



ISIS: Understanding the Threat and Its Implications for the West

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Ever since the news first broke in the West of the atrocities committed by the advancing Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rebels, this group has received broad attention in Western media. Now, details on ISIS' attempts to conquer the Kurdish-Syrian city of Kobanê – the 'Siege of Kobanê' – are meticulously provided. Earlier, the beheading of James Foley, Steven Sottlof, and other Westerners solidified the impression of a ruthless terror organisation that is following in the footsteps of Al Qaeda. Western and Arab states under the leadership of the United States (US) have developed responses to ISIS that centre on military (read: fighter jet) strikes on ISIS camps and infrastructure, while time and again Western citizens are arrested either en route to join the ranks of ISIS or on their way back to their countries of citizenship. Yet, while ISIS is sometimes described as being the new Al Qaeda, in order to understand this group it is essential to look beyond the experiences with and responses to Al Qaeda.

Unlike Al Qaeda, ISIS is not just a religious terrorist group. Nor is it a guerrilla group that can be understood by looking at the example of Palestinian groups in the late 1960s and 1970s or even the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in Algeria. This paper will show that ISIS does not fit one category as it combines both: the desire to rule a specific territory and extreme Islamist (Sunni) zeal. I will argue that these dual characteristics are important for understanding the current threat posed and may indicate possible future developments and solutions. Understanding ISIS does not mean condoning its actions; but it is essential in order to deal with it properly.

ISIS and the Use of Terror: Historical Parallels and Differences

What is terror? An all-encompassing definition of the phenomenon has not yet been developed but there is some academic consensus that it is a strategy (and thus not an ideology) that aims at instilling fear through violence or the threat thereof in order to further a political (or religious) agenda. One can furthermore differentiate terrorism from guerrilla movements or liberation groups that normally want to control a certain territory, use heavier weaponry, often operate in bigger fighting units, sometimes wear uniforms, and have a flag. Terrorists, on the other hand, operate in very small groups (if at all), do not normally have a banner (but they do use emblems or symbols), wear no uniforms, use small handguns and explosives, and want to implement specific political (or religious) goals. ISIS shows features of both, which is what makes this group special.



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The use of terror as a strategy by groups striving to achieve political goals has a long history. Early examples include the zealots of the first century AD, who wanted to drive the Romans out of the Holy Land while also having religious zeal (hence the word itself). To some extent, ISIS resembles them in this duality of character: both as a religious group and a movement claiming control over a territory. Terror continued to be used by groups and (state) authorities over the course of the next two millennia. Infamous examples include the Inquisition of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and the regime of 'la terreur' during Maximilien de Robespierre's rule in the wake of the French Revolution. Social-revolutionary groups as well as 'freedom fighters' used terror in the last two decades of the 19th century and carried it into the 20th century. One famous contemporary example is the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, archduke of Austria, in June 1914. But terrorism also blossomed after the First and Second World War. Jewish-Zionist groups employed terror to drive the British out of Mandate Palestine, while the FLN used terror to free Algeria from French occupation just like other groups resorted to it in their struggles for decolonisation during the 1950s up until the 1980s. The fact that history provides a wealth of lessons to learn from is shown by Palestinian 'freedom fighters' using the example of Jewish terror in the 1940s and trying to replicate it in the 1960s and 1970s to oppose Israel's occupation of Palestine. At the same time, social-revolutionary groups emerged - and disappeared again - in the West. Towards the late 1980s, the most prominent terror group today, Al Qaeda, came into existence in the maelstrom of the struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. ISIS is only the latest episode in a story that dates back millennia: the history of political violence as a tool to achieve political change.

What then is ISIS? The predecessor organisation was founded by Abu Musab az-Zarqawi in 2003 and committed attacks in Iraq. In the next couple of years, the organisation continued its assaults on US army installations, Iraqi authorities, the population, and also targeted and assassinated Western citizens. It was during these years, around 2005, that affiliations existed between the Zarqawi group and Al Qaeda, which led to them being recognised as a terrorist group by the US and other governments. The group became known as 'Al Qaeda in Iraq'. After the death of Zarqawi in 2006, Abu Ayyub al-Masri took over the leadership and the group was renamed 'Islamic State in Iraq (ISI)'. ISI claimed territorial control over parts of Iraq and further escalated its violent attacks all over the country. Upon the death of al-Masri, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed leadership of the group in 2010. Two years later, ISI began to participate in the Syrian civil war, thus further expanding its area of operation. One year ago, in 2013, the group changed its name to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

