

מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי



The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

The Persian Gulf Observer

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Europe and America are Fighting on Islam's Territory

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Europe and America are Fighting on Islam's Territory

By Dr. Glen Segell, Fellow – The Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa

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<http://www.rieas.gr/research-areas/editorial/2302-europe-and-america-are-fighting-on-islam-s-territory>

The Southern flank of Europe is the Mediterranean Sea. It is a small sea and many countries rely on the freedom of both sea and air traffic for their economy. On the one hand there was optimism that the Arab Spring would bring greater freedom for the individual in countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. There was further optimism that the North African countries of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt would become closer partners in all matters with the countries on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea such as Greece, Italy and France. This has not emerged because the waning of the dictatorial regimes in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt have also enabled radical and extremist Islamic groups to emerge and grow in strength. If only the phenomena were restricted to these countries then perhaps the fledgling radical movements could be contained. However they reflect a more wider global phenomena that endangers European and American security.

Sunni Islam

The global phenomena is the dream of Sunni Islam to establish a caliphate state. At the core there is already a state that exhibits all the necessary elements, yet has not been so declared. Saudi Arabia hosts Sunni Islam's holiest sites and practices daily life in accordance with the religious doctrines. Non-state actors have infiltrated and destabilized other states seeking to establish the same daily Islamic life in accordance with the religious doctrines.

To the west of Saudi Arabia, Sudan has had its Islamic revolution, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya remain in turmoil after the Arab Spring, in Somalia Al Shebab is slowly but surely achieving the same, and in a continuum to West Africa so is Boko Haram in Nigeria. To the north of Saudi Arabia, in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon a struggle is ongoing by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) and others to achieve the caliphate. If all these were to succeed then there would be a single Islamic Sunni caliphate state from Nigeria in West Africa, to the shores of Iran in the East and from Yemen to Turkey on a North-South Axis.

The Fight against the Islamic State

It is therefore not surprising that 62 countries have signed up to the American led coalition against ISIL. Every member of the European Union has expressed willingness to support the fight against ISIL in different ways. There is the common and single understanding that at threat is Europe's security. At the same time some European and American citizens have also joined the other side. In doing so there is a proxy war on Islam's territory. There is apprehension that there may be an increase in radicalism and terrorism on European and American territory as a consequence.

The questions at the fore of everyone's minds is: Who will win and why? Many people around the world have moved from Jesus to Mohammed and Mohammed to Para Braham and Para Braham to Jesus. Consequently is a war against radical Islam a just war? Inherent in such questioning is the fundamental ethos of European and American military strategy. Does an individual changing his belief or religion construct a dramatic change to the economy of Europe and America. Similarly does it matter if the President of the United States is white, black, male or female. Would it really make a difference if Europe were to become an Islamic Continent? And Is Europe and the United States expected to be Christian or maybe atheistic forever.

Can the war be won by military means?

No European or American leader is willing to broach this matter in a public debate. Rather military forces and diplomatic efforts have been committed to fighting ISIL, Al Qaeda, the Taliban and others. The war being waged is not on European and American soil but on Islam's territory in the name of European and American security. It has been declared a just war with just means but will it succeed?

The latest air strikes are against ISIL. For 13 years they have been against the Taliban. It is unlikely that ISIL will be destroyed by these strikes. Lessons should have been learned from the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. It is unlikely that the caliphate state evolution in Iraq will be blocked by air strikes. Indeed it is the dream of many Muslims worldwide "To unify all Islamic countries into a single Islamic state or Caliphate". The conclusion is a simple one: expect a quasi caliphate to emerge, develop and expand in the north and west of Iraq and the north and east of Syria.

The Future of Iraq

It is not just the rise of radical Islam that will determine this. When American forces withdrew from Iraq in 2010/2011 it was known that a majority Shiite government in Baghdad could not dictate to minority Sunni tribal leaders nor control traditional Sunni towns and cities. It was understood that at the time of American withdrawal, prisoners would be released that would include former Sunni leaders from Saddam's Ba'ath party and officers from Saddam's army. It was expected that some if not most of these would join up with Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Indeed the taste of power from Saddam's dictatorial days would one that would be hard to relinquish and not to retake once there was no American military in Iraq. This is exactly what transpired from 2011 onwards.

Hence and despite this knowledge there was little that could be done to thwart the rise of ISIL in Iraq. The reconstruction of the new Iraq Army trained by American forces was aimed at defending Iraq externally and not at internal security. The local police in the traditional Sunni areas of Iraq identified and even joined ISIL. At the same time Sunni tribal leaders and the former Ba'ath party officials gained social support sponsored by ISIL ideology and religious consent through local mosques. Simultaneously the political Shiite regime in Baghdad was weakened with the onset of the Arab Spring, growing Kurdish nationalism and Iranian intervention. It was no surprise that by the Spring of 2014 ISIL saw the opportunity to play its hand and move armed forces to take major cities such as Mosul, persecute minorities in Kurdish held areas and situate on the outskirts of Baghdad.

Air strikes will not remove these from positions of local authority nor diminish their local popular support. The towns and cities of northern and western Iraq are now in control of ISIL and Sunni tribal leaders and former Ba'ath party members. Even if every ISIL fighter were to be killed, the Shiite government in Baghdad will not have control of these, without conceding substantial political power to let them into the government of Iraq. This would entail letting radical Sunni ideologists into the Iraq government which would only further the territorial expansion of the caliphate. It is not foreseen that the majority Shiite population of Iraq would permit this. So Iraq has now been de facto divided into at least two states: southern and eastern Iraq for the Shiite and an ISIL caliphate for the Sunni in the north and the will tell if the Kurdish northern enclave can survive.

Conclusions for Europe and America

Since Europe and American leaders see European and American security at stake the foremost strategy should not be air strikes against targets on Islam's territory. If Europe and America wish to remain Christian or atheistic then the strategy and tactics should revolve around information and psychological operations. The goal should be to diminish popular support for radical Islam and its non-state actors.

History is a major help in providing examples of the evolution and transformation of regimes away from their radical and extremist stances to one of coexistence and participation in the international system. This is both post-Colonial and post-Cold War as well as Middle Eastern. Some examples are the Mau-Mau of Kenya, the end of South African Apartheid, the resolution in the Balkans and even Shiite Iran that has accommodated western styles amongst the general population. Perhaps radical Sunni Islam can also do so. No-one is suggesting that individuals should change their beliefs or religions. Rather that radical movements outside of the international system should become political movements within the state system and recognize and respect other religions and the sovereignty of nation states.