

ISLAMIC STATE

Do We Really Want to Destroy ISIS?

Gerta Zaimi



Gerta Zaimi is a researcher on International Relations, Middle East and Balkans at the University of Florence

Are America's goals and interests in the Middle East to degrade the Islamic State or to destroy it? Despite an initial confusion in terms at the beginning of 2014, the Obama administration has so far clearly demonstrated through words and deeds that the strategy is only containment. No doubt the interest and the will of the West are to destroy the

ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq & Syria), but no one is ready to put the boots on the ground and no one wants to enter a hopeless situation from which they do not know how to get out. The US-led coalition has been conducting air raids on terrorist targets for more than 17 months. The US conducts 93 per cent of the coalition attacks. But are the current tools used by Westerners the same as their ambitions?

Obama's last words were clear: "We've always understood that our goal has to be militarily constraining ISIL's capabilities, cutting off their supply lines, cutting off their financing at the same time as we're putting a political track together in Syria and fortifying the best impulses in Baghdad so that we can, not just win militarily, but also win by improving governance... I don't think they're gaining strength. What is true is that from the start, our goal has been first to contain, and we have contained them. They have not gained ground in Iraq. And in Syria they'll come in, they'll leave. But you don't see this systematic march by ISIL across the terrain. What we have not yet been able to do is to completely decapitate their command and control structures. We've made some progress in trying to reduce the flow of foreign fighters."

The question here is not the containment, but rather, whether Obama is doing enough to degrade (yes), roll back (a little) and destroy (not for the moment) the Islamic State. A containment strategy for ISIS is just a strategy of hope. For the truth is that ISIS is contained within the Sunni areas in Syria and Iraq, where around 6 to 8 million people live, but this also for realistic reasons. Only there it can find its social base. For the rest of the Islamic State has expanded its territory with strongholds and cells in Libya, Yemen, the Sinai



region, and Bangladesh, as well as established ties with other terrorist organizations in Africa. Within its proclaimed territory, ISIS has revenues of several billion dollars a year, a force of about 31 thousand young volunteers from all over the world (31 thousand is the number provided by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and 40 thousand is the number provided by the ISIS resources). Volunteers in its defense and expansion come from more than 80 countries, about half of them from the West.

ISIS is a globalized international movement, which lacks deep roots in the local society and has a project that requires the collapse of Nation-State borders. It is not a social movement of revolutionary proportions, and I would say that it is counter revolutionary as it refers to the return of the society as it was in the first two centuries of Islam. ISIS is a phenomenon based on extremism and totalitarian ideology.

Aside from everyone agreeing and having the goodwill in that ISIS should be destroyed, what is actually happening?

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the Bush administration's policy of forcefully imposing and exporting their democracy, pushed the Obama administration to position itself at an opposite angle. The strategy in this case was partly disengagement and partly a restrained one, which is essentially a containment strategy. Europe, despite its commitment in the coalition, has demonstrated to be unable to show its

presence without the American leadership.

Regarding the neighboring countries and forces in the territory where ISIS is based, essentially all are interested to weaken but not eradicate it. Assad doesn't see ISIS as his main threat. The opposition forces are those that are the main problem. Only by weakening the opposition until elimination, Assad can strengthen his thesis as him being the only one who can fight the Islamic terrorism. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah is now assisting Assad in his fight against the opposition for satisfying their own interests, which are not close to those of the West. Therefore, the disappearance of ISIS now is not in their will.

