

On the Brink of Delusional Triumph

The day when the United States and its coalitions established Operation Inherent Resolves in 2014 was the day that the world officially hoisted the flag of war against the Islamic States of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Nonetheless, entering the sixth year of the heroic rhetoric, the struggle against ISIS is far from the finish line. Just a few months after claiming their triumph with the killing of ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, Pentagon watchdogs on 4th February 2020 have once again sensed ISIS resilience. ISIS' militants have reportedly schemed for insurgency after Baghdadi's death – sending a message to the world to brace for another wave of terror. Military guerillas may pressure them, but the threats stand, as US National Counterterrorism Center noted that the sympathizers of ISIS keep growing (Shinkman 2019). Almost whenever the operation announces their seemingly imminent victory, ISIS manages to strike back with another series of military aggression, brutal terror, and public executions. The question remains: why does the US coalition effort to combat ISIS fail to prevail? As the current world order continues to weaken, the spread of ISIS becomes further unobstructed, creating a notion that we have only claimed a series of delusional triumphs. This paper contends that the failure of the current counter-terrorism attempt is due to three significant factors: failure to stop radical propaganda, failure to contain international conflicts, and failure to address religious exploitation.

Whether the operation to combat ISIS is considered a failure might be a normative analysis. Even so, it can be best assessed by reflecting on the chronological overview of the military operation itself. Counter-terrorist programs around the world have required significant military resources to combat ISIS and keep them at bay. Despite the successful killing of Baghdadi and multiple claims of ISIS shrinking domination, experts have argued that government officials failed

to account for three major datasets: budget relative to the outcome, external damages, and continuation of radicalization.

US Department of Defense Financial Report declared that the states spent \$5.5 billion on the operation from 2014 to 2016. The number doubled in the following years, as the government spent \$13 Billion to fund Operation Inherent Resolve only in 2018, and a budget of \$15.3 Billion has been approved for 2019 fiscal year (Department of Defense 2018). In a nutshell, around \$41 million US taxpayer's money is invested in striking ISIS each day. Political and economic analysts argue that the expenses to deal with ISIS are not efficiently allocated, particularly if we consider the many domestic issues that lack adequate funding (Hartung 2020).

In terms of casualties, Global Conflict Tracker reported that there are currently 2000 US troops deployed to combat ISIS in Syria, and the all-time number of US-coalition troops from 2014 to 2020 that have engaged in Operation Inherent Resolve is approximately 10.000 troops. While the government claimed to have triumphed with less than 1% of death tolls, their statistics, of course, neglect external number of losses. Experts calculate that the Middle East Armed Forces lost 55.000 lives. Furthermore, around 50.000 civilians in Iraq and Syria have lost their lives through the ongoing battle, with 6.5 million people are currently displaced (Global Conflict Tracker 2020). This data, in short, convince number of political analysts and human right advocates that the trade-offs are not worth it (Stavridis 2015). No matter how many *jihadists* that have been brought to justice, more of them will just appear to take their places. The world has been focusing too much on military aggression, while the main threat of ISIS is not their violent aggression, but their spread of ideology (Hassan 2016).

Failure to Stop Radical Propaganda

Even with the massive amount of budget used to fund Operation Inherent Resolve, and the even longer list of lives lost during the clash against ISIS, the world will never be entirely freed from the seed of ISIS radicalization as long as their ideals still exist. One key point that the United States Coalition fails to account is ISIS' ability to adapt to modern technology. With the first circulation of disturbing images in the world wide web showing their militias committing gruesome murders and terrors, ISIS gains its spotlight in the world's eye.

Far from keeping their operation a secret, though, these fighters made sure everyone knew about it...They posted selfies of black-clad militants and Instagram images of convoys... There was even a smartphone app, created so that jihadi fans following along at home could link their social media accounts in solidarity, boosting the invaders' messages even further. To maximize the chances that the internet's own algorithms would propel it to virality, the effort was organized under one telling hashtag: #AllEyesOnISIS (Singer 2018).

