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Fighting the Islamic State: What about the day after?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The US' military operations against Islamist jihadists in Iraq and possibly Syria risk repeating the West's failure to embed kinetic interventions in post-conflict reconstruction policies to address the core grievances of populations in the Middle East and North Africa.

Commentary

The beheading of a second American journalist and the likely execution of a British national have left US President Barak Obama and other Western leaders few options but to step up military operations against Islamist jihadists in Iraq and expand the battle into Syria.

The focus on confronting the militant jihadists however risks repeating the West's failure to couple military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya with policies that address post-conflict reconstruction of healthy, pluralistic societies. Similarly, the lack of support for more moderate rebels in Syria failed to take into account the consequences of allowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to squash his moderate opponents and enable the rise of groups that cast him in the role of a bulwark against terrorism.

Failure of war on terror

As a result, more than a decade after then US President George W. Bush declared war on terrorism in the wake of Al Qaeda's spectacular 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, militant jihadists have morphed into lethal military organisations capable of conquering and holding territories in countries as far flung as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Nigeria. The Islamic State, the militant Islamist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, is moreover financially self-sufficient, reaping up to an estimated \$1 billion a year in revenues from captured oil assets as well as extortion and kidnappings.

The rise of groups like the Islamic State or Boko Haram in Nigeria effectively signals the failure of the war on terror in eradicating Islamist violence or at least putting jihadists on the defensive. The exception may be Somalia where Al Qaeda affiliate Al Shabab has suffered loss of territory, but is still capable of launching deadly attacks in the capital Mogadishu or Al Qaeda itself which appears to have been more concerned in recent years with survival than with plotting an offensive global

strategy.

At the core of continued Islamist successes, is the failure of the United States to embed counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency strategies into a comprehensive policy that addresses core grievances on which the Islamists thrive: a changing geo-political environment in post-revolt Middle Eastern and North African countries in which autocratic and sectarian rule as well as colonial-era national borders are being questioned, and the propagation of a puritan, intolerant interpretation of Islam by one of its closest allies, Saudi Arabia.

The failure disregards a rare acknowledgement by Bush shortly after the 9/11 attacks that the United States had become a target because it had for decades emphasised stability in the Middle East and North Africa maintained by authoritarian rulers rather than the installation of regimes that catered to people's needs and aspirations. President Barack Obama's hope of minimising US military involvement in the Middle East with the ending of more than a decade of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with no real plan for the day after produced a return to the very policies that Bush identified as co-responsible for militant jihadist violence.

Putting military action at the core

The confrontation with the Islamic State inevitably will involve an increased US military commitment albeit in cooperation with America's Western allies and regional forces like Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi military forces. It is an involvement that puts military action rather than politics at its core despite US pressure that led to the replacement of sectarian Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki with an Iraqi leader who promises to reach out to the country's disaffected Sunni Muslim community.

Al-Maliki's rise as an authoritarian leader who monopolised the state's levers of power and alienated large segments of the Iraqi population in the process was in part the result of a US return to an emphasis on stability in a volatile part of the world rather than support for transition even if it is at times messy and produces problematic leaders.

So is the Obama administration's decision to drop pressure on Egypt despite the fact that the country has reverted to the repressive rule of a military commander-turned-president by an election that hardly could be deemed free and fair. As is the administration's treatment with velvet gloves of Saudi leaders who share a puritan Wahhabi interpretation of Islam with their jihadist detractors that subjects women to their male guardians, propagates intolerance towards those with alternative interpretations of religious texts, and encourage divisive, sectarian policies. Saudi da'wa, the proselytising of its religious precepts funded by the country's oil wealth, which kicked into high gear after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, has sparked intolerance in Muslim communities across the globe, such as in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Levelling the playing field

Decades of entrenched autocratic mismanagement and abusive rule in the Middle East and North Africa cannot be erased overnight. Similarly, they cannot be reversed by foreign intervention. Populations in the region will have to chart their own course in struggles that are likely to be volatile, messy and at times bloody. The US and others cannot do it for them. They can however help in levelling the playing field by living up to their democratic ideals and adhering to Bush's realisation that US policies in support of autocratic regimes help create the breeding ground for ever more effective and brutal groups such as the Islamic State.

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