

Falling into the ISIS Trap

Special Report: The Islamic State has entered into “phase two” of its plan. After establishing a rudimentary “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq (phase one), it is now seeking to provoke the West into a self-defeating overreaction, a trap that “tough” politicians are falling into, as historian William R. Polk describes.

By William R. Polk

The terrorist outrage in Paris has brought the reaction that “the ISIS strategist” assuming there is such a singular person expected and wanted, a massive, retaliatory bombing raid.

The strategist knows that such military action by the West has proven self-defeating in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere. These predictable reactions and overreactions not only did not stop the insurgents, but helped them recruit more supporters by hurting a lot of uncommitted bystanders. ISIS learned the lesson; our leaders apparently have not.

Anger and revenge are emotionally satisfying but not productive. The issue we face is not just how to retaliate against ISIS, which is easy, but how to achieve affordable world security. The first steps are to understand where these extremists come from, why some people support them and what they want. Only then can we cope with them.

But, as I read the press, listen to the statements of world leaders and watch the takeoff of fighter-bombers, I see little sign our leaders have found the road toward security. I do not find the satisfactory beginnings of a careful and sophisticated analysis in what is now being said or done. So, drawing on many years of observation, discussions and research, I here offer a few notes on terrorism and our counterinsurgency policies and will focus on ISIS (also known as ISIL, Daesh or the Islamic State).

I cast my comments in five areas: (1) our assets and those of our opponents; (2) their strategies and ours; (3) what drives their actions; (4) the results of our actions; and (5) our options. I begin with our advantages and weaknesses and theirs:

–**The United States, the major West European states and Russia** employ large intelligence services that are informed by a variety of surveillance devices (telephone tapping, radio intercepts, code breaking, aerial and satellite imagery and other, even more esoteric, means of tracking, observing and identifying people).

In addition, our security services continue to employ traditional covert activities and have virtually unlimited funds to buy information, encourage defection and “rent” temporary loyalty. Plus, the bulk of the community from which the attacks are mounted wish the attacks would stop. Thus, our most important asset is the desire among the vast majority of people in all societies who simply do not want their lives deranged. They want to live in peace.

Picking Sides

–Resident populations in rebel-held areas are probably neutral. But they are caught between two dangers: ISIS and us. What we do and what we do not do will sway them in one direction or the other. The “ISIS strategist” understands this and seeks to get us to harm or frighten the bystanders. When and where they can, many will run away from the near danger (as hundreds of thousands have).

But, in today’s counterinsurgency weapon of choice aerial bombing there is little difference between “near” and “far.” Targeted killings may kill leaders (and people in close proximity), but aerial bombings are more massive and less discriminating. The “ISIS strategist” knows that the heavier our attacks the more they will rally support to the ISIS banner.

–ISIS’s major asset is the asymmetrical nature of the targets that the two sides expose to one another: modern industrial states like ours are highly articulated and are, necessarily, complex whereas ISIS’s organization is loose, inexpensive and scattered. We saw this contrast clearly, even before the rise of ISIS, in the Sept. 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attack on America. The attack cost the lives of only a couple of dozen terrorists and probably less than \$100,000 but killed several thousand victims and cost the American economy perhaps \$100 billion (a cost compounded by the long-running follow-on wars in Afghanistan and Iraq).

In addition, there were the psychological, legal and political costs. Al-Qaeda had little to lose in terms of law and morality, but it pushed the United States into activities that weakened its traditional values and created distrust among its citizens. For al-Qaeda, it was a very cheap victory.

–ISIS’s vulnerability is that the vast majority of Muslims want, as people everywhere have always wanted, to go about “mundane affairs,” gathering and consuming, working and playing, competing and procreating. They are not fanatics and do not want to be martyrs or heroes.

Indeed, the “ISIS strategist” takes a dim view of these common people. In the document that forecast ISIS strategy *Idarah at-Tawhish*: *(The Management of Savagery)* the strategist or strategists wrote:

“Notice that we say that the masses are the difficult factor. We know that they

not generally dependable on account of [how the foreign imperialists and native turncoats have shaped them and we realize that there will be] no improvement for the general public until there is victory. [Consequently, our strategy] is to gain their sympathy, or at the very least neutralize them.”

How does the “ISIS strategist” propose to do that? His answer is a socio-political program aimed at “uniting the hearts of the people” by means of money, food and medical services and by providing a functioning system of justice to replace the corrupt system of its domestic rivals. That program has had some success but is vitiated or potentially undermined by ISIS violence and the terror it projects.

