Islamic State as a Modern Phenomenon.

Norbert O. Ross\textsuperscript{a}
Ahmad Mohammadpur\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Vanderbilt University, USA. E-mail: norbert.o.ross@vanderbilt.edu.
\textsuperscript{b}Vanderbilt University, USA. E-mail: ahmad.mohammadpur@vanderbilt.edu.

Published online: 28 March 2016.

To cite this article:

Over the past several months, Islamic State or ISIS / ISIL also known as DAESH has captured the imagination of many people and created political uproar both, in the West as well as across the Middle East. Taking hold of large parts of Syria and sweeping through parts of Iraq, DAESH continues to painfully illustrate the fragility of this area, calling more and more into question the intentions and consequences of international politics and specifically recent US-American nation-building attempts in Iraq.

Staged beheadings, videotaped and posted on YouTube expose the extremes to which followers of al-Baghdadi go in order to spread their message. Recent attacks in Paris do their part (although only indirectly linked to ISIS), opening the questions of how best to respond and counter these terrorist activities. Many have called for a boots-on-the-ground approach, yet it is often not even clear what that would mean. Clearly, the short-term survival of places like Mosul and Kobane depended on Kurdish fighters, the US airstrikes as well as Iranian militia. It also made for strange bedfellows! Yet little is known in terms of the emergence of ISIS and hence potential ways of fighting off further spread of this terrorist network remain somewhat obscure.

Two major confluences are usually quoted as having led to the Al-Qaeda inspired group: the US war in Iraq and its aftermath, as well as the rebellion against the brutal Assad regime in Syria. In Iraq an increasing alienation of the Sunni population followed the countries liberation from Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial regime (by and large Sunni). In the efforts of reconstruction and nation building, however, neither the US nor the subsequent independent Iraqi government understood the need to include Sunni or former Ba’ath members into the new governmental affairs. This has led to an increasing polarization between followers of the two Islamic sects. On the other hand, Syria has been battling a civil war since 2011 during which anti-Assad forces repeatedly fought against one another merging into ever-new alliances. Within the chaos of the civil war it was easy for Iraqi Sunni and former Ba’ath members to seek refuge in Syria. Given their shared experiences -persecuted by Shi’a and an adversary government- it is not surprising that many of them allied with forces battling the Assad regime, using Syria as a safe haven from where to launch attacks in Iraq. This has been further helped due to long-term cross border relations as well as an increasingly porous border due to a weakening of the Iraqi government.

Little is known of the specifics of the two currents leading to the formation of this more or less organized group. We say more or less organized group, because the exact organizational structure remains unclear in terms of precision, reach and control (and tends to be exaggerated for different reasons by both its enemies and supporters). Are the different actions (carried out in different places) coordinated by a central command? Or are they the actions of a decentralized set of loosely commanded followers? Are the different ideologies combined into one overarching goal? The circumstances of DAESH’s emergence seem to suggest the latter, and consequently it might appear that we overestimate the power of a central command. This
Islamic State as a Modern Phenomenon
Norbert O. Ross and Ahmad Mohammadpur

Appraisal is further supported by the fact that DAESH has at least two independent centers of activity.

Either way, none of this is to say that we overestimate the overall power of the group, as in fact it might be exactly this loose ties that lend this group an unprecedented strength (that and the extraordinary amount of funding). However, the questions we ask are different as we focus on the conditions within which DAESH could emerge and draw support. As an extension we not only ask what it might take to defeat DAESH, but equally important how we can prevent the emergence of similar groups to arise out of their ashes.

Islamophobia

By now it appears that DAESH has captured our imagination as the quintessential Islamic terrorist group, to some extent replacing Al-Qaeda as our main worry and enemy. Often described as jihadists seeking to recapture the lost glories of a resplendent Islam, media usually are fast to add that they are supported by mercenaries and criminals, using at times even drugs to convince converts to launch suicide attacks.3 Of course, similar claims can be found for groups such disparate as the PKK in Turkey, the Zapatistas of Mexico or the FARC of Columbia. We have neither the information nor the intention to dispute these claims. However, these similarities beg the question whether all these groups made similar political, ideological and economic choices or whether we see similar strategies employed by their respective opponents to discredit them. Again, our intention is not to defend ISIS. However, we fear that any polemical treatment of such groups as “thugs” doesn’t do justice to reality and neither does it help us understand and combat them.

While the world has seen terrorist acts before, ISIS might stand out in how it uses acts of extreme violence to broadcast their ideas and ideology, as illustrated by the showcasing of beheading. To explain these behaviors, researchers have combed through the Quran to identify the reason for such actions – essentially looking (and finding) passages that are usually cited and interpreted by DAESH to justify their acts. However, from an anthropological perspective such efforts of exegesis are futile. First, just as in Bible, the Quran does not provide specific prescriptions of behaviors covering all kinds of specific situations; even when it does, it is not at all clear whether such prescriptions are to be used literally or not. To say it differently, different people read the Quran (or the Bible) differently and hence it is not the actual written word, but it’s interpretations that we need to understand. This leaves us with either metal disorders or more importantly the specific socio-cultural circumstances as leading certain individuals to bring a certain kind of reading to the Quran. We need to ask why are certain individuals are more likely to agree with and listen to certain interpretations of the Quran? Second, the showcased beheadings are usually treated as if they were the simple acts of (misguided) and violent terrorists. They are. However, we need to ask what the purpose of showing these beheadings on the Internet is. It seems unlikely that the goal of this would be to gather direct support. Instead of creating sympathies, it seems that the opposite is in fact the case: they create outrage and disgust. Why then would DAESH continue to publish such events? We think that it is for two reasons. First, on a regional level this videos help spread fear in the Middle East and hence might limit local resistance to DAESH advances. Second, on an international level the disgust and outrage these videos produced put pressure on nations such as the US to get involved and hence force a direct confrontation with the western powers. This has been largely successful as people faithfully protested and reposted the videos across the world. However, expanding the conflict where ISIS (here now seeing itself as the Islamic State) battles against western superpowers (the US) of course recalls directly the US invasions but also echoes previous centuries of western colonialism and ruling through the mandates. This in turn evokes,
once more, the image of ISLAM under siege, creating potential followers around the world. And it worked!

