

President Obama's strategy against Islamic State is highly flawed



President Obama's plan to destroy the Islamic State (IS, former ISIS) is ineffective at best. Rather, NATO allies should aim toward forcing the terrorist organization that is destabilizing the territories of Iraq and Syria to implode from

within. Beyond the White House's valid intentions, there is little solidarity within the coalition that has been assembled to take action. With the exception of the United Kingdom, the United States had not secured any solid assurances from the 'allies' forming the 'Atlantic Alliance' to back up its overly military focused strategy; it may even have obtained some rejection. Most of all, the Atlantic Alliance cannot work because it has excluded Syria's Bashar al-Assad, which is as much an omission as it is a contradiction in terms.

The inception of IS was largely favored by the fact that some of the West's allies – namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar – have promoted the armed opposition against the regime of President Bashar al-Asad, which, as dictatorial it may be, has yet to find any credible – or reasonable – alternative. Obama's strategy was conceived and delivered far more to respond to internal pressures from Republicans and 'hawks' rather than to actually resolve the IS problem. Perhaps, that is the weakness of his foreign policy. Obama wants to disengage from many international crisis situations but he has been forced to succumb to internal pressure rather than seeking alternative solutions. Meanwhile, the West wants American leadership and it is just getting the same old tired solutions to problems in

the Middle East, Ukraine and China with which relations have deteriorated.

The fact that President Obama has remained reluctant to intervene militarily in Syria to influence the outcome of the civil war over the past three years suggests that he has realized that working with the Syrian regime offers the only real chance of eradicating IS the terrorist group. Moreover, the Atlantic Alliance is fully aware that the Syrian army, the Kurdish Peshmerga and units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are the ones performing the actual "dirty work" (i.e. combat) on the ground; and this very important latter part is exactly what the allies will not be doing. Meanwhile, inasmuch as Obama has framed the strategy as a war against ISIS rather than against Islam, it will be a difficult sell for some of the Arab governments called to participate. In fact, some of the West's most reliable regional allies, Jordan and Turkey, will offer only minor logistical support. This is because, IS's goal of creating a large Islamic state and converting the West are concepts well rooted in the Qur'an and constitutes an attraction for some of the 'allied' states. While, none of these would ever engage in messianic wars, their military participation in the anti-ISIS alliance, would only serve to exacerbate the conflict within the Islamic world between Sunnis and Shiites. From a strictly military point of view, Obama's offensive against IS will be largely based on air raids. Air raids are not sufficient.

The problem is not whether to send drones or fighter jets; surely, they will be all be used. Rather, such a conflict as one targeting a well rooted, armed and financed militant group as Islamic State, which controls an area the size of the United Kingdom (including Scotland) requires the kind of massive commitment that nobody can assure, neither the Americans and especially not the Arab allies. Obama is promoting a war by half measures and this cannot work. IS has appropriated many armored vehicles, tanks, guns, ammunition

during their numerous raids against the Iraqi and Syrian armies. Yes, the allies can bomb them successfully out in the open using aircraft but the terrorists would then seek refuge in the cities, starting a guerrilla war that can only be addressed with troops on the ground. This is exactly what the rebels have done in Syria, increasing civilian casualties and destruction to property. The West – especially the United States – has little appetite to get involved in such a war again. No, IS cannot be defeated by air strikes, bombs and bullets aimed at hitting the infrastructure and the strategic objectives of the organization.

IS has enjoyed operational and tactical successes on the ground while it is clear that it has an important nerve center in the West, especially the USA and the UK. No war against IS can be won without stopping its rise and its propaganda to recruit members in the West – members who come from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds alike. In addition, Western governments should borrow from the anti-Mafia and anti-drug cartel struggles playbook to tackle IS: target its funding and wealth. The military strategy should focus on driving IS away from the oil fields they are controlling. IS also has an actual public administration, provinces, a judicial system, tax collection and, of course, an army, which the CIA has estimated at being over 30,000 troops strong (but according to other estimates it might be as high as 50,000). The air strikes must be part of an offensive conducted simultaneously from multiple directions with Syrian and Iraqi ground forces backed by the air forces of the United States or any other Western countries.

IS should be treated in the same way as a rogue State; it should be made bankrupt and force to self implode. Without funds, IS will not be able to provide the kinds of benefits it has promised its backers. It will prove incapable of governing a well-defined territory for quite a long time such that its leadership would emerge discredited beyond repair. The actions

proposed by the West, in contrast, may only increase the global popularity of IS.

