

The IS, the US and Us

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23 October 2014

When President Obama gave his speech at the opening of the UN General Assembly in September this year, much of it sounded like a declaration of war on the so-called Islamic State (IS but also known as ISIS, ISIL, ISIG, EIS and even Daesh) within the territories of Iraq and Syria. Of course, by that time the war against the IS had already begun. This was not the Obama we knew. He looked sad and the arguments may not have been convincing for a majority of the delegates he was speaking to. The US President who wanted to end repeated US military adventures abroad had now to justify a war that in many ways is a continuation of the military intervention in Iraq that his predecessor, President George W. Bush, had begun and that had gone so terribly wrong. He had wanted to bring the US out of this messy war, but may now have triggered an even messier one.

Although Obama spoke at the UN, this new military intervention raises questions about its legality under international law. While one could argue that the operation in Iraq is in response to an Iraqi government request for help, bombing IS sites on Syrian territory – though this may be necessary from a military point of view – is far more problematic. With so many governments around the world wanting to see the IS destroyed, such questions can be easily ignored, at least for now. It could, however, come to haunt us later when things may not go so smoothly.

There are many countries – and not just Russia and China – that are wary of Western-led military interventions around the world without any UN mandate. However, they may not openly oppose this war against the IS because many of them have problems with radical Islamic groups on their own. But their restraints may also be driven by the hope that this conflict may entangle the US and its Western allies for a long time and distract them from conflicts over the Ukraine, the South China Sea, Hong Kong or elsewhere. If the fight against IS does not go as hoped, this could further weaken Western power and influence in the world.

We may go into this fight on morally high grounds – but are we also going to come out of it morally vindicated? Wars have their own logic. When we saddle up horses to allegedly save the people in the Middle East once again, we must be aware that we are part of the conflicts that have gripped this region. In fact that much of these problems are our doings. We drew these borders, created these artificial states, and imposed foreign kings on them. In the process, we betrayed almost any group and used superior force again and again to get our way. And the US-led invasion of Iraq that has triggered many of today's developments is just a few years back. We may have forgotten this, but they have not. In all likelihood, we will therefore not be received as saviors by most people.

Almost everybody agrees that this could be a long drawn out conflict – and that it will be a difficult one. We must know by now the limitations of high-powered technology and of our

modern armies in fighting irregular but highly motivated religious forces on the ground in social and cultural environments that we find difficult to understand.

There is no guarantee that the West can win this conflict, that we will be able to destroy the IS (we only have to think of the Taliban), or that we can break the wider support that has made IS possible. The result could be yet another withdrawal without having completed the job as in Iraq before and in Afghanistan now. But that time, we could have destabilized an entire region. The stakes for the West are therefore very high.

In any case, this war has already started, and we had to do something. But are we clear about our objectives? “To destroy a militant group” or simply “weaken them” will not do as objectives. Already now, we are not told what the final objective will be. What if things become more difficult? Even if we are successful, what would come next? We must know from Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya that we cannot simply destroy, but will have to rebuild. Otherwise we will never really win. And we also know how very difficult reconstructing damaged fragile states can be. Why should we now be able to be successful in something that we were not been able to do in Iraq before?

Wars are always fought on two very different fronts: against an enemy abroad, but also against public opinion at home. Especially, democracies tend to spend enormous energies and emotions to explain at home why the “enemy” is so devilish and dangerous that we must intervene. In the process, we tend to fail to understand the political, social, economic, historical and religious circumstances in which we have to fight the actual war. But emotions are bad advisers, and propaganda at home will ultimately not win wars abroad.

Bush’s Iraq war was an example of this. The then so-called ‘Coalition of the Willing’ began the war carelessly unprepared. Instead, there was plenty of wishful, ideologically-driven thinking of what Iraq would become once its dictator was removed. These facile assumptions quickly crashed when exposed to the harsh realities in Iraq.

Are we not committing the same mistakes again? Here are twelve questions and problem areas that need answers if want to have a chance to win - none of them has anything to do with humanitarian concerns or with superior weapons technologies:

1. Do we understand enough about who supports the IS and what makes them tick? Probably not. All the rhetoric about their barbaric behavior against minorities and individuals, and all our moral acclamations wanting to fight this, will not help explain the IS’ dynamic and successes. How are they organized, what keeps them together, what motivates them, what is there relationship with the local population, what are their aims, etc.? We may point at frustrated Western Muslim youths or blame al-Maleki for allegedly having followed a sectarian agenda in Iraq, but this is too superficial for a problem of this scale. There must be more to explain the phenomenon of the IS and its local and international support. For now, we cannot even agree what to name the IS. Unless we better understand the internal functioning of the IS, our chances to beat them are reduced.

