

Prove Islamic State a False Prophet

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Washington needs to destroy the group's image and achievements, and give Sunnis reason to help in that effort.

Fifteen years after 9/11, it might seem strange that terror and securing the American homeland are central to the presidential campaign. After all, combating terror was a priority of the Bush and Obama administrations. Both presidents invested a great deal in preventing external terrorist groups from being able to carry out terror attacks here and were successful in doing so.

Yet the San Bernardino and Orlando attacks, demonstrating the threat of homegrown terrorists and their shockingly easy access to automatic weapons, make the choices even starker, the stakes even higher. Slogans won't prevent such attacks but intelligence (particularly on email and social media posts), early detection of possible radicalization, and active cooperation with Muslim communities will all be part of the answer. Obviously, alienating Muslim communities is not a smart way to make them active partners in the effort. Nor is it effective in countering the Islamic State terrorist group, which portrays a world against Muslims as a recruiting tool.

Defeating and discrediting ISIL is essential for any strategic plan to deal with terror. Though there are other terrorist groups, ISIL represents a unique threat for at least three reasons. First, its use of social media is slick, professional and designed to appeal to those young people who are alienated and outcast socially. Second, it is a source of inspiration for lone-wolf attacks -- especially with its calls to "kill non-believers" and its claims of heroic martyrdom for those who do so. Third, it defines as its mission the need to produce a cataclysmic confrontation with the non-believers to yield Islam's final victory. And that means even if we do not attack ISIL, it will attack us.

What must be done to defeat ISIL? To begin with, we must blunt its appeal. ISIL claims to have a divine mandate. Suffering military defeats can demonstrate the hollowness of this claim. Presently, we are rolling it back in both Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately, until we undo the group's greatest symbolic victories -- its seizure of Mosul in Iraq and the

establishment of a capital in Raqqa, Syria -- its image of success will remain. Losing the symbols of these achievements is thus essential and would be impossible to hide.

There are other means for exposing the fraudulent nature of the group's claims, and here social media can play a role. Take the claim that ISIL fighters are divine messengers. With their resources and territory being squeezed, increasing numbers of fighters are surrendering and defecting. Why not showcase those surrendering on social media? What kind of divine messengers surrender? Similarly, put defectors on social media platforms and let them tell the story of the brutality, injustice, exploitation of women, and corrupt and arbitrary nature of rule in ISIL-controlled territory.

Ultimately, ISIL must be discredited. While we can debunk its claims by inflicting military defeats and exposing the group's actual behaviors, the United States and its non-Muslim partners in the coalition cannot discredit ISIL. Only Sunni Muslims can do that. ISIL claims it is the protector of Sunni Muslims against the non-believers and "the rejectors" -- the Shiite Muslims. If nothing else, this tells us that Iran cannot be a partner in discrediting ISIL. On the contrary, its role in the mass killing of Sunnis in Syria has contributed to the rise of ISIL.

We need the Sunnis -- clerics, tribes and governments -- to discredit and replace ISIL on the ground. Indeed, even if we succeed in militarily rooting ISIL out of Mosul and Raqqa and removing the remnants of ISIL control over territory, Sunni governance must take the place of ISIL. If it does not, if there are revenge killings by Shiite militias in the aftermath of liberation, if Sunnis are politically and economically excluded and repressed (as was the case when al-Qaeda in Iraq was defeated in 2008), it will be only a matter of time before we see the next incarnation of ISIL.

Our problem in getting Sunnis to take on this role is that our priority in Syria and Iraq is ISIL -- while Iran, the Shiite militias and Syrian President Bashar Assad are the Sunni preoccupations. They see a predatory Iran using Shiite militias to dominate the region and fear we are ready to acquiesce in their dominance. Until we can show we take the Iranian threat seriously, and will work with our Sunni partners to raise the cost to Iran of its destabilizing actions, the Sunnis will be unlikely to play the role that only they can against ISIL. The next president must understand this complicated reality and use our readiness to counter Iran in the region to gain leverage and influence to move the Sunnis to make ISIL their priority as well as ours.

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