

Fighting ISIS: Priming for a Multi-pronged Engagement?

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As on date, a coalition of 50 plus countries has put forth a common front against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In many respects, this coalition is more wide-ranging and intrusive than the one which evolved following the September 11, 2001 (9/11 attacks) in the US. Ultimately, the combined firepower of the coalition could be rather overwhelming for ISIS. Besides, the fact that a number of Arab countries are directly contributing to the military strikes, the move against the ISIS has been projected to be more legitimate from the perspective of the Muslim world.

But the question is would defeating ISIS militarily mean the end of jihadism?

From ISI to ISIS or ISIL

In itself, ISIS's claim of the establishment of an Islamic state is not as significant as the consideration of the issues that make such misadventures feasible and attractive to those that have joined or empathize with the group in the first place. In fact, understanding the metamorphosis of the fledgling Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) that came into existence in 2006 to the ISIS or ISIL, or from being described as a "jayvee team" to be one of severe strategic or existential concern from a counterterrorism perspective, is extremely significant.

The 2006 declaration, claiming the establishment of the ISI, was the outcome of the US invasion, and the perception of occupation, of Iraq, which essentially dispossessed the ruling Sunni elite under Saddam Hussain's rule. The establishment of a Shi'a-led government and the rising prominence of the Kurds were further bitter pills to swallow as evident from the first statement of ISI in which it emphasized that this initiative was in response to the division of the country among the Shi'as and the Kurds. At the time however, the group had rather limited objectives—to establish its control over a Sunni dominated area encompassing "Baghdad, Al Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahudin, Ninawa, and of parts of the provinces of Babel and Al Wassat," in Iraq.

How then the group could manage to expand itself - possessing territory both in Iraq and Syria; recruiting cadres from all over the world; and amassing assets to finance and sustain its ambitious caliphate project?

The Arab Spring Fall-out

ISIS's gathering of strength could partly be due to the Arab Spring fall-out which, as Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri emphasized, provided opportunities to undertake jihadist state-building initiatives across the region. Groups, which were mostly marginalized, were able to revive as the governments and their security and intelligence apparatus remained preoccupied with the protests. Erosion of state power and instability of the new regimes and the emergence of territories in many countries of the region, which respective governments could no longer control, created spaces for disparate jihadists to regroup, reorganize and train and new ones to emerge. Prolonged instability, unmet promises of reform and economic woes exacerbated public frustration and increased the vulnerability for radicalization which the jihadists exploited.

ISIS's strength also stems from its ability to harness the media, especially the social media with which it "created a brand, spread a seductive narrative and employed powerful iconography," thereby effectively becoming a magnet for foreign fighters including those from North America and Europe.

Money: Back in the Business of Terrorism?

Arguably, all these activities, including payments to the recruits, involve money—a lot of money. In fact, the ISIS phenomenon has brought the importance of money in terrorism to focus once again. It has been repeatedly emphasized how to progress from fringe radicals to recognized terrorists, the groups must have to acquire some income first and foremost. Most assessments of ISIS's rise and strength point to the huge amount of money that the group could amass from multiple sources including the looting of \$400 million in cash from an Iraqi bank; oil revenue from captured oilfields and donations. The group also appropriated the military hardware especially those given to the Iraqi army by the US.

In a way, it is not the possession of territory per se, but the wealth – estimated to be between 800 million and one billion a year, which could explain the group's ability to put up a threat of massive proportions. In relative terms, money could even be more important than the control of territory. In fact, post-9/11, territorial possession or mere presence in an identifiable physical location have proven to be serious vulnerabilities for most groups as evident from the fate of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.

Conversely, depriving the group access to its resources would be one of the most important tools to degrade and destroy it eventually. ISIS has been in a constant fight and mobilization to stay in the areas it controlled, the challenge of which would grow over time. This no doubt would be a huge cost to the group involving money and other resources, besides eroding its opportunity in terms of establishing governing structures necessary for statehood. Failure to demonstrate the attributes of a functioning state would undermine the vital aspects of its message that has been attracting recruits for the group from around the world and put a dent on its ambitious caliphate project.

It's not all about Military Strikes only

It is in the above contexts that the fight against ISIS needs to be

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understood. Threats from groups like ISIS cannot be overcome with military strikes alone. The strategic aspects of the fight against ISIS—going after its money and its ideology—need to be vigorously pursued as the international coalition led by the US and supported by the UN appears to be working on, making it significantly different from the “global war on terror,” post-9/11.

Three issues are worth considering in support of the above. First, despite the initial ambivalence, a clear and unambiguous understanding of the threat from ISIS has evolved among the members of the international community. Moreover, Washington is willing and in fact, leading the initiative to engage multilaterally against ISIS, instead of trying to “do it alone,” thereby enhancing the overall legitimacy of the fight.

Second, there is a renewed focus on the part of the international community to target terrorist financing, as evident from the unanimous and binding resolution by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on 24 September 2014, urging member-countries to take measures to suppress the recruiting, organizing, transporting, equipping and importantly, financing of ISIS. This was followed by strikes against the oil and gas infrastructure which the group controlled. These initiatives together with the public naming (and probably shaming) of the countries that financed ISIS would eventually starve the group financially and severely dent its ability to sustain its operations on multiple fronts.

Third, the religious narratives of the group in support of the Islamic state are either being under strain or being challenged from the mainstream Muslim community. Some of the most prominent Muslim countries are fighting ISIS with their own military assets. Additionally, the atrocities linked to ISIS in the territories that it claims to control and the type of governance that it put up—characterized by a general intolerance not only against non-Muslims but also against the followers of the faith within the Muslim community itself—could be undoing of its caliphate project and of the group itself. Extreme violence, broadcast all over the world through Internet or other media, might earn the group short-term gains—winning a recruit or two. But these have been counterproductive for the overall jihadist movement in the past as was evident from the documents recovered from Osama bin Laden’s hide-out. ISIS would meet with the same degree of revulsion and rejection from the larger community if it continues with its barbarity.

Fighting ISIS militarily is necessary. Ultimately however, the success depends on how the fight is conducted. While neutralizing the military components of the adversary is important, defeating groups like ISIS requires countering their ideology and depriving their ability to amass resources. Kinetic aspects of counterterrorism tend to be short-term—military strikes peter out and coalitions disappear as soon as the threat seems to be losing the steam. But counter-ideology and counter-financing measures are long-term and sustained, thereby helping to create an environment which will be inhospitable for groups like ISIS.