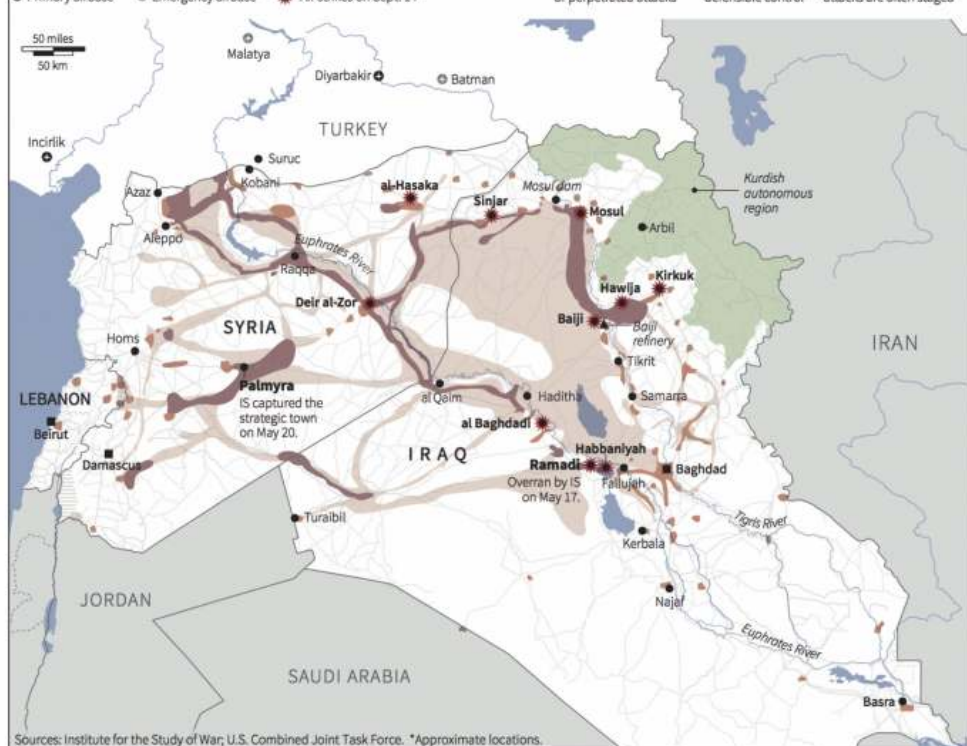
With regard to the Kurds in Iraq, their priority is protecting the borders of their friends, and keeping a de facto autonomy. Now they are in areas that include Kirkuk and its petroleum fields, and into the Ninewa Province in the southwest. They have no interest in strong ties with the Iraqi central government. If ISIS is defeated, this would mean an open confrontation with the Iraqi central government. Their interest is a divided Arab world and a weak government in Baghdad. ISIS is the element that provides these two situations, so the Iraqi Kurds have no interest in the disappearance of ISIS right now. Their interest is to have as much support from both USA and Turkey.

Turkey agrees with the West that ISIS should be destroyed. In other words, the common propaganda about an alleged ISIS-Ankara alliance is just nonsense. But Turkey doesn't see in

Fight against Islamic State

Recent air strikes and Islamic State control zones as of Sept. 15.

● Primary airbase ● Emergency airbase ★ Air strikes on Sept. 14*



ISIS the main strategic threat. It is a big threat, but Turkey also has other priorities. One of them is to not allow the al-Assad regime to take back the Sunni-majority areas of Syria, which may easily lead to gross atrocities against Sunnis, who may try to escape to Turkey, creating a much bigger refugee crisis. The second priority for Turkey is to not allow the PYD (Democratic Union Party) to dominate northern Syria. This is not because Ankara is obsessively anti-Kurdish, as some people seem to think, assuming that the PYD stands for "Kurds." Ankara's good relations, if not alliance, with the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) disprove that narrative. The problem is that the PYD is not just any Kurdish party – it is an extension of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party), which has been Turkey's "bête noir" since the early 1980s. Finally, Ankara is trying to keep the "Syrian opposition" alive, despite Washington's pusillanimity in supporting it. This opposition neither includes nor equals ISIS, as the pro-Assad pro-Russian narrative suggests.

The Iraqi Shiites intend the protection of sectarian border, so they are not in any hurry to destroy ISIS. Much of Shiite militias in Iraq are commanded by Iran, thus keeping alive the interest that a Sunni Islamist terrorist threat is quite important, so to distract from Shiite militia committed crimes. In this case as well, containing is much more important than defeating ISIS. Iran wants to fight it, but not necessarily to destroy it. Besides the interests associated with the Shia of Iraq, the existence of ISIS does not permit the creation of a united Sunni bloc rival, as it happened during the war with Iraq during Saddam Hussein's government.

