

The Islamic State Stumbles

Last summer, there was widespread hysteria across Official Washington over the seemingly unstoppable expansion of the brutal Islamic State and handwringing over President Obama's limited military response but the jihadist momentum now shows signs of stalling, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The fortunes of the extreme and violent group known variously as ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State seem to have changed markedly during the past few months. This summer the group was commonly portrayed, amid much alarm, as a relentless juggernaut that was scooping up so much real estate that it was a threat to overrun Baghdad and much else far beyond.

But the progress that was so frightening to follow in maps in the newspaper has stopped. The juggernaut has stalled. There will be endless debate about the causes of this change of momentum, ranging from military measures that the United States has taken to the somewhat more enlightened policies of the Iraqi central government. These and other influences have their effects, but the larger phenomenon of the decline of ISIS, decline not just that has happened so far but is yet to come, can be explained most of all by the group's own policies and practices.

The abhorrent and inhumane methods of the group are a major part of that explanation. Just as we abhor such methods, it should be no surprise that most people in the Middle East abhor them, too. Methods such as the highly publicized killing of individual captives have, besides terrorizing ISIS's adversaries, increased the prominence of the group and probably impressed would-be foreign recruits by showing that ISIS is the meanest, baddest, and most consequential organization engaged in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

But living under the rule of such a vicious group can be at least as repulsive to the locals as watching it from afar is to us. Such a way of exercising power locally is ultimately not a good way to win support. We saw a similar reaction in an earlier phase of the Iraqi civil war.

It behooves us to learn what we can, as those charged with directly confronting ISIS evidently are trying to do, about the basis for whatever appeal the group does have, and especially about any appealing ideas it offers. The good news is that ISIS offers hardly anything in the way of such ideas. It cannot become an ideological lodestar the way Osama bin Laden and his al-Qa'ida did, because ISIS offers nothing as original as Bin Laden's idea of hitting the far enemy as a way of getting eventually at despised near enemies.

The appeal of ISIS to its recruits has been based not on ideology but on directly and brutally establishing facts on the ground. The appeal reduces to the principle that everybody loves a winner. But ISIS has stopped winning. It is like a shark that must keep moving forward to survive, but it is not still moving forward.

The establishment by ISIS of a de facto mini-state was widely seen as an accomplishment and a sign of strength, but it also is a vulnerability. If you run a state, you are expected to make the trains run on time, and you will lose popularity if you don't. ISIS is demonstrating that it lacks the ability to manage a state, and people in the areas it controls, including even Raqqa, Syria, the major city it has held the longest, are suffering from a collapse of public services. Trying to run, however unsuccessfully, the mini-state also represents for the ISIS leadership a drain on attention and resources that might otherwise be used for expansion.

The proclamation of a caliphate, although it has had some value for the group in impressing and attracting foreign recruits, lacks the sanction and recognition that in the eyes of the vast majority of Muslims such a move is supposed to have. Mainstream Muslim scholars and religious authorities have avoided anything that even hints at recognition.

Some fundamentalist Salifis have even likened ISIS and the moves it has made to extremist outcasts at the time of the Prophet. To the extent that the self-styled caliphate is seen more as a usurpation of Muslim aspirations than a fulfillment of them, the proclamation of a caliphate will turn out to be more of a liability than an asset.

When an adversary is hurting his own cause, generally the most effective thing to do is to stand aside and not get in the way. This is true of political debate, civil wars, and many other forms of conflict. The United States cannot get entirely out of the way of this one, insofar as it can do a few things that, tactically and on a piecemeal basis, limit the short-term harm that ISIS inflicts.

But taking a longer-term and more strategic view, which recognizes how ISIS is hurting its own cause, for the United States to do less rather than trying to do more (especially more that is visible and kinetic) is apt to be the wisest course. Injecting new focal points for controversy and collateral damage, on the basis of which ISIS can make new appeals, is apt to slow the process of the group greasing the ramp of its own decline. It also is apt to make the United States more of a direct target of whatever harm the group is still able to inflict.

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