



## NATO'S RESPONSE TO ISIL: SEARCH FOR A COMMON DENOMINATOR

The self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (hereinafter "ISIL") has erupted into the scene in the past few years. It adheres to the Salafi tradition of Sunni Islam, a literalist interpretation with practices extreme for the standards of modern society, such as slavery, or the mutilation of criminals. As Western leaders assemble a global coalition to defeat the group, the biggest obstacle it faces may not be ISIL fighters themselves, but regional rivalries.

### The Salafi Art of Making Enemies

The forces assembling against ISIL are not the first to fight expansionist Salafist militants. When the Ottoman Empire was weakening in the 19th century, a Salafist insurrection began to raid villages in Arabia. Like ISIL fighters today, the so-called Ikhwan (no relation to the Egyptian group of the same name) killed on the pretext that anyone not of the Salafist creed was non-Muslim, and hence their "life and property was halal [religiously forfeit]." The group took over large swaths of Arabia, including the Holy City of Mecca in 1803. The worst of the violence was reserved for Shia settlements in Iraq, where they massacred women and children and destroyed shrines. The Ottoman government squashed the rebellion in 1812 and publicly executed its leader in Istanbul.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1314/Selim+Koru>

The movement resurfaced when in 1914, the "sick man of Europe" went into war on the side of Germany. The Allies found that supporting the Salafist tribes was a good way of pulling the Arab Peninsula under the Empire's feet. Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, the group's leader at the time, rose to power using a newly formed Ikhwan. But the elite soldiers soon objected to the corrupting influence of oil wealth and launched a rebellion against their ruler. Ibn Saud fought them in a bloody civil war, and eventually cut them down with machine guns he obtained from European allies. His country, Saudi Arabia, has since become a luxurious petrostate.

ISIL is the ideological descendent of the Ikhwan, the sword of Salafism. It is made up of a core of ruthlessly pragmatic operatives - many of them former Iraqi Baathists soldiers - who have more than a decade of insurgency experience under their belts. Unlike previous Salafi organizations like al-Qaeda, ISIL holds territory. This has been a problem for the Ikhwan as much as ISIL, since both groups' unique mixture of biblical brutality and accusing other Muslims of apostasy makes them deeply unpopular with their neighbors.

But ISIL is more powerful than its previous incarnations. The group has now taken the majority of Syria and Iraq and established its capital in Raqqa. It is assembling the trappings of a state, and has its own economic policy, judiciary, healthcare service and propaganda machine. It collects taxes, sells oil, as well as whatever historical artifacts it does not demolish. Unlike their regional counterparts, ISIL soldiers are well paid and get periodic leave to be with their families.

NATO should be concerned about the long-term threat of ISIL. The group frequently makes statements suggesting that it will turn towards enemies abroad once it has consolidated its hold over its chosen territories in Syria and Iraq. Its wide network of international fighters and experienced insurgents means that it has most likely the capability to launch lethal assaults on major soft targets in the West, most of all Turkey, with which it shares a wide, relatively unpoliced border.

### **The Response**

Global Coalition to Counter ISIL was formed in late-2014 and has more than 60 members, 9 of whom are NATO countries. Though the alliance does not officially lead the Coalition, its members compose its core. So far, the allies have primarily engaged ISIL from the air, with limited support missions on land. Much of the rest of the effort has gone into training and equipping local forces as well as humanitarian aid.

The Coalition is in principle a global effort that derives its legitimacy from international human rights. In practice however, it is a deal between the NATO-led West and Middle Eastern countries. The West promises to do the heavy lifting, while the regional Muslim-majority countries lend it political legitimacy. That is why despite significant contributions

by countries like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the US still carries by far the largest number of strikes and undertakes the most strategic missions.

The matter is complicated by the presence of a third front: Iran. The Islamic Republic supports Shia militias in Iraq, as well as the Assad regime and Hezbollah in Syria. This increasingly makes the fight into a rivalry between Sunni and Shia-majority countries for control of the region now occupied by ISIL. That is why some members of the Coalition, most notably Saudi Arabia, see the fight against ISIL as a secondary priority. The incoherence is strongly felt in the Coalition's Iraq policy. While the U.S. is buttressing the government in Baghdad, the Saudis see it as an Iranian puppet regime, and would see it weakened.

The NATO core of the Coalition therefore faces a dilemma. On the one hand, NATO wants local actors to take ultimate responsibility for the destruction of ISIL. It is aware that Syria and Iraq's current troubles are partly the result of imperialist designs a century ago, and does not want to expose itself to the same responsibility. On the other hand, NATO does not want the fight to entirely devolve into a proxy conflict between Sunni and Shia powers, since this would have disastrous consequences for regional stability.

### Recommendations

The problem in the fight against ISIL is not motivating countries to fight the group, but to get them to do so on a common denominator. The Coalition can do this by,

- ★ **Preparing a post-ISIL plan:** this should be a detailed step-by-step program, made public, with as wide a backing as possible. Though difficult, it would be most effective if the Coalition could bring Iran on board as well. Though such a plan will not entirely settle the proxy-war surrounding ISIL region, it will partially channel it from conflict into diplomacy.
- ★ **Developing a rehabilitation program:** for an alternative to sectarian war to emerge, the region will need to find a way to re-integrate fighters on all sides of today's conflict into pluralistic societies. NATO should work with regional actors of various sects to develop a program to this end. Turkey, a long-time member state known for its moderate strand of Sunni Islam, could be a valuable asset in this task.

Meanwhile, NATO must fulfill its core responsibility of safeguarding its citizens. It can do so using the principles of containment:

- ★ **Deterrence:** NATO should make clear through its actions and rhetoric that any attacks on its members will result in painful retaliation against ISIL. Considering

ISIL's history of strategic decision making, this method will most likely protect soft targets in NATO members from terrorist attacks.

- ★ **Territorial Containment:** the alliance must work with ISIL's surrounding countries to seal its borders as much as possible. This has been done fairly efficiently on the Syrian-Jordanian border, but less so on ISIL's northern border to Turkey. NATO should maintain pressure on the fringes of IS territory by continuing to arm and train friendly local forces.

As continually emphasized by General John Allen, U.S. envoy to the anti-ISIL coalition, the fight against ISIL is a multifaceted struggle. The group will not truly be defeated until the idea of violent Salafism has been discredited, a task that falls primarily on the shoulders of countries surrounding the territory in question. NATO countries can help by focusing this effort and steering it away from regional rivalries. In the meantime, the alliance should focus on containing ISIL's offensive actions to ensure the safety of its members.

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