One recent development to acknowledge is that while ISIS' predecessors upheld links with Al Qaeda, ISIS has currently moved beyond Al Qaeda. While they were connected at the beginning, ISIS has now developed a distinct character of its own. Just as much as the Red Brigades were not the same as the Red Army Faction even though they had a similar ideological foundation, Al Qaeda and ISIS - despite both being radical Islamist organisations - are certainly very different phenomena. Al Qaeda is a religious terrorist group operating in loosely connected networks with offspring organisations in several regions of the world. It does not strive, however, for a specific territory other than a very vaguely termed 'Caliphate' that - depending on the sources - would roughly cover



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northern Africa, the Middle East, and further extend into eastern and southern Asia. ISIS' aspirations are more clearly defined as they have their origins in the idealised notion of the Caliphate that was in place in the Levant in the 7th and 8th century AD. Al Qaeda wants to strike at the West (especially the US) as exemplified by the attacks on New York, Washington, Madrid, and London, while ISIS' objectives lie in the Iraq/Syria region - at least thus far. Moreover, Al Qaeda was organised around Osama Bin Laden and his successors. After Bin Laden's death the organisation became even further decentralised, whereas ISIS developed a regular hierarchical structure culminating in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his two deputies for Iraq and Syria. ISIS draws upon committees for financing, law (Sharia law basically), security, and other themes to manage its organisation and territory. In many ways, ISIS thus features a pseudo-governmental structure unparalleled by Al Qaeda. Lastly, while Al Qaeda sent its fighters overseas, to carry out terrorism there, ISIS recruits fighters from abroad to participate in the struggle in Syria/Iraq. Consequently, in many ways, ISIS shows features of a guerrilla group or even a 'liberation movement'. The group strives for territorial control; unlike most terror organisations it wants to create its own state. At first glance, ISIS might resemble, say, the various Palestinian groups of the early 1970s (such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) for instance), the Irish Republican Army (IRA), or the FLN. These groups had/have a clear hierarchical structure and wanted to rid a specific territory of foreign occupation - Israeli, British, and French respectively - and in the process also resorted to the use of terror. Similarities here certainly exist. However, while these groups wanted to free their countries from a well-established foreign power, this is not quite the case with ISIS. ISIS is more of a separatist movement not based on any single ethnic group that is trying to fill the vacuum left by the receding state in Iraq and Syria. The PFLP, the IRA, and the FLN all fought a very strong state, while ISIS is taking over from a failing state. Moreover, while guerrilla groups or separatist movements normally specifically target military personnel and not necessarily civilians (although civilian casualties are tolerated), ISIS directs its violence intentionally against non-armed targets. Add to this the distinct religious driving force behind ISIS and the differences between it and 'normal' guerrilla movements become even starker.

Consequently, ISIS combines features of both guerrilla movements and religious terrorists: it is a hybrid organisation. This is both an asset and a disadvantage for the group. On the one hand, it increases its claims for legitimacy as it is allegedly struggling for a just cause (not only a territory but also within a metaphysical context). This helps recruit fighters to their struggle. On the other hand though, the longevity of ISIS will be closely tied to the region it operates in, and once a viable security and political concept for Iraq and Syria is found, it will be difficult for ISIS - as it exists today - to survive. Developing a long-lasting solution to the problems in the Middle East is a totally different story though as the long history of the region demonstrates. But solutions are possible.



The Special Character of ISIS and Its Implications for the West

Why then is ISIS so dangerous? For one, more so than Al Qaeda, it recruits members that have European and Western passports. These fighters are already returning to their countries of citizenship and authorities there are becoming increasingly more aware of the threat potential that these radicalised and battle-ready (mostly young) people can pose. It does not require much imagination to understand that as more and more Western (not to mention Arab) governments become involved in the fight against ISIS, the leadership of the organisation will seek to carry the battle home to these countries as a means of retaliation. The first reports about ISIS sympathisers planning to behead random victims in Australia are only an indication of this trend; and they will not remain singular events. This threat could even increase if ISIS loses ground due to the military alliance that is building up against it in the Middle East. In order to retain credibility and to achieve its goals, ISIS will have to resort to the tactic of terrorism in the West. The intention behind this policy is clear: to spread fear in Western societies about ISIS revenge and to build up enough domestic pressure to force governments to cease their operations against ISIS in the Middle East. This is the difference to Al Qaeda. Bin Laden wanted to deliberately hurt the West, ISIS will do so more in retaliation for Western military involvement in Iraq and Syria. Consequently, as opposed to Al Qaeda, which had a global range of action from at least the mid-1990s on, ISIS is, thus far, focussed on the creation of its Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. As long as the territorial struggle continues there, attacks in the West could occur – and in all likelihood at some point will – but they will not be the primary mission of the group.

