

Recently, the news from the Middle East has been dominated by ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), an extremely militant group of Sunni Muslim jihadists also known as ISIL (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), the term commonly used by President Obama and his administration. In February, 2014, Al Qaeda broke ties with ISIS, presumably over its barbarous tactics. In June, 2014, ISIS, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a former professor and imam in Baghdad, and former generals in Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army, declared itself a caliphate with religious authority over all Muslims worldwide and with the political goal of controlling the Levant, which includes not only Syria and Iraq but also Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Cyprus and part of southern Turkey.

ISIS, which now calls itself the Islamic State, has enjoyed amazing success in a short period of time. They now control large parts of Iraq, including the major city of Mosul, one of the most important educational and research centers in the country. News reports have described the Islamic State as a "self-sustaining financial juggernaut," that earns more than \$3 million a day from oil smuggling, human trafficking, theft, and extortion. They have succeeded in recruiting a good number of Westerners through their sophisticated use of social media. They appeal to militant Muslims by portraying themselves as the great hope to bring down the United States and to restore the glory days of Islam when the Ottoman caliphate was a world power. They have used barbarous beheading videos to show their disdain for the West and to promote their recruiting. When they have taken over areas, they have imposed a harsh version of Sharia law, forcing people to convert to Islam or be killed.

Responding to their success and brutality, President Obama has formed a loose coalition, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to contain and destroy ISIL. To this goal he has initiated an air campaign to curtail their advances, sent 3,000 American military advisors to help the Iraqi military retake conquered parts of their territory, and begun equipping Kurdish forces to assist in the battle against the radical jihadists.

To understand this complex struggle, it is important to keep in mind some of the dynamics that drive the Islamic world, including the Sunni-Shia divide that continues to influence Middle East politics. This split within the Islamic community, which was tragically ignored by the Bush administration, goes back to the death of Muhammad in 632 when some of his followers, later known as Sunnis, installed Abu Bakr as the successor to the Prophet over the objections of other followers, later known as Shiites, who insisted that the successor should be Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. A key event in this ongoing split occurred in 680 when Sunni Muslims killed Ali's son Hussein and his family in Karbala, located in modern day Iraq, creating animosity between the two sects that has resurfaced periodically: for example, the 2006 Sunni bombing of the sacred Shiite shrine in Karbala ignited widespread sectarian fighting throughout Iraq.

Today, ISIS appeals to Sunni Muslims who have been excluded from power by the Shiite dominated government in Baghdad. This suggests that a crucial factor in containing ISIS is for the Iraqi government to bring more Sunnis into power so the various Sunni tribes feel more included and are less susceptible to ISIS recruitment. Sharing power between the two sects, along with the Kurds, did not work under the Sunni leader Saddam Hussein nor under the Shiite president Nouri al-Maliki. Many Western scholars are doubtful that it will work now under the Kurdish president Fuad Masum.

The rhetoric of ISIS, for example, calling themselves a caliphate, is designed to tap the resentment felt in some parts of the Muslim world over their treatment by the West. Within about a century after the death of Muhammad, Muslims controlled a vast area from central Asia to Spain. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman caliphate was not only a world power but also a great center of culture. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europe overtook the Islamic world, surpassing Muslims in military power, wealth and technology. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British and French extended their influence into the Ottoman Empire, which became known as "the sick man of Europe," leading to its demise by the end of WW I. France and England then carved up the Ottoman territories into artificially constructed states, with no clear national identity or homogeneous Muslim population - - Iraq being a prime example. ISIS portrays itself as the powerful champion of the humiliated Muslim world capable of defeating the West and leading Islam back to international prominence.

To understand the dynamics of the Middle East, it is also important to recognize the ambivalent role of Saudi Arabia in the spread of militant Islam. Saudi culture is influenced by a puritanical reform movement, called "Salafism" by adherents who want to return to the purity of the original Muslim community, and "Wahhabism" by critics linking it to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who vehemently denounced Shiites as heretics and Jews and Christians as idolaters and, according to some commentators, called for their destruction by the sword, a charge vigorously denied by others. There is no doubt that Saudi society is restrictive: citizens must be Muslim; women cannot vote or drive cars; and foreign nationals working in the country cannot publicly practice their religion. According to a 2006 report by Freedom House, an independent American watchdog organization, the Saudi Wahhabi-influenced public education system, as well as Islamic religious schools known as "madrassas," propagate an ideology of hate toward non-Muslim religions, a position at odds with the authentic teaching of the Quran. Our State Department is convinced that Saudi donors are the largest source of income for Sunni terrorists around the world, such as al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. Osama bin Laden was a product of Saudi culture, as were most of the terrorists involved in the 9/11 attack on the United States. Now fearful that ISIS has become too radical and too powerful, Saudi Arabia has joined the coalition fighting them.

