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Issue Brief

How to Deal Effectively with ISIS?

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The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS, has become a threat to global peace. It launched a series of attacks in France on 13 Nov, 2015 and a day ago in Lebanon on 12 Nov 2015. In France, it left 129 dead whereas the attacks in Beirut were the deadliest since the Lebanese Civil War in 1990. Now, its strength lies in occupying a geo-strategic position in Syria and Iraq. The self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and Syria captured territory in Iraq and Eastern Syria that is inhabited by six and a half million people. The militant organization declared itself a “caliphate” after seizing area of Tikrit and Mosul. The two words, Caliphate and Islamic State, are the main cause of its extraordinary recruiting appeal. By choosing this identity, ISIS declares itself and its leader to be the only true authority of Islam, the only legitimate government over Muslims everywhere, and the fulfillment of a host of end-times prophecies. In its violent campaigns, the organization claims to be working to correct political and religious injustice. This very narrative of veiled justification of terrorism decides whose “boots” should be on the ground. In this regard, Saudi Arabia’s formation of an anti-terrorism coalition is finally a right move. Yet what makes the coalition successful and productive is a coalition that includes Iran, Syria and Iraq.

The Middle East is ablaze; therefore the states in the region should unite to bring peace. Fighting ISIS only means managing the symptoms without addressing the real grievances upon which the Islamic State feeds. Therefore, a carefully thought-out plan is needed to fight ISIS and to eradicate all the sources of its power. A plan that aims at promotion of moderation and strengthening state institutions can bring peace in the region. To this end, long-term efforts are required as there is no quick fix to ISIS and its off-shoots. ISIS and its extremism are two sides of the same coin. The battle against it will have to be fought on more than one front. Physical, intellectual and ideological efforts are needed to put an end to all such forms of extremism. To this end, all the Middle Eastern players must be on the same page.

It is the right time for the Middle East to host a Global Summit on Violent Extremism. The fight against ISIS does not end quickly as it is a war against a demented ideology that will require a long time to end. The US has formed a coalition of around sixty countries and launched four thousand airstrikes on the IS, yet the militant organization remains undefeated and appears to be growing stronger. Herein lies the lesson for the Muslim alliance; only making a coalition and going for vague options to launch attacks on the IS will not produce the desired outcomes. Repeating the same mistakes would be even more counter-productive. The Iraq War and the haste in imposing an inexpedient political set-up was a blunder. Therefore, the first priority of the alliance should be to take local and regional players on board to reach a negotiated solution for the protracted disputes.

The Sunni-Shia rift that widened in the wake of the Iraq War must be bridged by religious scholars from both sects. Otherwise, states like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian region will remain vulnerable to the volatility generated by ISIS. If not curbed at this stage, this fire will turn into religious wars. ISIS has tried to polarize the Muslim world. Leaving Syria and Iran out of the coalition will serve its purpose. The Middle East is already paying a high price of religious polarization. It must move towards ending the Syrian civil war with a negotiated solution. Once Iraq and Syria are made stable, ISIS will lose its strength in the region.

A three-pronged strategy is needed to fight ISIS. First, a unanimous decision to fight the IS; second, resolution of conflicts in the Middle East by negotiations; and, third, weakening the IS by hitting its revenue system and denying it free movement across the region. In order to make this strategy successful, media campaigns should be launched to shape public opinion across the Muslim world. The IS has developed a brand through its media savvy techniques. Therefore, the media should be at the forefront of deflating its glorified but false image. Religious scholars and organizations must denounce the macabre methodology of the IS and give a counter-IS narrative. Only in this way, will their appeal for recruitment be weakened.

In the Global Summit to counter Violent Extremism, participants would have to devise a plan to punish those who are buying oil from ISIS. Without hitting at the revenue system of the organization, any success in fight against it would be highly unrealistic. The organization is believed to generate \$US 1 to 3 million a day by producing four thousand barrels of oil from Iraqi wells and forty-four thousand barrels a day from Syrian oil wells.¹ The Members of the organization are black-market dealers who exploit a willing network of truckers, middlemen and others to allegedly sell oil to Syrians, Kurds and Turks. The coalition has to impose sanctions on those who are buying oil from the IS, and, where possible, on those who enable this oil to be sold.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who spent time in the US prisons in Iraq, is now the self-proclaimed Caliph of the Muslim world. This highlights one fact; that prisons do nothing to curb terrorism because these terrorists believe in demented ideologies and the prison's corrective measures are not effective in correcting this thinking. Rather, these prisons serve as a breeding ground for them to establish contacts, indoctrinate youth, and disseminate knowledge of making explosives. In order to cure their malady, they have to be demobilized, deradicalized and rehabilitated. Pakistan's Military Operations, Rah-e-Nijat and Rah-e-Rast, are an example of how extremism needs to be curbed by infusing a counter-terrorism

narrative in the minds of terrorist. Once these prisons, which have become nurseries for the terrorists, are turned into rehabilitation centers, not only the ghost of extremism can be exorcised but the rehabilitated persons could be used as a model for other people also.

No state owns the IS. Even so, its appeal is growing. There are reports that the IS has recruited 3,000 persons from Saudi Arabia. This is a matter of introspection for Riyadh. A stronger response from Saudi-Salafi scholars to reduce the influence of the Islamic State is necessary.

The founding father of the organization, Abu Masab al-Zarqawi, was born in Zarqa. It is the second largest home to Palestinian refugees in Jordan; and serves as a reminder to the world that the miseries of Palestinians have frustrated the Arab youth and motivated them to join terror networks. The radical ideologies and their related chaos cannot be put to an end unless a peaceful solution of the Palestinian issue is found out.

The IS has presented a utopian concept of Islamic state and denounced western style democracy. Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, the mentor of the founding father of the ISIS, Abu Masab al-Zarqawi, slammed western style democracy in his article, "Democracy: A Religion" and called democratic practices in the Muslim world "pollutants" in the religion of Islam. Though he didn't endorse the most lethal form of extremism that Zarqawi used, Maqdisi's political ideology borrows from Zarqawi's thoughts. To counter this ideology is one of the biggest challenges for the Muslim alliance. The Muslim political mindset has long been stagnating and stuck in the grooves of old interpretations. There is a dire need for Muslim religious scholars and political thinkers to come up with reconciliation between old and modern interpretations. *Ijtihad* is the need of the hour.

Notes and References:

¹ Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, "The Islamic State", New York: Council on Foreign Relations, November 16, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>