2. Do we understand where IS gets its fighters, weapons and money from? Probably not. According to Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, the Pentagon believes that IS is funded from sales of oil products and antiquities as well as from local taxes, extortion and by plundering the banks of Mosul. But IS' controlled territories are surrounded by hostile governments and cannot be reached by sea or by air. War making needs supplies and logistics. There must be much more to it to understand an organization that is able to wage war on several fronts at the same time, often hundreds of kilometers apart. The IS controls an area the size of the United Kingdom and this all happens without the use of mobile phones. IS operations must cost a fortune. If we assume that the IS has 30,000 fighters at a monthly costs of only US\$ 200 per head, this would already amount to a bill of six million dollars – per month and in cash! Unless we understand better how the IS keeps being fed with money, weapons and fighters, and devise means for blocking such supplies, our chances to win will be seriously reduced.
3. Will Western allies be welcomed back in this region? Probably not. It is only four years since the last US troops left Iraq, and many of the areas the US bombs today in Sunni areas of Iraq suffered heavy US military actions only a few years ago. This could not appease the people of this area. Only when the US helped organize, pay and arm Sunni tribal fighters in 2007, did they turn against al Qaida affiliated groups. However, when the US left Iraq three years later, no arrangements for these Sunni tribal fighters were made. They must have felt betrayed. How can they trust the Americans now? They will also never trust the Baghdad government, with or without the obligatory Sunni ministers (they were always there). It is this double distrust that probably explains the explosive spread of the IS in these areas. Could the US expect to win a war without any local support?
4. Can we realistically expect that we can influence developments in this region? Probably not. We must be realistic and accept that US and Western influence in the Middle East has considerably declined over the last ten years. In Egypt, we were told to go home when we wanted to argue for a more democratic approach, and in Libya we were forced out despite the fact that we had helped to overthrow Qaddafi. Turkey does its own thing, and in Syria, except for a relatively isolated group of Syrian expatriate opposition figures, Western influence is probably close to nil. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the US was not even able to persuade its closest ally in the region, Israel, to stop its massive bombings of heavily populated areas in Gaza. This loss of influence will negatively impact the chances for success in fighting the IS. Fear of effective US/ allies' military action is probably low; there will be no 'shock and awe' effect.
5. Can Arab allies help bridge this credibility gap? Probably not. We appear to rely on the least democratic regimes in the region as allies, all with doubtful human rights records at home. These kings and emirs can hardly aspire or serve as models for a future Iraq, a country that is, despite all internal differences, staunchly republican. The fact that America's allies are filthy rich and have a record of what is seen as Western-type of decadent live styles may not help the credibility of this intervention either.

6. Could the involvement of US' Arab allies destabilize the region even further? This is a serious possibility. The kingdoms and emirates have problems at home that a prolonged engagement against Arab Sunni brothers could only make worse. The Saudi family came to power through similar methods to those used by IS fighters today: a highly mobile, radical and religiously motivated group of fighters who are intolerant to other religions and destroyed historical and religious heritage including important Shiite sites in today's Iraq. This history could now come back to haunt them. Bahrein, with Saudi Arabia's military help, had just violently suppressed an uprising of its Shiite majority. How will this reflect on them fighting in Iraq where the conflict is along Sunni-Shiite lines? What about Jordan whose king enjoys little sympathy among his own people who are tribally, culturally and religiously close to the Sunnis in Iraq that the king is now fighting? Qatar has been a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and is therefore at odds with its other Arab allies. How would this play into the fight against the IS? And in all Emirates mostly Muslim immigrant workers exceed the local populations. These immigrant workers have remained politically inactive; but this must not always be so. Being badly treated, their sympathies may rather be with an IS than with exploitative Emirate employers. Is our intervention against the IS opening the door to much greater intra-state conflicts in the Persian Gulf region?
7. Do we have any ideas about how to deal with the Sunni-Shiite conflict? I would guess we have no idea. This would be unfortunate because this Sunni-Shiite divide will ultimately decide the war on IS. Even if we have not invited Iran to the Paris conference, its presence in Iraq is all felt. The Baghdad government, the remaining Iraqi army and of course also the newly re-emerged militias are mostly profoundly Shiite. For most Sunnis, Iran and Shiite influence in Arab lands is probably a much greater concern than the IS. Recent developments in Yemen will only fuel this Arab Sunni fear. There is no affinity with the Kurds either. How long will it take until these Arab allies (or their populations) will come to the conclusion that they are providing support to the wrong side in this conflict? Especially, if this conflict draws on without any tangible success it could pose a serious strain on this Arab-Western coalition. Ironically, the West may end up with Iran as the only real "supporter". This would only heighten tensions in the region.
8. What can an air campaign realistically achieve? Probably very little. In fact, it could even become counterproductive. With time, air campaigns tend to intensify. The reason is that frustration over their ineffectiveness may lead to increased bombings. The air campaigns against Germany in WWII, in Vietnam or more recently NATO air strikes against Serbia and Libya are examples. The West will, in all likelihood, have inadequate intelligence on the ground to direct their bombing campaign. Because of this, many civilians will be killed; even smart bombs and drones will not change this. This could increase solidarity with the IS locally as well as internationally; it may even lead to their glorification for fighting an overwhelming but cowardly West that hides behind distant warplanes and unmanned drones.
9. Where will we get the foot soldiers from? They will probably have to be Western boots after all. All agree that one cannot defeat the IS from the air, but that it needs ground forces to