(Sayyid Qutb, an Islamic theorist who was executed in Egypt in 1966, may be taken as the philosopher behind Muslim Fundamentalism, and Abu Bakr Naji, perhaps a *nom de guerre* or even a committee, may be – or may have been – what I call “the strategist.” For more details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Understanding Islamic Fundamentalism.”](#))

Ill-Advised Wars

–The American-European and Russian strategies against guerrillas and terrorists have both relied primarily on military action. This was obvious in our campaigns in Afghanistan. The Russians are now at least in part repeating in Syria the strategy they employed in Afghanistan just as we repeated much of our Vietnam war strategy in our engagement in Afghanistan. The U.S., our allies and Russia are now apparently embarked on the same general strategy in Syria and Iraq.

The supposedly more sophisticated strategies (such as encouraging training, anti-corruption campaigns, “security” programs, jobs creation, various forms of bribery and other economic activities) are given relatively minor attention. Least attended is the political dimension of insurgency.

Yet, at least by my calculation, the reality of insurgency is the reverse of how we are spending our money and devoting our efforts. I have calculated that in insurgency politics accounts for perhaps 80 percent of the challenge; administration is about 15 percent; and the military-paramilitary component is only about 5 percent. A look at the program numbers shows that our allocations of money, political savvy, administrative know-how and military power are in reverse order.

–Three reasons explain why these allocations which, although proven ineffective, are still employed: the first is failure to understand the political dimension of insurgency as I believe most of the counterinsurgency “experts” fail to do; the second is that “standing tall,” beating the drum and calling for military

action win plaudits for political leaders; and the third is that arms manufacturers and the workers who make the weapons want to make money.

On that last point, President Dwight Eisenhower was right: the military-industrial complex (to which we have added the lobby-corrupted Congress) is “the tail that wags the dog” of American politics.

We don't have to guess what the strategy of ISIS is. Their leaders have told us what it is. *The Management of Savagery* (using the Arabic word *tawhish*, which evokes a sense of dread and is applied to a desolate area, the haunt of wild beasts, where there is no humanity or softness but only savagery, terror or cruelty) specified the long-term campaign to destroy the power of those societies and states that ISIS calls “the Crusaders,” i.e., the Western powers, which ISIS identifies as imperialists, and to cleanse Islamic society of the turncoats who support them.

The Three Stages

–The ISIS campaign falls into three stages:

The first stage is “vexation” of the enemy aimed at creating chaos in which the forces of the foreign powers and their local proxies are distracted and exhausted while Muslim terrorists and guerrillas learn how to use their power effectively.

The second stage is the “spread of savagery,” which begins locally with small-scale attacks and metastasizes. Individuals and local groups take up the cause and act either on their own or with limited coordination. Those who carry out ISIS programs will do so because they have adopted its ideas not because they are directed by any central authority.

As their campaigns spread, ISIS's enemies, and particularly the United States, will seek to retaliate but will be frustrated. “America will not find a state on which it can take its revenge, because the remaining [states] are its clients,” according to the plan. “It has no choice but to [occupy] the region and set up military bases. [This will put it at] war with the population in the region. It is obvious at this very moment that it stirs up movements that increase the *jihadi* expansion and create legions among the youth who contemplate and plan for resistance.”

“So,” the “ISIS strategist” writes, the correct tactic is to “diversify and widen the vexation strikes in every place in the Islamic world, and even outside of it if possible, so as to disperse the efforts of the alliance of the enemy and thus drain it [of energy, will and money] to the greatest extent possible.

“For example: If a tourist resort that the Crusaders patronize in Indonesia is hit, all of the tourist resorts in all of the states of the world will have to be secured by the work of additional forces, which [will cause] a huge increase in spending.”

As though implementing this plan, ISIS claimed that its supporters downed a Russian airliner in recent days in the Sinai Peninsula as it returned from the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Shaikh.

The plan continues: “If a usurious bank belonging to the Crusaders is struck in Turkey, all of the banks belonging to the Crusaders will have to be secured in all of the countries and the draining [that is, the costs of security] will increase.

“If an oil interest is hit near the port of Aden, there will have to be intensive security measures put in place for all of the oil companies, and their tankers, and the oil pipelines in order to protect them and draining will increase. If two of the apostate authors are killed in a simultaneous operation in two different countries, they will have to secure thousands of writers in other Islamic countries.

“In this way, there is a diversification and widening of the circle of targets and vexation strikes which are accomplished by small, separate groups. Moreover, repeatedly (striking) the same kind of target two or three times will make it clear to them that this kind (of target) will continue to be vulnerable.”

The attack on Paris was not, as *The New York Times* announced on Nov. 16, a change of ISIS tactics; it was an event that fit exactly into the second stage of the long-range strategy.

