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Defeating ISIS: the Need for a Cooperative Effort

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of a collective approach in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria also known as ISIS. The approach of the international community had been doomed to failure because it excluded key players in the region. In order to annihilate this terrorist group and the threat it poses to international security, this article proposes a revision of the approach to the resolution of this problem through the inclusion of all the parties susceptible to secure an efficient contribution to that endeavor before the situation becomes irremediable. In order to do so, the inclusion of Syria and the regional powers is indispensable for a workable resolution of the conflict. As a result of a theoretical analysis building on realism, rational choice and international terrorism, a proposal for a more inclusive approach to negotiations is recommended. It argues for the imperative to put aside the disagreements concerning the fate of President Assad for the purpose of preventing further chaos regionally and internationally.

Key Words: Negotiation, ISIS, Terrorism, Syria, Conflict

Introduction

In addition to the long-lasting political turmoil prevailing in Iraq and Syria, the two countries are simultaneously experiencing an additional dislocation of their sovereignty and territorial integrity because of the presence of the radical group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This extremist organization, which underwent many developments¹, not only threatens the stability of the region, but also poses a serious security hazard to the western countries.

Notwithstanding the international mobilization, the international community seems to be unable to design and implement a sustainable strategy to fight this group. In fact, the warfare envisioned under the leadership of the US failed to efficiently combine military and constructive diplomatic endeavors along with other strategies. Even if perceived as the result of sectarian divide, this conflict also involves transnational actors and parameters. A comprehensive understanding of its root-causes and stakes involved is required for an efficient and sustainable resolution in order to avoid another *fiasco* in the region. This conflict can be studied from different perspectives; however, this paper will focus on an international approach for the purpose of designing a sustainable first step to its resolution. While the first section of this essay is focused on a theoretical analysis of the conflict, the second part suggest the necessity of an inclusive negotiation process.

Conflict Overview and Theoretical Analysis

The ISIS problem can be tackled through different perspectives. In order to simplify the analytical process, the conflict is analyzed using structural violence, rational choice and international terrorism theories.

The conflict takes place across the borders of Iraq and Syria, in a territory as large as Belgium. ISIS declared its Islamic State (caliphate) to extend from across Syria and a large part of

1- The organization also known as the Islamic State went through different stages since the formation of the Al-Qaeda (AQI) in Iraq by its leader Abu Musab Alzarqawi. Retrieved from the BBC website, Rise of the Islamic State: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28116033>

Northern and Western Iraq (Annex 1, Figure 1). This radical organization does not only control many important cities, but also dominates some regions rich in oil and with access to the Turkish border (Annex 1, Figure 2). In the aftermath of the failure of Western intervention in Iraq and the civil war in Syria, the terrorist group, which went through different organizational mutations, became more virulent. Thus, an escalation of conflict in the region characterized by an increase of violence against Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Many parties are involved in this intractable conflict. At the writing of this paper, it is important to underscore that the recent dynamics of the conflict entailed some changes in the positioning of the parties involved. Indeed, some secondary parties like Russia and Iran turned into primary ones after the military engagement of Moscow (Aljazeera, 2015) and the improvement of the US-Iran political relations at the aftermath of the signature of the nuclear deal adopted on October 18, 2015 (The Guardian, 2015). Despite the diplomatic and political signification of the participation of some countries in the Syria Peace Talks, held in Vienna in October 2015, it is important to underscore that the primary parties in this conflict are the ones directly opposing each other; that is to say the US led coalition, Syria, Iraq and ISIS –with all its subsidiary factions. The secondary parties are all those nations which have an indirect interest in its outcome. These include the UK, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Arab League states, and the Euro Zone, now that the migrant crisis has emerged as a direct consequence of the warfare. Interested third parties include, among others, the neighboring countries, the civil population, the oil companies operating in the region, and the international community as whole. As the situation appears insoluble, it is important to underscore that among the exasperating factors that led to the intractability of this conflict are the dissemination of the fundamentalist ideology across the borders and the political vacuum in the weakened states of Iraq, due to the incapacity of former President Al-Maliki to

include the Sunni in the mainstream politics, and in Syria because of the de-legitimization of President Al-Assad by the international community.

From a theoretical perspective, and in the context of international affairs, three germane theories have been selected to provide a perspective on the conflict. For the purpose of simplification, three theories are considered in this analysis: realism, rational choice and international terrorism. While each theory provides a given perspective on the conflict, their complementarity will secure a thorough understanding of the situation at the macro level.