Islamic State must be fought in the West and the Middle East

✘ Islamic State ('IS', former ISIS), a terrifying and terrorist organization, brandishing an especially intolerant version of Sunni Islam and waging a war of conquest in Iraq and Syria, has attracted many fighters from Europe and the West. The latter have been involved in gruesome displays of violence, mostly intended for western spectators. Indeed, such episodes as the execution of American journalists James Foley and, today, Steven Sotloff have been marked by sickening rituals dedicated that are more about the audience than the poor victims themselves. The videos are professionally produced to make the message as chilling as possible from crucifixion to beheadings. The displays are so effective in their horror that even al-Qaida has repudiated IS's tactics. In 2005, Ayman al-Zawairi, the current leader of Al Qaeda (he replaced Bin Laden) reportedly wrote a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, IS's 'ancestor' to advise against using such violence because "Muslims will never find things like that palatable". Gengis Khan himself would not find 'things like that' palatable; yet, westerners enrolled in IS, have been the most enthusiastic perpetrators.

The practice of Westerners who have moved to Syria to fight alongside local rebels against the Shiite/Alawite dominated regime of Bashar al-Asad is not new. However, in the first few

years of the Syrian civil war (it is estimated that the Civil War, so far, has killed 191,000 people), Western governments, especially those of the United States and United Kingdom, were willing to turn a blind eye to this phenomenon; indeed, they worked under the logic that Asad is hated in the west as a tyrant who kills his own people and that the civil war would somehow replace dictatorship with democracy. Surely, Asad has not earned a candidacy to sainthood, and he faced widespread criticism (even from ally Iran) during the early days of the revolt when his artillery was pounding the rebels in Homs. Western governments have also arrived late to the realization that IS is extremely dangerous. Iran was the first to deliver Russian type ammunition to the Peshmerga while the US and UK dropped bottled water and blankets! Much of the West, ignoring warnings from experienced analysts and from Asad himself, fooled itself into believing that the Syrian civil war would be contained within Syrian borders. Even, now, they refuse to read the evidence, obstinate in their compartmentalization of Syria from Iraq into the Manichean formula: i.e. Syrian government BAD; Iraq government GOOD; Kurds Good; Alawites BAD.

Apart from oversimplifying the Syrian civil war, the phenomenon of Western Jihadists is very significant and worrisome because it subverts the cliché that religious fanaticism and its violent consequences is exclusive to economically backward countries. Clearly, it can develop in London, UK as in London, Ontario, Canada (the origin of two Jihadists – both of them from Christian families – who participated in a deadly attack against a gas plant in Algeria in 2012). Moreover, governments are now concerned by the eventual return of battle trained religious radicals to their countries of origin, ready to carry out terrorist acts. These thoughts are likely keeping many US security officials awake at night as the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaches. Sociologically, according to a synopsis of various statistics, 'The Economist' suggests that most Western Jihadists appear to

be less than 40-year old men and that there are even women (10-15%) from countries of central and northern Europe. As many as 12,000 westerners were fighting in Syria, including about three thousand Westerners, most of whom have joined the IS ranks. Mike Rogers, Republican congressman and president of the United States Secret Service Committee of the House of Representatives, said that hundreds of people with American citizenship, British and Canadian that have been trained with fighters in Iraq and ISIS in Syria pose "a very serious threat" to the United States, especially the Americans who have passports and have the opportunity to enter the country without a visa. The UK appears to be the 'centre of gravity' for European jihadist networks.

It is not very difficult to get to Syria. Turkey, despite tighter controls, is the main gateway. The first stop for many aspiring fighters is Istanbul, where they can board several domestic flights to cities near the Syrian border (what some local residents have dubbed the jihadi express"). From there, they wait for the opportunity to enter Syria secretly, or by using false Syrian identity cards. Clearly, the IS has well established links inside Turkey. The combatants' motivations for joining are the key to understanding the desire to join the Jihad. They are neither poor nor marginalized. Many are middle class; for example, some recently identified fighters were found to have been accepted to study medicine or to have worked in a High Street shops with parents running a restaurant. According to the Economist, the very religious fanaticism one would expect to be at the heart of the problem is missing from several fighters. There was recent news that two apprentice jihadists from Birmingham, England, bought "Islam for Dummies" books on Amazon. These are hardly what one would describe as Islamic scholars. Therefore, many fighters are simply attracted to those places because their life is not very interesting.