‘Fighting Society’

The third stage is the “administration of savagery” to establish “a fighting society.” To minimize the air power of its enemies, ISIS has turned itself into an almost nomadic state, virtually without frontiers. But within the areas it controls, it has set out a socio-political program that aims at “uniting the hearts of the people by means of money, food and medical services and by providing a functioning system of justice under *Sharia* [Islamic] governance. From this base it will become possible to create a rudimentary state.”

The “ISIS strategist” draws a lesson from the defeat of the Russians in Afghanistan. Since the Afghans could not defeat the Russians in formal battles, they aimed to provoke the Russians so that their forces over-extended themselves and they were caught in a wasting, unwinnable conflict. This conflict bankrupted the Soviet economy while the harsh tactics the Russian army employed cost the

Soviet Union the support both of their own people and the Afghans. America and Europe, the "ISIS strategist" believes, can be lured into a similar trap.

In this struggle, the "ISIS strategist" believes, violence is the key. It weakens the enemy while it performs as the school almost the social "hospital" needed to transform corrupt societies into tomorrow's Islamic "true believers." In this policy, ISIS may have been inspired by Frantz Fanon, the Afro-French-Caribbean psychiatrist, whose book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, reached a vast audience in the Third World.

As Fanon wrote, violence is a "cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect."

The "ISIS strategist" thought of violence both in those terms and in the impact of violence on its opponents, writing: *Jihad* "is naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening (others), and massacring."

It also must be conducted ruthlessly: "*Jihad* cannot be carried out with softness. Softness is one of the ingredients of failure for any *jihadi* action. Regardless of whether we use harshness or softness, our enemies will not be merciful to us if they seize us. Thus, it behooves us to make them think one thousand times before attacking us.

"Consequently, there is nothing preventing us from spilling their blood; rather, we see that this is one of the most important obligations since they do not repent, undertake prayer, and give alms [as required in Islam]. All religion belongs to God."

Making the enemy "pay the price" can occur anywhere: "if the apostate Egyptian regime undertakes an action to kill or capture a group of *mujahids* [combatants] *mujahids* in Algeria or Morocco can direct a strike against the Egyptian embassy and issue a statement of justification, or they can kidnap Egyptian diplomats as hostages until the group of *mujahids* is freed.

"The policy of violence must also be followed such that if the demands are not met, the hostages should be liquidated in a terrifying manner, which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters."

As we know, liquidating captives in a terrifying manner is an ISIS specialty. But, as we look over guerrilla wars, we see it to have been generally practiced.

Guerrilla Playbook

—The **ISIS politico-military doctrine** that the "strategist" lays out can be

described as a religious version of what Mao Zedong and Ho Chi-minh proclaimed as their kind of war: a combination of terrorism when that is the only means of operation, guerrilla warfare when that becomes possible as areas of operation are secured, and ultimately – when the conflict “matures” – the creation of a warlike but minimal state. This sequence often has played out in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries all over the world as I have reported in my book *Violent Politics*. It is ugly, brutal and costly, but it has nearly always eventually succeeded. ISIS has adopted it.

As ISIS leaders tells us, they regard their struggle “not as an economic, political, or social battle” with state-like opponents for territory but “a battle for minds,” underwritten by a determined proclamation of Islam. Nothing quite like it has been on the world stage since the great wars of religion in Europe some 400 years ago.

Why would Western nations today plunge into the kind of battle? If we cannot answer that question and ultimately cope with the answer we have many painful years ahead of us.

–**The ISIS guidebook**, *Management of Savagery*, begins with an interpretation of the world Muslims inherited from imperialism and colonialism. Not only Muslims but most of the peoples of the Third World suffered grievously. And their descendants harbor painful memories of “the ghastly destruction of souls.” According to ISIS, the great powers and their native proxies “killed more people than have been killed in all of the wars of the *jihadis* in this century.”

Is this just hyperbole, designed to inflame hatred of us? Unfortunately, it is not. Whether we remember these events or not, the descendants of the victims do.

Memories of the years beginning after Columbus led the way across the Atlantic become increasingly bitter. As first the Europeans, then the Russians and later the Americans – the world’s “North” – gained in relative power, they thrust into the “South,” destroying native states, upending societies and suppressing religious orders. Imperialism, with the resulting humiliation and wholesale massacres of populations, although largely forgotten by the perpetrators, remains today vivid to the victims.

The numbers are staggering: in one relatively small part of Africa, the Congo, where one in ten is a Muslim, the Belgians are estimated to have killed about twice as many natives as the Nazis killed Jews and Roma – some 10 million to 15 million people.

Hardly any society in what I call “the South” lacks memories of similar events inflicted by “the North.” Look at just the more recent military record:

In Java, the Dutch imposed a colonial regime on the natives and, when they tried to reassert their independence, killed about 300,000 "rebels" between 1835 and 1840; they similarly suppressed Sumatra "rebels" between 1873 and 1914.