Defined as a, “tradition of analysis that stresses the imperatives state face to pursue a power politics of national interest,” (Burchill, Linklater, Devetak, Donnelly, Paterson, Reus-Smit, & True 2005, p. 50) a realist approach provides the understanding that all the governments involved in the war against ISIS have vested interests in safeguarding their security and territorial integrity from a potential spillover of violent extremism. This equally applies to Iraq and Syria, which are already engulfed in the conflict, and to Saudi Arabia which fears the spread of the turmoil into its territory already suffering from the Shiite menace. Most of the regional states, the EU, and Russia also have the same interest in safeguarding their national security. Since state-centrism and anarchy are essential elements of international relations, the legitimacy of all the countries to secure their survival stems from the pursuit of their national interest, both internally and transnationally. As statesmanship is given precedence over any other concerns, realists exclude all ethical contemplations. This is what, in part, explains the US-led military action against ISIS and the Russian intervention in Syria.

Though this theory has been initially marginalized in the social sciences (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004, p.427) rational choice theory undergirds the idea of national imperatives’ precedence over other considerations. With this respect, each country took the decision it saw as

in alignment with their national interest. In promoting the latter, all the governments' central institutions have determined the expected utility about the optimum alternative. However, all commanders in chief being expected to take their final decision based on pre-existing beliefs and contextual historical analysis (Hampson, 1985), the leaders of the US led coalition joined either because of traditional allegiance, perceived future interests, or simply for security reasons. As for the recent Russian military intervention in Syria, which is mostly perceived as an overt support to the Syrian regime, it also can be interpreted as a regional repositioning essentially motivated by the trial of strength in which the West is engaged with Moscow since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis. Iraq on the other hand had no other alternative than to welcome a foreign intervention to supplement the Iranian assistance in fighting ISIS². Because the bombardment of the ISIS positions also targeted the Syrian infrastructures, Syria adamantly objected to the violation of its air space by the Western coalition because this also meant further weakening the government in place. Now that the Russians are also involved in the raids, Damascus eased its position regarding the principle of sovereignty because of the benefits induced by the intervention³. In addition to the afore-mentioned, it is important to underscore the reluctance of the Turkish government to intervene militarily in Northern Syria because any action against the Syrian Kurds will further antagonize President Erdogan's position domestically and internationally. As for most of the other states of the Arab League and the EU, the individual decisions were based on a mere concern for internal political and economic security and stability.

In order to discuss the topic at hand from a terrorism perspective, Tore Bjorgo's definition is used to define the concept as "a set of methods of combat rather than an identifiable ideology or

2- According to US News, Iraq is being backed up by n7o less than 20,000 Shiite militiamen in its fight against ISIS
<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/17/absent-us-forces-iraq-turns-to-iran-militias-for-isis-fight-in-tikrit-mosul>

3- According to media report, Russia is also targeting Syrian opposition groups.

movement, and involves premeditated use of violence against (primarily) non-combatants in order to achieve a psychological effect of fear on the others than the immediate targets” (Bruce, 2013, p.27). Based on the situation in the ground, ISIS uses religion and ideology to reach its political objective: the creation of its own “Caliphate” (i.e. state). The sustainability of this vision relies essentially on the enrollment of underprivileged members. This was initially the case in Syria and Iraq. This approach was extended to the European countries, mainly France and the UK, where the social systems which essentially disenfranchise the youth of Muslim descent along with the underdogs who are the result of the states’ failure to provide some kind of societal justice. In addition to these, there is also a record of well-off persons who opted to join the terrorist group for reasons other than mere religious and economic ones. Furthermore, the international community contributes to international terrorism either by being supportive or suppressive of the aggrieved groups for geopolitical and strategic positioning, or because of ideological and religious affiliation. Currently, all the international players can be identified as driven by either or all of these motivators.

Discussion

The intricacy of the situation in the Middle East is exasperated by the ramifications of ISIS beyond the Iraqi and Syrian borders. Terrorism is not only fueled by structural violence, but also by the interests of the different governments involved in the region. Since the security concerns developed beyond geographical boundaries where ISIS militarily operates, there is an imperative for a joint effort to encompass all the intergovernmental differences regardless of the geographical and political proximity to Syria and Iraq.

The international intervention that followed the Paris Conference on Iraq⁴ was doomed to failure because it lacked an effective diplomatic rapprochement with the key parties in the region

and a good packaging of the military action to the Middle Eastern populations. Indeed, the inclusion of Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria would have secured a cost-effective cooperation in the fight against ISIS. More specifically, the inclusion of Moscow and Teheran would have been beneficial because of the influence they exercise over the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Despite the Western position about President Assad, it is impossible for the international community to neglect his government's possible contribution in the fight against the terrorist group(s) based in its territory. Furthermore, and in terms of legality, all the actions undertaken on its soil would have secured their compliance with the principles of sovereignty and international law. In the absence of a UN resolution, an agreement with Russia -a strong ally of the Syrian regime- regarding the intervention in Syria is crucial to the success of the operations in the region.

