

Western strategy to meet this challenge should address not only the manifestation of this strain on the ground (such as criminalising and trying to block Muslims from joining Islamic State and other Jihadi groups) but its deeper roots which motivate Muslims to make the very decision to join it. Given the psychological and emotional dimensions of the Jihadi allure, more emphasis is warranted on dispelling the glamour and illusion surrounding it; vividly publicising ISIL’s defeats, portraying the grim reality of life under Islamic State and amplifying stories of disillusionment by young recruits who joined it. These approaches seem to promise more than issuing religious edicts (important as they are) or highlighting the group’s cruelty, which the group itself clearly sees as a source of attraction for the disaffected young recruits it seeks.

While Europe should consider why its integration and social policies failed to stop the wave of Jihadists emerging in Western societies, it should seek as many Muslim partners as possible to fight the Jihadi appeal, since the war will ultimately have to be fought and decided within Islamic society. While Arab

states (especially Jordan and Egypt – the latter in Sinai and Libya) are playing an increasingly active role in the military campaign, Arab and Muslim societies have yet to generate effective societal, cultural and educational responses to the Jihadi trend. President Sisi’s recent high profile call for renewal in Islamic religious discourse is a courageous step in the right direction, yet it addresses only part of the problem.

3. Do not give Iran a pass

This war should be fought in the context of a long-term vision for the region, looking at the day after an ISIL defeat. ISIL’s opponents in the West and in the region need to ask: Is it possible to defeat ISIL while keeping Iraq as a one decentralised state, rather than allowing Shiite militias and Iran to fill the void? Can Syria realistically be reunited under one central government? How to deal with regional and sectarian schisms? How to approach alliances in a region beset by instability and inherent contradictions?

In this context the West should be wary to not let the threat of ISIL blur its clear sight regarding the challenge posed by Iran to regional stability. The urge to conclude a nuclear deal with Iran against the backdrop of converging interests on ISIL must not be translated to significantly softening Western positions on the deal or giving Iran a pass on its destabilising regional policies, including support for proxies and terror groups. On the contrary, only firm policies stand the chance of securing a reasonable nuclear deal and deterring Iran regionally. Iran has a clear self-interest in countering ISIL and does not need to be rewarded for it.

4. Support liberal pro-Western actors

In the regional context, more attention and support should be given to the very few relatively successful, liberal, pro-Western elements such as Jordan and the Kurds, who are currently the most potent local force fighting Islamic State on the ground.

5. Encourage deepening ties based on shared interests between Israel and Sunni powers

Notwithstanding political differences with the West over the Palestinian issue, Israel is an asset as a strong, stable, democratic pro-Western power

working with major Arab regional actors to block extremists destabilising the region.

For Israel, a Middle East with ISIL in its heart augments converging interests with major Sunni powers such as Egypt, Jordan and key Gulf states, who share Israel's concerns regarding Jihadists, the political Islam of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, and the (mostly Shiite) Iran-led radical axis. Acting on these converging interests, Israel, working in coordination with the US and the EU, should strive to create a regional framework to also address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – a strategic Israeli interest notwithstanding Islamic State.

Given that the Palestinian Authority appears bent on not turning back to the paradigm of bilateral negotiations from the path of international legal confrontation it has taken, one way out of the existing vicious circle may be an initiative with the Arab states, for example a revised Arab Peace Initiative. Pro-Western Arab states have a lot to offer Israel in terms of developing more open relations, and can give political direction and cover to the Palestinians. They have the potential therefore to help salvage deteriorating Israeli-Palestinian relations.

The interest in working more closely with Israel to contain Iran and Islamic State may create an added incentive for Arab states to go beyond security coordination and behind-the-scenes political dialogue. At the same time it must be recognised that without an Israeli move that conveys its seriousness in advancing towards a solution, the Arab states are unlikely to play a proactive role vis a vis the Palestinians and will not allow relations with Israel to significantly advance. Once a new Israeli government is formed, this is an area that third parties should explore with the parties in the region.

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