The finding reflects a compelling modus operandi—ISIS feels no urge to keep their operation clandestine; instead they clearly try to show the world what they are up to. In the era of globalization, society is deeply impacted by the roles of mass media and cyberspace; ISIS observed this trend and quickly adjusted itself to the virtual framework. Media that is spread through the internet is more fluid, given how people can easily repost and transmit materials—a phenomenon defined as “the multiplier effect,” which contributes to the rapid spread of ISIS propaganda on a global scale (Maggioni 2015). Moreover, while the ‘actors’ in these videos might be apprehended or executed during military operations, the circulation of existing materials could not be stopped merely by government censorship and restriction.

Analysts highlight that these new innovations of radical propaganda have yielded positive results to ISIS. Research shows that ISIS has expanded its base as they succeed in appealing to a

broader range of backgrounds ranging from Western and Afro-Eurasia countries (Hamblet 2017). By conveying messages through digital platforms in ‘creative’ manners, radical-extremism now no longer moves underground; instead, it is clearly and blatantly served in front of our eyes. The sophisticated propaganda innovation has helped ISIS to ensure that their ideas are vocalized in a much broader scope. With the rapid development of technology and numerous possibilities it offers, cyber-radicalism has proven to be a severe threat which the US coalitions have yet to overcome.

Failure to Restore International Conflicts

The other important factor that US coalitions neglect is the aftermath of their military intervention, particularly in Syria and Iraq. The capture and assassination of ISIS’ elites, as well as the liberation of former ISIS territory, has been the government’s parameter of their victory. Even so, their failure to restore social order after chaos facilitates ISIS’s rise and eventually, recruitment effort. In an exclusive interview, Dr. Reşat Kasaba, Director of Jackson School of International Studies in University of Washington, explains that ISIS grew after the American forces that invaded Iraq back in 2003 created utter chaos:

Upon the anarchical state of society, people who felt that they were going to be left out from the power structure created and organized all sort of militia groups and organizations—and ISIS is one of them (Kasaba, 2020)

Dr. Kasaba further explains that the disarray caused by U.S. coalition military intervention scars civilians and creates a fertile soil for ISIS to plant their seed of radicalization. With multidimensional turmoil around the world, victims of conflicts begin reaching ISIS to be their savior. Even when ISIS has excelled in expanding their audiences and relaying messages with their adaptability above, they also need people to actually receive and accept the ideology to be

radicalized and eventually recruited. Some people, especially in the Middle East, not only accept ISIS's presence, but they also aid ISIS in doing their work. Anand Gopal of The Atlantic provides the most explicit story about the issue—in his article, *The Hell After ISIS*, he narrates the condition when ISIS attacked the province of Anbar, Iraqi officers were scattered and overwhelmed:

Gunfire came from rooftops, nearby shops, the electricity plant. Men sped by on motorcycles lobbing grenades. Police began abandoning their checkpoints around town and fleeing to headquarters. Reports of gunshots came from nearly every neighborhood. That was when Abu Ammar had a dark realization: The townspeople were helping ISIS (Gopal 2016).

Victims impacted by international conflict became a prime target demographic for ISIS, who in turn used guerilla-warfare tactics conducted by civilian sympathizers to hit back against counter-terrorism efforts. US Coalition Armed Forces would not likely to target townspeople and civilian, nor do they suspect them to be ISIS' henchmen. ISIS militias consider themselves being repressed by the Western states, in which they too suffered from the aftermath of U.S. intervention. ISIS appealed to locals to join their battle against a 'common enemy.'

Another source of international discontent and a large pool of ISIS recruits comes from Al-Hol camp in Rojava, Syria, where 72.000 refugees from ISIS-held territory are hosted, who now blame the world military for standing against ISIS. Even women and children believe that they shall usher in the ISIS caliphate, requesting soldier corps to bring them back to ISIS (Arraf 2019). Multiple reports eventually find that apparently, ISIS provides food, shelter, safety, and even money for the townspeople. When ISIS finally usurped power, they enchanted people with welfare promises as long as they join the caliphate. Desperate enough to regain a decent life, the townspeople became disillusioned and viewed ISIS as a radical alternative, as ISIS promised to

fight the foreign devils and release them from the agonizing war. These testimonies show how the aftermath of U.S. counterterrorism efforts work against the long-term eradication of ISIS, and that new approaches to battling ISIS are needed which take into account the everyday realities of civilians in ISIS-influenced areas and the potential damage to these communities that current U.S. Coalition strategies inflict.