In addition to the above-mentioned, the international community must put an end to the perceived idea that another Crusade is taking place in the region, as anticipated by Pope Francis (The Guardian, 2014). A good public relations strategy has to be put in place in order to give more legitimacy to the military action, on the one hand, and to prevent further exasperation of the conflict along sectarian and religious lines. Among other things, the official discourse should clearly distinguish between the concepts of fundamentalism, terrorism and Islam. It could also ensure that track II diplomacy strategies involving non-state actors are amplified to prevent further recruitment by terrorist groups.

Negotiation Schematic Approach

Traditional approaches to international conflict resolution are essentially based on negotiations characterized by interest-based bargaining. With the Migrant Crisis and the Russian intervention,

4- The Paris Conference on Iraq, also known as the International Conference on Peace and Security in Iraq was held On September 15th, 2014

most key players are less likely to abandon their positions, thus, further increasing the chances of absolute deadlock. For this reason, it is imperative to reconsider the reorganization of the inter-state negotiations.

In order to be successful, negotiations should officially be held between two different groups of actors. Rounds of negotiations should be organized among primary parties and their allies. These would be followed by negotiations among the two super powers and the EU only. In addition to unifying the positions among the members of each camp, this approach will enable all the secondary parties to provide a clear statement of their needs and requests based on the current regional imperatives. It will also help the US, Russia and the EU decide on a common strategy to fight ISIS. From this perspective, representatives of the US, the EU and the Arab League would meet to discuss their interests, positions and their intervention strategies before meeting with the Russian government. The latter is suited to meet with all because of its ability to “exercise leverage” based on the close ties it has with most of the other states (Hampson, Crocker & Aall, 2007). Once agreement is reached, the negotiations can be extended to the Arab League, Iran, Iraq and Syria by the main super powers.

“Time is crucial in diplomacy” (Cohen, 2005, p.33). For this reason, the EU should take advantage of the US / Iran Nuclear Deal and the last final year of President Obama’s mandate to reach a primary understanding with Russia. The signature of the Iran Nuclear Deal as well as the current presidency of M. Rouhani also present a good opportunity to have a consensus about a course of action. For this reason, it is imperative for the international community to find an acceptable agreement about the very divisive point of contention: President Assad.

There is certainly a unanimous agreement about the necessity to suppress ISIS. However, this is impracticable unless the Syrian authorities are motivated to cooperate with the international

community in that sense. With regards to the recent evolutions, mainly the Russian military intervention, such possibility remains remote unless the point of contention concerning the future of President Assad is resolved through a workable and acceptable deal that would satisfy all the parties involved in this conflict. The main issue, here, is twofold. While for Russia and Iran the current Syrian regime is of geopolitical importance, for the EU and the US it is, at this point, a matter of not losing face after the multiple declarations calling for his resignation. In addition to the above-mentioned, the race for regional dominance should be halted until the ISIS and Post-Assad issues are solved.

Discussing a post-ISIS situation in the region implies a deep review of the root-causes of the conflict in Iraq and Syria. This would include envisioning stabilization mechanisms that would apply to the intercommunal and political strategies. Because this is not the object of this paper, President Assad's issue should be tackled from an instrumental perspective. His regime fighting for survival, it is crucial for the international community to postpone the request for his destitution until ISIS is annihilated in Syria and Iraq. Discussions must be undertaken on the basis of the Syrian regime's contribution to the fight against the terrorist group. The use shuttle diplomacy through the Russian channel would prove to be useful due to Moscow's current position. Since states' representatives are rational actors who favor "diplomacy and negotiations in the international relations" (Hampson, Crocker, & Aall, 2007, p. 37), all the governments requesting the destitution of President Assad would have to evaluate the utility-maximization his regime represents in the fight against terrorism. Consequently, the needs rather than the wants of each government should take precedence in the discussions. At this point, the need of security takes the primacy. That is why President Assad's fate is to be considered as an internal affair that is left to the Syrian people to democratically decide upon once stability and security are restored. In the

meanwhile, the international community's best interest is to provide enough guaranties about a non-interference in the Syrian internal affairs. This will surely appear as a volte-face. Yet, the security constraints dictate and justify such turnaround, at least for the time being.

Conclusion

The development of the ISIS conflict still poses a serious threat to the stability of the world. Its potential to finance large scale activities -thanks to oil smuggling-, and its increasing appeal to the young Muslim population of European descent and victims of structural violence constitute an additional challenge to the current war waged against this group.

The imperatives of an immediate collective action have been acknowledged by the international community which agrees on the necessity of a common political strategy and a military action. Any coalition that fails to include all the parties subjected to its threat will prove to be in vain. That is why all the governments should put aside their differences in order to secure a legitimate and effective outcome to such an endeavor. Its success requires the inclusion of the alienated Syrian government, and the political and military cooperation between the US led coalition and Syria. In order to put an end to the state of anarchy caused by ISIS, all negotiation processes should include Syria in the coalition either directly or with proxy representation. It is only through a realistic approach to the resolution of the conflict that it would be possible to put an end to the utopia of the so-called Islamic State and its devastating strategy.

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