

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 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 Assad 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 Assad 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 Assad's fight against the radicals by bombing IS outposts in Syria and Iraq.