Saudi Arabia's main enemy is not ISIS, but Iran. Let us recall that ISIS is not supported by the Saudis. Maybe for the Saudis, ISIS was initially seen as a weapon of the Sunni radicalization for revenge against Iran's hegemony. So Iran remains the enemy number one for Saudi Arabia.

Israel is satisfied if the war in Syria will lead to the collapse of Hezbollah, it is pleased to see Iran plunged into an uncertain war and bury the Palestinian cause. In regards to the occupied area of Golan, Israel will not allow the creation of a next front of Hezbollah there. For their part, the Palestinians are not at all tempted by ISIS. Israel, for this reason has no urgency in the disappearance of ISIS.

Lebanon, even if the presence of the refugees will cause problems, whether by ISIS and Al Nusra (the Lebanon front is the only one where Al Nusra and ISIS create alliance) it will be protected by the Lebanese army, and by Hezbollah that can't allow problems to Shiite community in Lebanon (it is its social base).

At the same time, Jordan will take all the possible measures to prevent any internal instability, but it is not able to have a leading role in this context against ISIS.

Containing ISIS is an illusion. The "containment" of the Soviet Union, which people forget, was eventually judged insufficient by Kennan himself as it precluded any form of engagement such as arms agreements -or when appropriate and feasible rolling back. The situation, in each event, is thoroughly different: ISIS is not a recognized State and never will be. It is not a Nation-State or a multinational State (it does not accept the concept of nation, it accepts

only the concept of the Umma), and has no legitimacy. It can survive only through expansion and conquest. It also cannot accept to be contained; it works only if it expands.

To have an effective containment strategy, one must aim to convert the opponent's spirit, negotiate and thus compromises can be reached. But, in the case of ISIS this is impossible and unthinkable. In ISIS we will never find compromises and accommodation, and for sure no possible negotiations. Actually, there is nothing to negotiate with people like that, and they wouldn't negotiate any way. We are mutually exclusive. In this case, in order to not wait for history to face its eventual traumatic consequences, the path to be followed is not that of containment, but that of destruction. The containment simply cannot work with ISIS. Chamberlain tried to contain Hitler and we know what happened (and in Germany's case, we were dealing with a real Sate).

So what can be done when facing such situation? The only things that I have in mind are the actual errors and lessons we have from the past.

We will have to include strong military support for the opposition coalition and the FSA. We should never forget that our priorities are not the Syrian priorities. Assad cannot be tolerated for the simple reason that he is both the cause of the civil war, and of the entry of international Jihadist groups into the country.

The fact of the matter is that we can't hope to defeat the IS in Syria without the support of the Sunni Arab majority which we are now alienated because of the US blanket support for the YPG. The Obama administration is right to support the YPG as a potent military force against the Islamic State, but it must make sure that the YPG (Peoples Protection Units) stops its attacks against Syrian Sunni Arabs and the Syrian Opposition Coalition, does not threaten Turkey and stops accepting PKK reinforcements. It should say that the group cannot be simultaneously an ally of the US, Assad and Russia. If it doesn't do that, the anti-IS coalition will be in danger of unraveling and the beneficiaries will be Assad, the Islamic State, Iran, Hezbollah and Russia.

A UN and not a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) sponsored great coalition as in 1991 with the Arab countries, is the thing to do. It should be 90% US. The Arabs cannot play the main military role because their ground troops cannot afford this kind of war, they do not have the resources and Iraq and Syria are paralyzed. This is not the war to be done with mercenaries. To defeat ISIS, we need more than 300,000 US and allied ground troops in Iraq and Syria. Something no President and government is ready and will probably be ready to do in the near future, but sooner or later we will have to arrive to this solution. A single air war is not enough in this case.

Immediately we should be ready for the after War to not repeat the same errors of the after Iraqi War of 2003. And a more long-term strategy is the war on the ideology, whose core battle will be fought inside the Islamic world. But this is a new chapter of the ISIS's defeat.