Failure to Address Religious Exploitation

Religious exploitation has long been fertile soil for radicalism, and provides ISIS a platform for proliferating their ideology. Perverted interpretations of religion have long been perpetuated by every radical Islamic organization to sanctify their deeds in the name of God. The problem has been the hallmark of radical extremism that persist for decades spanning from the case of Boko Haram, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS nowadays. It generates a jurisprudential dilemma, for in principle based on secularism and freedom of faith, there are certain grey areas where nation-states legal power could not bind religious activities and communities. In persuading people to believe their ideas, ISIS reached out to Muslims by claiming to be doing God's will in the Holy Quran. To build their caliphate on a firm basis, ISIS engages in the method of nation-building, and to do so, they try to produce a sociocultural and historical narrative to defend and justify its actions (Hashim 2018). They drive the *ummah* (the Muslim community) to fallacy by justifying their vile acts upon Quran verses.

The *Hadith* literature in the Quran is highly valued in the Muslim faith, providing *ummah* with the Prophet Muhammad teachings and ways of life. Unfortunately, ISIS creates its distorted version of the *Hadith* meanings, translating each and every verse literally to fit their deeds. Through the religious scripture, ISIS tries to verify itself as a single legitimate Islamic government in the world. Due to the fact that following the *Hadith* is an obligation for Muslims, the *ummah* is

trapped within the confusion caused by ISIS's version of *Hadith*. If ISIS is 'truly' carrying out the Prophet's will, then ummah has an obligation to bow down to ISIS' rules. ISIS also argues that the practice of *jihad*, such as through bombings and aggression, is what God wants. They say it is a message from the Prophet Muhammad to obliterate the 'enemy of Islam'. They denounce Christians and the Western states as the enemy of Islam, and those two groups should be destroyed by physical struggle in war (Lister 2015). Although most global Islamic clerics and organizations have condemned ISIS, erroneous narratives of jihad continue to proliferate and targeting those who have hard-line beliefs and radical views about Islam culture itself (Boutz 2019). ISIS tricked people into following them not as a choice but as an obligation of faithful believers who solemnly carries the will of their Prophet. The subject of religion has long been held on as more of private affairs, yet the inability of states to formulate ways to regulate religious extremism contributes to its spread.

Based on the trends observed above, it remains possible that the Islamic State will continue to metastasize and spread its influence even when they have lost their leaders and territory. The slogan "*you are either with us or against us*" that has been the basis of United States counter-terrorism since the attack of 9/11 is arguably irrelevant. ISIS condition far transcends that, and it would require more than military showdowns to shut down their operations. Dr. Daniel Chirot from Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington gives his insight on what might be a long-term solution towards the issue:

Of course, that [military intervention] is a short-term solution they could think of. If you worried about bombs going off next week, then that is what you must do. To improve the employment situation, improve the economy, treat minorities better—those are complex but long-term solutions. (Chirot 2020)

Dr. Chirot argues that military intervention is just one of the many fundamental issues that need to be resolved. Without mending the world's social institutions from the wreckage of war, disillusionment of people, and the failure of global order, ISIS, if not, more extremist organizations will always rise to challenge the world.

Regarding this paper's fundamental question about why the United States coalition's effort to combat ISIS fails to prevail, analysis has shown three primary factors: failure to stop radical propaganda, failure to restore international conflicts, and failure to address religious exploitation. Based on the trends observed above, it remains possible that the Islamic State will continue to metastasize and spread its influence even when they have lost their leaders and territory. The United States Coalition should perhaps embrace the fact that their strategy to counter-ISIS is not perfect. They should look at broader facts and account for the X factor costs of their planning. The fundamental issue that needs to be resolved is their ideology- the main power of ISIS to recruit new followers and jihadists that will pursue their erroneous demeanors. ISIS recruitments need to be stopped first rather than their military violation. It should now be evident that we need to strategize a revolutionary counter-terrorism attack: ideally a shift towards counter-ideology approach that will hinder the ability of ISIS to expand.

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