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## **Fighting Islamic State: Getting Down To Root Causes**

*By James M. Dorsey*

### **Synopsis**

*The international community's countering of Islamic State should not just focus on neutralising violent jihadism but also addressing its root causes and translating that notion into policy.*

### **Commentary**

THE RISE of Islamic State (IS) beyond the borders of Syria and Iraq over the past one year has drawn comparison with the spread of communism more than a century ago. It has also pitted proponents of kinetic realpolitik seeking military defeat of the extremist against supporters of the notion that jihadism poses primarily an ideational threat.

However both schools of the debate focus on the violent nature of the threat and ways to neutralise it rather than on what has sparked the current menace that has been germinating and mushrooming over decades. Root causes figure in the competing visions of how the IS can best be confronted.

### **Debating the root causes**

It has become common-place to speak of the need to tackle the root causes that make IS one of the most brutal insurgent groups in recent history, attractive to disaffected youth across the globe. Translating that notion into policy, however, is proving difficult, primarily because it is based on a truth that has far-reaching impact on the international community irrespective of how close or far its members are from the IS' current borders.

It involves changing long-standing, ingrained policies at home that marginalise, exclude and stigmatise significant segments of society; emphasise security at the expense of freedoms and debate; and in more autocratic states that are abetted by the West, reduce citizens to obedient subjects through harsh repression and attenuation of religious belief to suit the interests of rulers.

Ultimately, IS has to be defeated not in its Syrian capital of Raqqa but in the dismal banlieues of French cities that furnish it with the largest contingent of European foreign fighters; the populous neighbourhoods in Tunisia that account for the single largest group of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq; in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, whose citizens account for the second largest number of foreign fighters and whose decades-ong effort to propagate a puritan, intolerant, interpretation of Islam has

been a far more important breeding ground for jihadist thinking than the writings of militant Islamist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb; and in Western capitals led by Washington who view retrograde, repressive regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Focussing on root causes means broadening scholarly and policy debate to concentrate not only on what amounts to applying Band-Aid that fail to heal the festering open wounds but also to question assumptions made by the various schools of thought on how to solve the problem.

### **Jihadism: a symptom, not a root cause**

The facts on the ground have already convincingly contradicted the notion that IS will be defeated militarily. A year into military efforts, air strikes have failed to put a serious dent in IS's appeal or the amount of territory it controls; Iraqi regular and irregular forces have been unable to shift the balance of power on the battlefield; and no other member of the 60-nation coalition assembled by the US has been willing to deploy a ground force that potentially could defeat the jihadist group.

Yet, even such a hypothetical defeat would not solve the problem. Al Qaeda was degraded, to use the language of the Obama administration. Instead of reducing the threat of political violence, it produced ever more virulent forms of it, embodied by IS. It may be hard to imagine anything more brutal than IS, but it is a fair assumption that defeat of the group without tackling root causes would only lead to something that is even more violent and vicious.

There is much to be said for the notion of containment rather than defeat of IS in the belief that over time it would be forced to adapt its expansionist ambitions and brutal tactics as reality kicks in and the responsibility of government forces it to come to some kind of accommodation with the international community. Containment addresses the immediate problem but ignores factors that fuel radicalisation far from the warring state's borders and make jihadism attractive to disaffected across the globe.

Similarly, the notion that the very existence of IS poses a greater threat to regional stability and security in the Middle East and North Africa than conventional or unconventional military power elevates jihadism – the violent establishment of pan-Islamic rule -- to the status of a root cause rather than a symptom and expression of a greater and more complex problem.

Moreover, the ideological challenge posed by IS despite its discriminatory, exclusionary, narrow-minded interpretation of Islam, is primarily its equally problematic readings of the faith. IS shares some puritan concepts with Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism but rejects notions of monarchic rule and a clergy that uses puritanism to bolster the power of an autocratic family. IS's caliphate contradicts Iran's concept of the velayat-e-faqih, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists. Its model of governance opposes the Muslim Brotherhood's precepts, and ideas propagated by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates of an Islam that first and foremost prescribes absolute obedience to a ruler.

### **Putting one's money where one's mouth is**

In other words, the ideological debate waged in the Muslim world is to a large extent dominated by schools of thought that do not advocate more open, liberal and pluralistic interpretations of Islam. That is where the real challenge lies. The international community would give more liberal Muslim voices significant credibility if it put its money where its mouth is. It should offer a pallet of policy options that take a stab at rooting out the problem and its underlying causes rather than confine it to self-serving regimes and their religious supporters.

Some of those who emphasise IS' ideational challenge warn that jihadism, like concepts of Arabism and Arab nationalism that were popular in the past, could provoke conflict in and between Arab states. Reality on the ground has put that notion to rest. IS with its territorial base, coupled with multiple other factors, has demonstrated the fragility of existing Arab nation states and likely condemned to dustbins of history notions of Syria and Iraq as the nation states the world has known since the end of colonial rule.

By the same token, reducing the significance of recent attacks on mosques and tourist sites by IS fellow travellers in Tunisia, Kuwait, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to challenges to the political legitimacy and authority of those states, is to fail to recognise that IS fundamentally feeds on the failures of those

regimes. These include the failure to provide their youth social and economic opportunity, and to adopt policies that are inclusionary not exclusionary, pluralistic not discriminatory, and encourage participation in political debates and processes rather cutting off all avenues for expression of discontent. Therein lie the root causes of the jihadism threatening the international community.

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