There are a number of consequences that derive from this premise. First of all, as long as the struggle in Syria and Iraq continues, ISIS will remain a potential threat for Western countries and time and again returning ISIS fighters will plan and possibly commit attacks in Europe and North America. But this also means that as long as the struggle for territory is ongoing, ISIS will focus its resources on that battle. Consequently, should the conflict be won by the coalition and ISIS is really driven out of the region – and thus out of existence there – terrorism in the West will probably continue for a while as radicalised fighters return to their countries. But deprived of any realistic claims to territorial control, the group will lose legitimacy as well as appeal and will degenerate towards a small core nucleus of radicals. ISIS might then resemble one of those terrorist cells of today that are loosely united by the umbrella term ‘Al Qaeda’. Like these cells it will continue to be a domestic security concern but it will be nowhere near the danger that ISIS poses at the moment.

The second consequence of the regional focus of ISIS is that there are ways to dry out ISIS that are more feasible than in the case of Al Qaeda. The root of the conflict that ISIS thrives on lies in the political instability of Iraq and Syria. Both countries are either failing states or just about getting there. A new regional concept that provides for stability, perspectives, and peace by including all-important ethnic and religious groups in the region would drive support away from ISIS, pacify the region, and thus eventually end the threat. This, however, requires a stronger commitment from the



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international community at large, and its more prosperous members in particular, to the region. Stability and peace in the Middle East will come at a price.

In both scenarios described above, the end of the conflict will not immediately translate into the end of ISIS terror. History tells us that terrorist organisations take a long time to die. Even if a regional order of stability were to be created, sporadic instances of terror by veteran ISIS fighters might still occur, both in Iraq and Syria as well as in the West. Yet, these will be signs of the death struggle of the organisation rather than its power. Once it is deprived of its territorial control, the Islamist-fundamentalist character alone will probably not allow ISIS to continue its existence. It would lead to even more rivalry with Al Qaeda and in all likelihood, ISIS would get the short end of the stick.

Conclusions

In sum, as ISIS becomes an ever more serious regional actor in the Middle East, questions arise as to what it constitutes and how to deal with it. As this essay has shown, ISIS is not just a new Al Qaeda – be it a successor or part of the network. It is a new and genuinely different group that while having a strong religious-extremist foundation has goals that go beyond the metaphysical sphere and quite simply come down to power and influence. It is a guerrilla group – for lack of a better word – that has the potential to carry terrorism to the West and in all likelihood will do so as Western nations become more committed to fighting it militarily and particularly if it loses ground in Syria and Iraq. Paying more attention to identifying potential sympathisers in Western countries will go some way to preventing these attacks but due to the nature of these ‘fighters’ – being Western citizens – it will be extremely difficult to completely eradicate the threat (as is the case in every situation of terrorism). The more efficient solution will be to attend to ISIS on the ground, in the Middle East. If a genuinely stable and united international front against ISIS can be established that fights it on all fronts, a solution might be possible. But a solely military approach will not suffice. Attending to the legitimate local grievances about the political instability in the region will be at least equally important. Providing for stability, participation, and prosperity in Iraq and Syria will drive away recruits and dry out ISIS in the long run. Even then – and definitely in the case of a lack of resolve of the international community to fight ISIS together – only a political solution will help turn ISIS away from terror and towards becoming a political force in a system where its participation is ensured. This will mean, however, that for any solution of the problems in the region – the failure of governance and states – ISIS will have to be included in the settlement. This will be a highly unpopular decision for Western politicians to make but it is an essential one to end the threat in the absence of the total military defeat of ISIS. History provides examples of cases where champions of terrorism were included into the political process to make them stop the use of violence. When the PLO was taken seriously and recognition was extended to its cause and mission, it bid goodbye to terror. Likewise, when the peace process in Northern Ireland moved forward to include negotiations with political representatives of the IRA, such as Sinn Fein, terrorism subsided there, too. In the beginning, no one wanted to talk to terrorists but eventually there was no way around it. Terrorist organisations



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have a tendency to soften as they turn into political forces. The importance here lies on the urgency to establish such a process as soon as possible in the Middle East. The longer the conflict with ISIS lasts, the more likely it will become that ISIS fighters will carry terrorism to the West as well. Swift responses and localising the conflict by finding solutions in Syria and Iraq will help keep the number of victims in the West down. There is no doubt that the bloody business of ISIS, its means and methods have to be despised as they are – no matter what religious justification is provided – abhorrent. Yet, ISIS needs to be engaged with one way or another. This does not mean that terrorism works; it just means choosing the lesser of two evils.

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