actually conquer and hold territories. But who should do this? The Iraqi Shiites, be they part of the national army or of local militia, probably have little interest in going deep into Sunni controlled areas. The experience of the collapse of the well-equipped Iraqi army in the face of irregular IS fighters should be a lesson for us. In the Sunni provinces of Iraq the majority of Shiite soldiers were more like an occupation than a protection force. Why should they fight for territories and protect populations that are “foreign” and possibly even hostile to them? More likely is that these Shiite forces will now concentrate on protecting Baghdad and on cleansing the Sunni enclaves in the South of Baghdad.

Also Kurdish forces would be foolish to be drawn into the plains and deserts of Salahuddin and Anbar and risk being worn-out by more motivated IS forces. Kurds would be foreigners in these areas. In the wake of these troubles, they have already occupied some Sunni populated territories in order to gain control over Kirkuk’s oil deposits and to straighten their borders. Why should they now risk everything for the unity of Iraq, a country they never wanted to be a part of?

Also, Arab allies would never commit their forces to fight IS forces directly. Also Iran would not do this – why should they? And Turkey? Also Turkey is unlikely to do the ground fighting for the West. And should it militarily intervene it would pursue its own national interests and not necessarily those of the West. Turkey is too much part of this region. We should not forget its role during last Iraq war. Not only that, any Turkish involvement will likely increase the mistrust within the present Western alliance. The Kurds will suspect it preventing a Kurdish state and Arabs grabbing Arab lands. The Ottoman Empire is like the colonial time not so far away. Ultimately, it would have to be US soldiers nervously supported by some of its Western allies that may have to do the fighting on the ground too. Despite all declarations to the opposite, this may be the tough consequence of having begun an air campaign.

10. Do we have any plans of what should happen to Iraq? If yes, we may have the wrong ideas. Iraq may already be well on the way to being divided into a Kurdish, a Sunni Arab and a Shiite Arab region. The irony is that Iraq’s Constitution that was pushed on Iraq by the US in 2005 provides for this possibility and describes in detail the process of how this could happen legally. Furthermore, the physical separation of most of these three communities, much of it the result of the civil war from 2005 to 2007, will make this easy. Kurds have repeatedly said that they wanted a separate state and although most Shiite politicians still claim to stand for national unity, their deep mistrust and hatred for Iraq’s Sunnis (for 500 years including during the Saddam era they had been at times their brutal rulers) would make separation an attractive choice. The Shia already control most of Iraq’s oil and gas resources, they would probably be able to keep Baghdad and they would have access to the Sea. If this happens, the US and its allies may find themselves in the uncomfortable position of taking a different view over Iraq’s national integrity than its two local Iraqi allies they apparently came to support.

