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War against Islamic State: Sowing seeds of more extremist groups

By James M Dorsey

Synopsis

The US-led war against the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, is sowing seeds for the sprouting of yet more extremist groups. In doing so the US is reverting to a misguided policy that has spawned more virulent forms of militant Islam.

Commentary

The US-led international response to the Islamic State's advances in Iraq and Syria is more extensive and fraught with danger than the war on terror declared by President George W Bush in the wake of the 9-11 attacks on New York and Washington. It is a response that contains the seeds of continued failure in confronting terrorism and threatens to give rise to groups that may be even more extreme than the Islamic State, hard though that may be to imagine.

Bush concluded within weeks of the 9/11 attacks that Al Qaeda was as much a product of US support for autocratic Arab regimes as it was the result of politically bankrupt Arab leaders. His acknowledgement amounted to an admission of failure of a US policy designed to maintain stability in a key geo-strategic and volatile part of the world.

A decade later, discontent with failed regimes produced popular revolts that toppled the autocratic leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Elsewhere in the region, mass protests erupted in Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Oman. Bahrain's minority Sunni rulers brutally suppressed a Shia uprising. Egypt's transition was routed with a military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood, backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Syria is in its fourth year of a bloody civil war that has fuelled the rise of the Islamic State, a jihadist group that makes Al Qaeda look like a lesser evil.

Multiple problems

The problems with the US-led military offensive against the Islamic State are many. For one, it turns Clausewitz' definition of war as an extension of diplomacy on its head. It reduces what is at its core a political problem that requires a political solution coupled with a military effort to contain the Islamic State to a military problem in which politics is an afterthought.

The emphasis on a military solution moreover goes beyond restoring the principle of endorsement of repressive regimes like those of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt that are regressive and/or supportive of ideologies akin to that of the Islamic State, promoters of sectarianism, and among the worst offenders of human rights. It reinforces perceptions among many Sunni Muslims that the West first turned a blind eye to the killings in Syria and now is undermining what is left of credible resistance to the Syrian regime. Those perceptions are rooted in US expansion of its offensive in Syria to include Jabhat al-Nusra, a jihadist group aligned with Al Qaeda that is wholly focused on defeating the Syrian regime but opposed to the Islamic State.

The Obama administration's alignment with the Middle East's counter-revolutionary forces and targeting of groups other than the Islamic State risks identifying the US with efforts by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to target political Islam as such. The three Arab nations earlier this year cracked down on non-violent groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. They have since called for an expansion of the campaign against the Islamic State to include non-violent expressions of political Islam. The US alignment prevents it from adopting a policy that would seek to contain the Islamic State militarily while focusing on removing the grievances on which the group feeds. It is a policy that is destined to at best provide a band aid for a festering wound.

Saudi and UAE efforts to target political Islam as such were articulated earlier this year by former British prime minister Tony Blair. Blair argued against "a deep desire to separate the political ideology represented by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood from the actions of extremists including acts of terrorism." He acknowledged that it was "laudable" to distinguish "between those who violate the law and those we simply disagree with" but warned that "if we're not careful, they also blind us to the fact that the ideology itself is nonetheless dangerous and corrosive; and cannot and should not be treated as a conventional political debate between two opposing views of how society should be governed."

On that basis, it is hard to see why Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's puritan interpretation of Islam that is the well spring of much of contemporary jihadist thinking, does not top the list of ideologies that are "dangerous and corrosive." Saudi Arabia, like the Islamic State, was born in a jihadist struggle that married Islamist warriors led by an 18th century jurist Mohammed Abdul Wahab, with the proto-kingdom's ruling Al Saud clan.

A wake-up call

The rise of the Islamic State is a watershed, a wake-up call for many in the Arab and the Muslim world desperate for change. It has fuelled a long-overdue debate among Arabs and Muslims about the kind of world they want to live in.

In an essay earlier this month entitled 'The Barbarians Within Our Gates,' prominent Washington-based journalist Hisham Melhelm wrote: "The Arab world today is more violent, unstable, fragmented and driven by extremism — the extremism of the rulers and those in opposition — than at any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago... The promise of political empowerment, the return of politics, the restoration of human dignity heralded by the season of Arab uprisings in their early heydays — all has given way to civil wars, ethnic, sectarian and regional divisions and the reassertion of absolutism, both in its military and atavistic forms.... The jihadists of the Islamic State, in other words, did not emerge from nowhere. They climbed out of a rotting, empty hulk — what was left of a broken-down civilization."

For his part, Turki al-Hamad, a liberal Saudi intellectual, questioned how Saudi religious leaders could confront the Islamic State's extremist ideology given that they promote similar thinking at home and abroad. Writing in the London-based newspaper Al Arab, Hamad argued that the Saudi clergy was incapable of confronting the extremism of groups like the Islamic State "not because of laxness or procrastination, but because they share the same ideology."

Neither Melhelm nor Hamad are Islamists. Yet, they reflect widespread soul-searching among Islamists and non-Islamists across the Arab world. Theirs is a debate that predates the rise of the Islamic State but has been pushed centre stage by the jihadists. It is a debate that is at the core of tackling the root causes on which jihadist groups feed. It is a debate that threatens to be squashed

by a policy that focuses on military rather than political solutions and promotes status quo regimes whose autocracy chokes off opportunities for the venting of wide-spread discontent and anger, leaving violence and extremism as one of the few, if not the only, option to force change.

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