

## A Sensible Strategy to Counter ISIS

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian

The recent ISIS terrorist attacks in Paris and California were a watershed. It is now clear for the Western world that ISIS is not a threat that can be contained but rather needs to be decisively defeated. However, the West should be careful not to succumb to a self-defeating over-reaction as it did after the 9/11 attacks. Indeed, the threat of terrorism looms larger now than it has ever before. It is time for Western decision-makers to pursue bold and novel approaches, centered on engaging all of the major power brokers in the Middle East in ways they have not until now.

The key to ultimately defeating ISIS is to recognize that it is based on an idea—Wahhabi Salafism—which predates ISIS and in fact serves as the ideology of all so-called jihadist groups from Boko Haram to Al Qaeda. This puritanical, fundamentalist sect has in recent decades extracted millions of followers from the traditionally more pluralistic and tolerant forms of Islam practiced across North Africa, the Middle East and beyond. This has not been an organic phenomenon either, but has been due to intense proselytization campaigns originating mostly from the world's leading Wahhabi-Salafist state: Saudi Arabia.

Saudi efforts at spreading Wahhabi Salafism have in fact been a cornerstone of the Kingdom's foreign policy since the days of its support for the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet Union and even before. This has been epitomized by a massive Saudi theological infrastructure that disseminates books, religious edicts, every type of media outreach, and untold sums of money for religious organizations and mosque construction projects across the Islamic world. In fact the Saudis have [spent](#) at least \$87 billion propagating Wahhabism abroad during the past two decades.

This policy has proven to be a time bomb, for the Saudis themselves and for the much of the rest of the world. As a 2009 Department of State memo signed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [read](#): “Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide ... More needs to be done since Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaida, the Taliban, LeT and other terrorist groups.”

However, if Wahhabi Salafism is the fuel that has nurtured ISIS, the fire that ignited it into what it is today has more to do with the broader realities in the region. For instance, the unconditional support of the West, in particular the United States, for what many in the world view as flagrant Israeli injustices against the Palestinians has had a continual radicalizing effect on populations across the Middle East. General David Petraeus even stressed this during testimony before the Senate in 2010, [stating](#) that the Israel-Palestinian conflict “foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel” and that “al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support.”

The bitter resentment created by the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, along with other acts of foreign intervention in the region, have also boosted the popularity of groups like ISIS and created the power vacuums that they have been so remarkably able at filling. Furthermore, the mostly young people who are drawn to militant groups often come from despondent societies

that are ruled over by Western-supported autocrats and mired in the kind of under-development, poverty, and unemployment that readily fosters extremism.

While an effective and comprehensive strategy aimed at defeating ISIS should focus on ameliorating all of these issues as the root causes, it is hard to imagine any of them being resolved in the near term. Nonetheless, the only way to durably defeat ISIS is to tackle these underlying factors that have allowed such a group to come into existence and will guarantee similar groups emerging in the future long after ISIS is out of the picture.

However, given that ISIS now seems equally concerned about fighting the “far enemy” as it does the “near enemy,” eliminating the immediate threat posed by this group should be a priority for all regional and global powers. To this end, any thoughts that may have existed in the minds of some in the West about containing but not defeating ISIS as a way of keeping it as a kind of buffer against supposed Iranian influence should be discarded.

There is a consensus among key stakeholders in Tehran that Iran’s strategic interests lie in curtailing the threat posed by terrorism through regional cooperation. Western decision-makers too should realize there is no realistic way to bring the conflicts in Syria and Iraq under control without talking to Iran and recognizing its role. It is imperative for there to be across-the-board engagement between all regional and global powers to face the ISIS threat.

For its part, Iran can be of instrumental help with both the political and military steps that need to be taken to knock out ISIS. “If Iran is taking on ISIL in some particular place and it’s confined to taking on ISIL and it has an impact, it’s going to be – the net effect is positive, but that’s not something that we’re coordinating” [said](#) the US Secretary of State, John Kerry on December 3d. Nevertheless Washington needs to recognize it is in its interests to ignore the expansionist goals of the Islamic Republic and focus on partnership with Iran against ISIS. It has invaluable leverage with the most consequential players in Syria and Iraq and can also help deliver the Syrian and Iraqi boots-on-the ground that are necessary in any serious effort to push back ISIS.

Ultimately, what is also vital in the fight against ISIS and for broader peace and stability in the Middle East is the construction of a regional security and cooperation system that brings together powers such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq and Iran. Through such a framework, these countries can identify their common interests and work to collaborate rather than confront one another. Iran has pushed for such a system for decades, and the time has come for the political orthodoxies in its neighboring countries as well as their allies in the West to work to make this vision a reality.

It seems that the world powers now realize that chaos in the Middle East affects them directly. It is time for their leaders to put resources and commitments where their mouths are and pursue the geopolitical shifts necessary to end the threat of ISIS and stabilize the region once and for all.

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