In 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini, exiled for 14 years in France, led a revolution that overthrew the shah of Iran and created a Shia theocracy that quickly went on the offensive against the United States, branded as the "Great Satan." Under the leadership of religious leaders, known as ayatollahs, including the Supreme Leader and a clerical Council of Guardians, Iran has brutally suppressed dissent within the country and supported militant Shiite groups around the Middle East, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Shiite government in Iraq, and the Assad regime in Syria, thereby extending its growing influence from Tehran through Baghdad and

Damascus to Beirut. If Iran produces nuclear weapons, the whole balance of power in the Middle East will change. For now, the Shiite theocracy, intent on extending its influence, has good reason to oppose ISIS and control its expansion.

This brief description of the dynamics at work in the Muslim world suggests to me two general principles to guide the U.S. response to ISIS: do as little as is necessary by way of military resistance to them; and do as much as possible to blunt their influence.

We should not overestimate the military power of ISIS with its estimated 30,000 troops and mostly captured weapons. They pose no direct military threat to the United States, nor are they close to a match for the Middle Eastern military powers Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran with their large standing armies and sophisticated weapons. The Islamic State is already contained, in large measure, by these countries that continue to vie for dominance in the region.

ISIS is a current threat to Iraq, but this is mostly a continuation of the sectarian battle between Sunni and Shia Iraqis now pitting former loyalists of Saddam Hussein against the Shiite dominated regime in Baghdad. During the Iraq war we spent trillions of dollars and lost over 4,000 soldiers to create a stable government that could keep the peace and defend itself, only to have it all fall apart under the attack of a rather small group of ISIS fighters.

There are important lessons to be learned from that good intentioned, but tragically flawed, intervention in Muslim sectarian politics: we cannot serve as the policemen for the whole world; we cannot impose our will on the Middle East; we cannot plant democracy in Islamic countries; we cannot stop jihadist terrorism by military force; and we surely cannot force Sunni and Shia Muslims to reconcile and cooperate. In developing a strategy to combat ISIS, we should not let their deliberately provocative barbarous actions move us to increasing levels of military involvement.

A moral argument can be made, however, for a limited military intervention for humanitarian purposes. For example, airstrikes to prevent ISIS from taking over a town where they would force conversions and slaughter infidels can be justified by a proportionality argument that the good accomplished outweighs the evil always associated with violence. Such intervention is governed by the general principle that the United States should do as little militarily as is necessary to contain ISIS.

On the other hand, the United States should do as much as possible to counter the sophisticated propaganda of ISIS. The Islamic State is a real threat to both the Muslim world and the West because of its ability to propagate a radical jihadist ideology that foments violence around the world and attracts followers who can be trained and sent back home to carry out terrorist activities.

The success of ISIS may provide a new opportunity to convince Muslim nations that supporting terrorism is not in their self-interest. The United States should pressure the Saudis, who have helped create a monster in ISIS, to reform their educational system so their students learn not to hate other religions but to respect them, thereby shrinking the recruiting pool for the Islamic State. We should make it clear to Turkey that we will not be further drawn into the Syrian civil war as a price for their support of the coalition. The Iraqi government should know that there are clear limits to our support, and that we will not defend them against ISIS unless they really share power with Sunnis. With Iran, the obvious priority is to reach an agreement that confines their nuclear ambitions to peaceful purposes.

Here in the United States, we need broad strategies that reduce the pool of alienated citizens, especially youth, who are likely targets of ISIS propaganda. Our young people need job opportunities to keep their hopes alive for a better future and fair treatment from society to keep faith in our system of democracy. Our public schools could do a better job teaching about religious traditions, including Islam. We would all benefit from more interfaith dialogue and collaboration in our universities and faith communities.

More specifically, we need to counter directly the jihadist appeal to violence. We should celebrate people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King who used non-violent methods to achieve great social transformations. We should give far more attention to the many statements by Muslim organizations which have condemned terrorism, including the Islamic Society of North American and The Council on American-Islamic Relations. Especially significant is the 2007 open letter entitled "A Common Word Between Us and You," written by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders, both Sunni and Shia, and sent to Christian leaders, including Pope Benedict and the Archbishop of Canterbury. This letter, which deserves much wider exposure, condemns random violence as opposed to authentic Islamic teaching, but also presents love of God and love of neighbor as a framework for dialogue and collaboration.

We need creative responses to the jihadist threat. Perhaps Homeland Security, for example, could hire the best film makers to produce social media friendly videos designed to counter ISIS propaganda.

We are in a long term struggle not just against ISIS as a military force but against an ideological movement that sees violence as the only way to address grievances, to overcome injustice and to achieve respect. We have to do everything possible to show that dialogue and peaceful collaboration are a more effective means to justice and peace.