They seem to think that jihad is a kind of vacation: Club Med

('Club Ak47' perhaps?) without the alcohol perhaps. Sociologists can easily understand how a middle class bored youth in a dead-end job in a gray town can suddenly find some worth by joining and feeling part of a group which gives him access to fame and weapons. And the real extremists understand this better than Coca Cola marketing gurus, recruiting the most boring people from the most boring towns (Belgium was the most prolific supplier of jihadists in proportion to population). Never since the days of Osama Bin Laden and the Twin Towers, has any radical group been as successful as Isis at recruitment. They are far better at attracting young Muslims (and non-Muslims) living in European and American cities than al-Qaida. Social and personal frustration, lack of integration, finding a strong identity, the need to find an existential role are the reasons that led these young Westerners to join IS.

This formula is not much different from the Hashashin, a radical Shiite sect, active in the 11th– 13th centuries. They murdered high-profile political figures in broad daylight under the alleged influence of drugs such as hasheesh (hence their name). Some governments are turning to 're-education' or 'deprogramming' methods to dissuade youth intent on joining the international Jihad. The methods are similar to those aimed at young people involved in criminal organizations. The United States has taken note; even Senator John McCain, who urged arming the Syrian rebellion and its struggle against Asad not two years ago, has advocated President Obama to take deeper military action against IS. President Obama will attend a UN Security Council summit to be held in the coming weeks, dedicated to the phenomenon of Foreign Fighters and the Islamic State. As much as the West will be forced to take direct action in Iraq either covertly or overtly helping Asad's fight against the radicals by bombing IS outposts in Syria and Iraq.

Access to oil makes 'Islamic State' a greater threat than al-Qaeda

✘ Iran, the Arab States of the Persian Gulf region and North Africa discovered oil in the first half of the 20th century. They used the proceeds of oil sales – boosted by the 1973 oil embargo and various nationalizations – to advance their societies. Governments from Libya to Iraq to Saudi Arabia and Oman have used oil to fund education, healthcare and social welfare programs. Oil has vastly changed the social landscape in the Gulf region, turning Bedouins and pearl fishermen into oil sheikhs and desert tents into the grandiose skyscrapers that dot the shorelines of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Dubai. However, oil States, monarchies and republics alike have also used oil wealth to pursue covert regional and international political agendas. Libya's defunct dictator Mo'ammr al-Qadhafi financed Palestinian nationalists as well as pet rebellion projects in Africa and the Philippines. The Saudis have used the oil wealth to back Arab monarchs and strategic allies; they also used it to finance the anti-Soviet mujahedin in Afghanistan in the 1980's setting the stage for the Taliban and for al-Qaida. Recently, the Saudi royals have used oil proceeds to 'buy' their population out of the socio-political phenomenon known as the 'Arab Spring' thanks to USD\$ 100/barrel oil.

The Iraqi government seems to have no doubts and believes that Saudi Arabia has been Islamic States main financial sponsor. In June, the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki declared it openly: "We believe Saudi Arabia responsible for the moral and

financial support provided to ISIS". This is a rather 'hot potato' for the United States, (the Saudis' main political and military ally). Washington has rejected al-Maliki's allegations. There may be some truth to them in that private wealthy Saudis, as in the case of al-Qaida, may well have financed IS or ISIS in the context of the deepening divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, a struggle that is has come to define the geopolitical calculations of the entire Middle East. The problem is that IS is far too wealthy for it to be funded through 'gifts'. It has regular income. The fact that IS, which professes as similar 'salafist' interpretation of Islam as the Saudi Wahabbism has raised the concerns of the Saudi monarchy (deploying several thousand troops along its entire northern border with Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait) suggests that even if they had some influence over IS, they are now afraid of it.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the terrorist group Islamic State ('IS', formerly known as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or ISIS) has also financed itself through oil. IS has been fighting to control the Baiji refinery, which accounts for one-third of Iraq's total oil production. In Syria, where IS gained strength by fighting against the Asad regime and other rebels, IS gained control of oil fields in eastern Syria. It then went back to Iraq and gained more oil fields along with two refineries, which turned IS into a virtual oil power in its own right. Some analysts have described it as the wealthiest terrorist group in history and its fortune amounts to an estimated USD\$ 2 billion with revenues of over USD\$ 2 million per day when oil proceeds are added to the 'taxes', extortion and kidnapping. In this sense, Islamic State is much more sophisticated and dangerous to the region than al-Qaida, which relied on the personal wealth of Osama bin-Laden and other wealthy patrons – whose funds could be eventually controlled and checked by authorities. IS's funds come from oil and revenues from local businesses that are difficult to identify.

