

ISIS: What The US Doesn't Understand

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By Ahmed Rashid

Over the last few days, as the United States has stepped up its bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria, it has been hard to escape another reality: the US is still looking for a coherent strategy against the Islamic State. Along with its relentless drive across the deserts of Syria and Iraq, and its continued massacre of civilians and members of endangered minorities, ISIS can now also claim its first victim in Washington with the [sacking](#) of Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. His departure—prompted in part by divisions with the White House over Syria policy—highlights the deep problems of an air offensive against ISIS that has alienated Arab states and other allies in NATO, even as it has failed to bring tangible results.

The crisis ISIS has created for the West and the Arab world cannot be effectively addressed until there is a broader understanding of what ISIS wants. The first thing we need to recognize is that ISIS is not waging a war against the West. In view of the staggering growth in the number of ISIS's international recruits—there are now estimated to be some 18,000 foreign fighters from 90 countries—the growing possibility that some who have joined the group may return home to carry out acts of terrorism must be taken seriously. There is also a risk that others who never went to Syria, like the shooter in the Canadian parliament in October, will be inspired by ISIS to carry out such attacks.

In contrast to al-Qaeda, however, ISIS has not made the US and its allies its main target. Where al-Qaeda directed its anger at the “distant enemy,” the United States, ISIS wants to destroy the near enemy, the Arab regimes, first. This is above all a war within Islam: a conflict of Sunni against Shia, but also a war by Sunni extremists against more moderate Muslims—between those who think the Muslim world should be dominated by a single strand of Wahhabism and its extremist offshoot Salafism and those who support a pluralistic vision of Muslim society. The leaders of ISIS seek to eliminate all Muslim and non-Muslim minorities from the Middle East—not only erasing the old borders and states imposed by Western powers, but changing the entire ethnic, tribal, and religious composition of the region.

The primary target are Shias, who are dominant in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, command a strong plurality in Lebanon, and form small minorities in almost every other Arab state. Shia-Sunni tensions have existed since the early days of Islam, but until ISIS, they had never reached the extent that one group is literally trying to exterminate the other. Among the group's many atrocities, in late October, Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that the group had executed some 600 Shias during its takeover of Mosul last summer. Even Al-Qaeda's anti-Shia pogroms in Afghanistan did not go this far.

The fate of other minorities in the region is equally imperiled. Already, the number of Christians in Iraq has dwindled from some one million in 2003 to about 250,000 today; half a million Aramaic-speaking Assyrians have fled, as have thousands of Armenians and Greeks. Syria is in an even worse state, with regular executions of minorities by the Islamic State now taking place amid a war that has already had disastrous consequences for the country's many minorities.

The ideology that has produced such a perverse interpretation of Islam is Wahhabism—a Sunni sectarian view of Islam that is the official creed of Saudi Arabia and some of the Arabian Gulf states. The eighteenth-century founder of Wahhabi teachings, Muhammed Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791), was neither a jihadist nor a promoter of violence and hatred. He was part of the anti-colonial revivalist movement within Islam at that time and his only abhorrence was Sufism, the mystical side of Islam.

However, as part of its campaign to gain control of the Arabian Peninsula, the Al Saud tribal confederacy adapted Wahhabism to allow for the practice of two extremist ideas. The first is Salafism, which aims at recreating what is believed to be the puritanical Islam of seventh-century Arabia, when the Prophet Mohammed was alive. The second is the practice of Takfir—declaring all Muslims who do not follow the path set by the Salafis to be unbelievers and therefore worthy of having their throats slit.

A corollary to these Salafist ideas is ISIS's determination to seize territory, carry out conquests, and reshape the Middle East as a single unitary state under a so-called Caliphate. Despite its hatred of Shias, ISIS has until recently largely avoided attacking Syrian government forces, a strategy that has allowed it to capture large amounts of territory already in rebel hands. Unlike Bin Laden and his followers, who worshipped martyrdom as a form of obedience to God, with rewards to be received in heaven, ISIS wants earthly power and possession of territory as well. As I have [noted](#), in this respect ISIS is like the Taliban in Afghanistan, seeking to establish an actual Islamic state that it can govern according to its extremist precepts.

But it is also worth noting what ISIS is not doing. While ISIS leaders have frequently condemned and threatened the US, they have held back from declaring it a major target. The beheadings of Westerners are best understood as acts of revenge against the US bombing campaign, as well as propaganda designed to terrify outsiders and demoralize those fighting against it.

Significantly, they have not condemned Israel at all, nor have they sided with the Palestinians during the recent war in Gaza or carried out any campaign to help the Palestinian cause. This omission may be tactical: ISIS's leaders may calculate they cannot afford to take on the well-equipped state of Israel for the moment but will do so in the future. Or it may be strategic: as ISIS consolidates a large territory in Iraq and Syria, its leadership may deem it more pragmatic to not make enemies of the world's Jews so that it can live alongside Israel without incurring the wrath of the Israeli air force.

Accepting that ISIS is primarily waging a war within Islam requires a different kind of strategy than the US is pursuing. Firstly, the Arab states who are most directly affected by ISIS's rise to power should be leading the coalition, not the Pentagon. American leadership of the coalition—which is already being perceived as support for the Assad regime—is a sure formula for inflaming anti-Americanism throughout the Muslim world. Arab rulers are under pressure from their own people for joining a US-led coalition, tension which is too easy for ISIS to exploit.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia are the two states best equipped to lead the coalition, but their nervous royal rulers are at odds with one another and hesitant to do so without greater US commitment. Turkey, another natural leader and member of NATO, has been at odds with the Americans over the Kurdish issue and the failure to remove Bashar al-Assad of Syria. The US is clearly vital for the success of the coalition and especially in coordinating its military activity against ISIS, but its main goal should be preparing the Arabs to assume leadership. This requires a huge diplomatic investment by the US, which has until now been absent. We have yet to see Arab generals planning and announcing battle plans and scenarios. Although they are working closely with US CENTCOM behind the scenes, it is the US that seems to be taking all the decisions.

Washington and its Arab allies are deeply divided about what to do in Syria and on the future of the Assad regime. The US doesn't want to remove him from power until ISIS is defeated, while the Arabs largely want him gone now. But future US policy on Syria will only be successful if it is made in concert with Arab governments. The US will have to tilt to Arab wishes if it wants the coalition to continue. In recent weeks, the US has been discussing a shared military strategy in Syria with Turkey, but it is not yet clear what will come of it.

Despite the increased bombing in Syria, the Obama administration approach seems aimed at defeating ISIS in Iraq while merely containing it in Syria. This is not feasible. ISIS is on the borders of Lebanon and Jordan, where pro-ISIS riots have taken place; and last month ISIS cells in Saudi Arabia claimed to have killed eight Shias. In other words, ISIS has already established itself as a pan-Arab movement trying to transform the whole region and efforts to treat it as an Iraqi phenomenon will fail.

Arab regimes need to come together far more than they have done if they are to convince their populations that the extremism carried out by ISIS in the name of Sunni Islam is destroying the traditional, tolerant Islam that most Arabs have always believed in. But only the US and NATO countries can make that happen through intense diplomatic activity across the region. Until it does, the US obsession with aerial bombardment will accomplish little.