

ISIL, Ideology, and Islamic Militancy – Where is the Centre of Gravity?

Written by Stephen Pitt-Walker

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STEPHEN PITT-WALKER, JAN 25 2015

Defeating the roots of so-called 'Islamist Fascism' in ideological terms will be far more difficult and is far more serious an issue than dealing with its immediate symptom in the form of ISIL. This is not to suggest that defeating ISIL is unwarranted. Such an action surely meets the standard for waging a just war under international law. Moreover, it is morally reasonable due to the atrocities being committed by this terrorist army. However, defeating the underlying cause at its source is a far more significant and requisite challenge, necessary so that, paraphrasing the words of Sun Tzu, any future extremist Islamist-based armed force is subdued before having to engage it in battle...this being the Chinese (politico-military) sage's measure of the perfect strategy.

The ideology of militant, extremist Islamism emanates from two main sources, one is the Saudi Kingdom, which is of course Sunni and somewhat more fluid and flexible in its interpretation of Islam (albeit that al-Qaeda was born of the disaffected Saudi Osama bin-Laden) than the other which is The Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran is a Shia theocracy that applies a much more stringent, harsh interpretation of Sharia Law under the *Velayat-e faqih* (Shia clerical-Statism) as conceived by the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Mullah's regime in Iran is a much more overtly militant, arguably criminal state than the Saudi Kingdom. The Mullah's themselves preside over the perpetration of (and many have themselves perpetrated) human rights violations and crimes against humanity. These atrocities are principally the same as those committed by ISIL.

Although it is tempting to see ISIL as a Sunni (Salafi or Wah'habi) based terrorist army due to its historical roots, it is now demonstrating itself to be none of the above. Interestingly, the conglomeration that is ISIL has massacred not only ethnic Kurds, Christians, Shia and other *Mohareb* and infidel minorities but also Sunni tribe's people. This begs the question of why an ostensibly Sunni Jihadi Army (ISIL) is killing Sunnis in central Iraq? Certainly not for religious reasons... Based on the evidence it would be reasonable to deduce that sectarian loyalty has little to do with ISIL's ideological motives and that perhaps there is more behind the curtain than we see on centre stage.

I think it is always interesting to look at the results and benefits equation to see which party to any multi-relational dynamic is drawing advantage. That said, I cannot see any advantage for Saudi in the current state of affairs. Further, I see little advantage for a genuinely independent Iraq, especially Iraqi Sunnis or Kurds. The West is certainly only troubled by a threatening mess and due to Syrian-Iranian concerns and threats, along with legalities related to Iraqi sovereignty, the US has very limited military options. So who is advantaged by the campaign against ISIL?

Here are some interesting developments and their results as they pertain to the ISIL phenomenon. Let's begin with the fact that the suggestion has been made that Syria has colluded with ISIL. Iran has upheld the Assad regime since it began to falter in the early months of the Syrian civil war and the Mullah's regime in Iran has much to lose if free Syrian rebels prevail. The Iranian commander of Quds force and Iran's spymaster is known to have been coordinating IRGC military elements in Syria since the early stages of the insurrection... ISIL emerged from Syria, obviously well-funded, well-armed, well trained in conventional warfare, well organized and well led. It then attacked the Kurdish north and predominantly Sunni central Iraq. These regions and the groups within have long been a thorn in the side of the Iraqi central government under the Shia Prime Minister al-Maliki, as well as a historical enemy of

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Shia Iran.

The Shia dominated Iraqi government is now led by a Shia Mullah al-Abadi who has the same political roots as the former PM al-Maliki i.e. al-Darwa in Syria. The new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, has effectively legitimized the IRGC Quds force and Iranian backed Shia militia's presence in Iraq by formally requesting and welcoming these Iranian ground forces to assist in the fight against ISIL. This is despite the fact that these groups have covertly operated in Iraq since the fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003. It is also reported that the IRGC General Qassem Soleimani, the aforementioned Quds force commander and espionage Czar from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security, is master-minding the military strategy against ISIL in Iraq. In referring to Quds force Steven O'Hern (2012: 85) states that it "has the single aim – projecting power outside Iran's borders [and] the man in charge...directed the killing of hundreds of American servicemen" during the insurgency that followed the defeat of the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein. It is hard to deny that Iran is expanding its influence due to the rise of ISIL and is cloaking its previously covert activities in Iraq in a veil of legitimacy through its arguably mendacious claim to be aligned with the west in the fight against the ISIL terror. This is analogous to the Mafiosi laundering its dirty money through legitimate business organizations that have been established only in order that they may act as fronts for illicit Mafia activities.

If we connect the dots painted above and refer to the historically and constitutionally enshrined aim of Iran to expand its distorted form of Islamic revolution (through extra-territorial terrorism via Quds force) beyond its borders, and its foreign policy aims to increase its influence and regional hegemony – and the implementation of extra-territorial terrorism it has undertaken through Quds force global assassination program in the early 1990s as well as its establishing Hamas and Hezbollah, it is difficult to see that any participant in the war on ISIL is drawing more advantage than Iran. This is more especially the case in the context of the delicate stage at which the rise of ISIL and Iran's response to that event was timed, vis-à-vis the recent round of Iran's nuclear development program negotiations with the US, P5+1 and the IAEA. These have been put on hold yet again to the advantage of Iran (and the longer these negotiations take the further advanced Iran's unchecked nuclear program becomes), and the Iranian-backed Houthi's have mounted a successful incursion into Yemen, capturing its capital and much of its territory. All this may be mere coincidence, but two adages spring to mind. The first is a military intelligence maxim that "anything beyond two coincidences constitutes enemy activity" and second is, in the inimitable words of Sherlock Holmes, that "once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth." Arthur Conan Doyle.

My point is that humanity (Muslim and others of all creeds and religions) needs to address the inhumane ideology represented by militant, extremist Islam wherever it arises as in the case of ISIL, but that if the root of that ideology is not remedied then any treatment is of the symptom and not the cause. The solution then lies in locating the ideology's centre of gravity and strategizing its containment if not its demise. That is if one can put this genie back in the bottle...Ultimately, I submit, that dealing with the root cause of this ideology requires a completely different level of threat analysis and strategy than the military campaign against symptoms of the ideology such as ISIL.

About the author:

Stephen Pitt-Walker [BA (Hons, 1st) MA, MIS [IR], JD] has more than 25 years of strategic advisory, management consulting and outsourcing management experience across multiple industry sectors. He has consulted independently since 2009, prior to which he was Vice President, Financial Services at Gartner Consulting (Asia-Pacific). He is also a graduate of the Royal Military College of Australia, Duntroon, the Australian Defence Force Academy, and served as an officer in the Australian Regular Army for 10 years. He is a Fellow of the Strategic Planning Society, London.