11. Do we have any idea what may happen to Syria? Probably not. The civil war in Syria rages now for three years without any solution in sight. There appears a splintering and radicalization of armed opposition groups and it is no longer clear who allies with whom and who controls what. US bombing could change this balance. But do we know for certain how this balance of power among conflicting parties might change? Are we sure that those groups will gain the upper hand that are friendly to the West? Is the idea to arm and train the Free Syrian Army a realistic one? In fact, is the Free Syrian Army still a factor in the mosaic of hostile groups? I doubt this! More likely is that should Iraq break apart, Syria would break apart too. The result could be the emergence of completely new states, or state-like structures, with new borders. But is this what we wanted?
12. Do we know what the political fallout for the wider region could be? Probably not. We are better developing some ideas about this. The war against the IS may suddenly take on dimensions that set a whole region in turmoil. We could find ourselves fighting a war over peace agreements that were made almost a hundred years ago in wake of WWI. Whole countries may disappear and borders drastically changed. In addition to Iraq and Syria, what would happen to Jordan and by extension what would this mean for Israel's security? How would Turkey or Iran react to a Kurdish state on Iraqi territory and how would this entice Kurds to seek even greater national unity at the expense of Turkey and Iran? And how would this encourage other minorities in the region (and in fact around the world) to seek greater independence? How would the large Muslim immigrant workers react, how the various Shiite minorities in the Gulf States?

But all of this raises a more fundamental question: Is an US-led air campaign the best option to deal with the IS problem or were there other options? In fact, the bombing campaign may have wrecked our only real chance to fight the Islamic State by exploiting its two main weaknesses: its hostility towards virtually all other Arab Sunni groups, governments and religious trends and its need to control territory and build a viable state.

With a direct Western military intervention we may have prevented other Arab Sunnis to take on the IS as a deviation of their religion, beliefs and values. To parade some emirs and kings will not do here, opposition to the IS must come from within the Sunni Arab population. Such an inner-Sunni controversy could be very useful, it would increase the awareness that also they have to make their own choices for the future and not only react to Western interferes and perceived injustices. We now leave little room for Arab Sunnis to take responsibility and may only reinforce old pattern of Arab solidarity against "arrogant foreign powers". Sympathies for the United States, the UK and West in general are already very low in this part of the world.

Our bombing will also prevent taking advantage of the second IS weakness. The IS leadership has promised to build a new state along the principles of Islam, at least on how they interpret Islam. With this they have raised expectations among their followers and sympathizers for a better and more just world. This will not be easy to fulfil and reality will soon catch up with them.

They will be responsible for a large population that needs work, food, water and supplies; they will need roads, transport, medical services and some sort of education. Given the hostilities in all neighboring countries and the fact that this Sunni region is poor of resources, this may be difficult to achieve. How long can one maintain the notion of a Caliphate if much of the country is gripped by economic depression and anarchy that can only be suppressed by fear?

More important for the IS leadership is that their fighters need to be supplied, motivated and taken care of. Even the most motivated Jihadist must eat, has to drink, needs ammunition, requires transport and has to stay healthy. Also Jihadists, especially if they consist of large and diverse groups including Westernized members, will soon realize that their dreams will not come true, that promises will not materialize and that their society will not become more just. Our bombing gives the IS leadership the perfect excuse of why this Caliphate cannot deliver. It will also help them control discontent and keep up the motivation.

To benefit from the IS' weaknesses would not need any drones, cruise missiles, smart bombs, but instead a little more 'Fingerspitzengefühl' – while a military intervention could always have been kept as an option of last resort. Why can we not learn from the failures of our earlier military interventions in Lebanon, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya? Now that the bombing has started, there is no way back anymore. All we can hope for is that the IS proves to be a less formidable adversary than we must be assume from their present successes. In this case, we would simply win by luck and not by strategy.

When we now congratulate ourselves on finally doing something to protect civilians and to end barbaric killings, rapes and beheadings, we may not have realized that we opened a much bigger Pandora's Box and that we may have triggered problems many times larger than those we came to solve. With all the talk of humanitarian interventions and the protection of civilians, this world is still governed by real politics. We must be careful not to fall victim of our own arguments meant for domestic consumption. Instead we have to think through such interventions more carefully. Maybe in Washington or Brussels some clever heads have worked this all out – but if this is the case, they have kept it a well-guarded secret.

We have to do more to weigh our options as the next such problem might be just around the corner. What we see in Iraq and Syria today may repeat itself in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Following the withdrawal of NATO forces by the end of this year, we may see large areas in both countries fall under the control of the Taliban and with it a return of radical Islamic Groups. The future of the rest of Afghanistan and Pakistan, a nuclear power, would be uncertain. All seems to depend on a shaky power-sharing arrangement between Ghani and Abdullah. The chance for this to hold is even for optimists minimal. And with a weakened central government, a reassured Taliban and the possibility of renewed fighting among Afghan communities, the Afghan army may just as quickly disintegrate as the Iraqi army. The just agreed remaining 12,000 NATO troops may not hold back the rout and chaos that could ensue.

Hopefully that will never happen – but if it does, we have set the entire region from the Hindu Kush to the deserts of Arabia ablaze.