For example, the main perpetrators of the Paris attacks seem to have come fairly late to Islam, having encountered a more violent reading of the Quran in prison. Why did this violent reading - proclaiming a defence of Islam - resound in these individuals? Why was the violence vested in religious terms? After all, the Quran does not ask for the killing of people that draw cartoons mocking the prophet. Understanding Muslim society in Francs as well as related racism and Islamophobia in other parts of Europe might help us understand the overall situation. Not only does France have a long and unfavourable history in the Middle East (and specifically in Syria), but more to the point today's Muslim in France are faced by intense racism and discrimination. They are much less likely to finish higher education, or find employment, yet they are much more likely to be incarcerated. Such imprisonments have not only directly led to the formation or spread of terrorist groups, but also sent a message to Muslim that it IS about religion, whether they want it or not. If a person is more likely to be incarcerated because of her religious belief, then of course it IS about religion. From that perspective then it might be easier to understand that young Muslim in France (and in many other paces) are more likely to listen to violent interpretations of the Quran, especially when cast as a defence of their religion that is under attack by outsiders.

To be sure, none of this excuses nor justifies these actions, yet it makes them more comprehensible, which in turn should allow us to hone our strategies of combating DAESH. For example, it results from this analysis that we must understand ISIS not a pre-modern group trying to recapture the lost splendid of Islam; Instead we need to understand ISIS (against their discourse) as a modern nativist movement that can only be understood in the context of age-old Islamophobia, rejuvenated through recent fears of the Muslim terrorist, western colonialism in the Middle East (extended through the British and French mandates), as well as shifting alliances, and the two gulf wars that uprooted whole societies. When an irrational fear emerges in which all Muslims are viewed as potential terrorists, then being Muslim means being persecuted. When Islam is routinely singled out alone among world religions as violent (especially in comparison to Judaism, despite Israel's treatment of Palestinians), then Islam must be regarded as under attack. Similar interpretations might arise from revelations of torture in Guantanamo, Abu-Ghraib, and CIA “black sites,” or the support of non-elected oppressive regimes (such as Iraq under Saddam, or Syria under Assad at certain times in history). The devastating wars in the Middle East waged by two-term Republican and Democratic administrations have played their role. The scorched-earth tactics that decimated Fallujah, drone attacks on innocent people, and the illegal shootings of unarmed civilians by the military or private security firms have not only undermined any notion of just war, but added to the notion of Muslim as under attack. In fact, contextualizing DAESH in this way might help us explain why even Christians and Kurds have been known to join DAESH fighters and why so many supporters have been flocking to Syria from European countries such as England, Belgium, and France etc.

To be clear, we are by no means condoning the actions of DAESH. However, we think it is important to understand its emergence in context in order to explain its lure its continuous strength. This strength lies not only in a large number of dedicated fighters, but also in a continuous network of people willing to support DAESH, ideologically, politically and economically. We need to understand DAESH as a modern phenomenon that emerged not simply by individuals reading the Quran; instead it materialized from people feeling under attack and hence read the need and right for violence into the Quran. In other words, rather than objectifying the so-called Islamic terrorist we are better off to deconstruct it, understanding the complex interweaving of the makings of terrorists in specific situations and conditions. This will give us the tools to combat not only specific fighters one at a time, but will allow us to undermine and dry out the conditions upon which such terrorism builds. We
surmise that our analysis goes to show that the boots-on-the grounds approach to DAESH must be questioned for the long-term damages it inflicts on people and ideas. If we are correct than DAESH specifically rose out of war efforts then it seems unlikely that further military actions will solve the problem. Instead, while DAESH might be beatable militarily, it seems that the cost would be simply a new formation of even less predictable terrorist groups emerging from their ashes.

---

1 It is important to note that while on the outset the conflict seems to be about religion sectarianism (Sunni vs. Shi’a), it is in reality about social groups and power and not a schism with respect to religious content.

2 We follow current proposals not to call the group ISIS as this implies the existence of a state. Given our discussion it should be clear that we do not think of DAESH as a state.


4 For example, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the leader of DAESH spent almost five years imprisoned at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq, side by side with other extremists such as Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Abu Louay, Abu Kassem, Abu Jurnas, Abu Shema and Abu Suja. These extremists were held side-by-side with those less radical, allowing U.S.-coalition prisons in Iraq to essentially become recruitment centers and even training grounds for ISIS recruits.