The group's ability to raise funds is closely linked to the territory it controls, which makes it impervious to sanctions, anti-money laundering laws and banking regulations. Gaining access to oil fields and refineries is clearly IS's main tactic, boosted by its gains in the loosely controlled regions of post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. Surely, ISIS benefited from the (western encouraged) funds originating in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar or Kuwait at the time of the first uprisings against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad. Moreover, several organizations took advantage of the humanitarian emergency and have used the Syrian crisis as a cover to donate large sums of money to extremist Islamist groups, using funds coming mainly from mosques and social media. IS has also relied on such income sources as extortion, kidnappings and the Jizya tax that Shari'a law imposes on non-Muslim communities. All of these contribute vast sums and groups like al-Qaida and the various offshoots have more or less worked along similar lines. What makes IS so different and so dangerous is crude oil, which no doubt accounts for the largest share of the Group's revenues.

IS has robbed some USD\$ 400 million from banks in Mosul but it also controls wells with a production capacity of over 80,000 barrels per day, which is then sold vastly below cost – between USD\$ 25 and 60 dollars per barrel according to reports – to buyers that share no part of Islamic State's medieval and brutal political and social ideas. Oil has become simply too expensive for governments in the region to pass up the opportunity to buy oil at bargain basement prices. Intermediaries arrange for the oil to 'flow' from ISIS controlled regions and wells in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria to Jordan and Turkey. The official Syrian government led by al-Asad has also been accused of buying oil from ISIS – leading some analysts to suggest that al-Asad has cooperated with ISIS. Indeed, the intermediaries, given that the oil producing region in question is in and around Mosul, are none other than Kurds – the very Kurds who have also been the targets of

atrocious attacks by IS itself. Kurdish traders in the border regions straddling Iraq, Iran and Syria buy oil from IS and then ship it to Pakistan where it is sold “for less than half its original price,” according to a captured IS fighter. Given, the difficult social and infrastructure reconstruction process in Iraq, many oilfields and refineries in the country remained outside government control.

Control of regular oil income gives IS the ability to hire and to use funds to govern, pay salaries and even extend ‘largesse’ in the same way that other States continue to do. It is just a question of scale. IS has the power and funds to build infrastructure, pay for social services and recruit new ‘staff’. IS cannot simply be fought as a terrorist group. It is a State in its own right as the name suggests and it has much more money than al-Qaida, which, supposedly pent little more than a million dollars to fund the 9/11 attacks against New York and Washington. Even, if IS had access to a fraction of its alleged USD 2 billion fortune, the Middle East and the world face a very dangerous foe. Perhaps that is why President Obama and other world leaders are so confused about how to deal with IS. They can use drones and send special forces to win individual battles, scoring temporary victories, but they won’t be able to stop IS until they break their stranglehold on their independent source of oil. Indeed, the strategy to defeat IS – short of defeating the internal combustion engine and converting the world energy system to alternative or nuclear power – is to target the intermediary smugglers of crude oil – and its buyers. In other words, it’s a case of the war on terror borrowing from the ‘war on drugs’ playbook.

The Iraqi Government has already made it illegal to buy oil in Iraq without official authorization. Iraq’s Oil Ministry said: “International purchasers [of crude oil] and other market participants should be aware that any oil exports made without the authorization of the Ministry of Oil may contain crude oil originating from fields under the control of [ISIS]. The only

seller of Iraqi crude oil authorized by the Ministry of Oil is [Iraq's state-owned oil company] SOMO." IS has merely exploited already existing smuggling networks, which escalated last May when Kurdish smugglers began exporting oil via the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The Iraqi government accused the Kurds of engaging in "smuggling" blocking public sector salaries in Erbil – leaving them vulnerable to IS offers.

The nightmare scenario – and well within the realm of the possible if not probable – would see IS take over much of Iraq and extend its advance toward the Gulf region causing a major problem to oil supplies and production. In other words, turning Iraq into the perceived threat that led the world to coalesce against Saddam Hussein in 1990 after his forces invaded Kuwait. President Obama will be hard pressed to avoid re-deploying ground troops in Iraq or even of effectively helping Assad deal with IS in Syria..