In Algeria, after a bitter 15-year-long war that began in 1830, the French stole the lands of the natives, razed hundreds of villages, massacred untold numbers of natives and imposed an apartheid regime on the survivors.

In Central Asia, the Russians and Chinese impoverished or drove away previously thriving populations. While in a bitter war in the Caucasus, as Tolstoy recounts, the Russians virtually wiped out whole societies.

In India, after the attempted revolt of 1857, the British destroyed the Mughal Empire and killed hundreds of thousands of Indians. In Libya, the Italians killed about two-thirds of the population of Cyrenaica.

Old Grievances and New

One may reasonably say that these things are long in the past and should be forgotten. Perhaps, but there are other slaughter, just in the last few decades, that cannot be so excused. In the American campaign in Vietnam (a non-Muslim society), napalm, cluster bombs and machineguns were followed by defoliation, cancer-causing chemicals and assassination programs that, in total, killed perhaps 2 million civilians.

In Afghanistan, the numbers are smaller because the population was smaller but, in addition to about half a million deaths, a whole generation of Afghan children have been "stunted" and will never grow to their normal size or, perhaps, mental abilities. Afghan casualties in the Russian war are unknown but could not be less than half a million. In Iraq, as a result of the U.S. invasion in 2003, estimates run up to about a million Iraqi deaths.

Death is only one result of war; the survivors face continuing terror, starvation, humiliation and misery. As the structure of societies is severely damaged or destroyed, civic life has often been replaced by gang warfare, torture, kidnapping, rape and desperate fear.

Studying these events, I am reminded of Thomas Hobbes's description of mankind before civilization, "poore, nasty, brutish and short."

Collectively these and other results of imperialism, colonialism and military intrusions into "the South" of the world constitute a holocaust as formative to current Muslim action as the German holocaust has been to Jewish action.

The scars still have not healed in many societies. We see the legacy in the

fragility or complete destruction of civic organizations, the corruption of governments and the ugliness of violence.

As the "ISIS strategist" writes, and as I have heard from many informants in Africa and Asia, we of the "North" practice racial and religious double standards. When "they" kill a European, we rightly react with horror. Any killing is abominable. But when "we" kill an African or Asian, or even large numbers of Africans or Asians are killed by ISIS or another terror group, we hardly notice.

On Nov. 13, the day before the attack on Paris, a similar attack was carried out in Beirut, Lebanon, in which 41 people were killed and about 200 were injured. Almost no one in Europe or America even noticed. This is not merely a moral issue although it is certainly also that but cuts to the quick of the issue of terrorism.

Memories of events such as these go far to explain why young men and women, even those from relatively affluent and secure societies are joining ISIS. To "airbrush" the record, as an English journalist with wide experience in Asia has recently written, is to fail to understand what we are up against and what we might be able to do to gain affordable world security.

Successful Insurgencies

—**The results of insurgency** are described in my book *Violent Politics*. There I have shown that in a variety of societies over the last two centuries in various parts of Africa, Asia and Europe, guerrillas have nearly always accomplished their objectives despite even the most draconian counterinsurgency tactics.

Consider just one example, Afghanistan: the Russians and then the United States deployed hundreds of thousands of soldiers, large numbers of mercenaries and native troops and used unprecedented amounts of lethal force over nearly half a century of warfare.

While the outcome is not yet definite, it is obvious that, at minimum, the guerrillas have not been defeated. Afghanistan has been called "the graveyard of imperialism." Its role in destroying the Soviet Union has been well-documented. It is not through with us yet.

Consider also results in those parts of the world where hostilities have been relatively subdued. When I was a young man, in the 1940s and 1950s, I could go into villages practically anywhere in Africa or Asia and be received cordially, fed and protected. Today, in virtually all of those places, I would be in danger of being shot.

So what are our options in this increasingly dangerous world? Let us be honest and admit that none is attractive. Public anger and fear will certainly make some of them difficult or impossible to effect. But I will here put them all "on the table" and evaluate them in terms of cost and potential effectiveness.

The first response, which was announced by both Presidents François Hollande and Barack Obama in the first hours after the Paris attacks is to engage in all-out war. The French Air Force immediately bombed areas where ISIS is believed to have training camps.

The next step, presumably, although neither leader was specific, will probably include the sending of ground troops to fight in Syria and Iraq in addition to the bombing campaigns now being mounted by both countries and Russia. This is an extension and intensification of current policy rather than a new venture, and, to judge by the Russian experience in Afghanistan and ours in Afghanistan and Iraq, the chances for destroying ISIS are small. Those chances will be lessened if we also attempt to "regime change" in Syria.

A second option, which I assume is being broached in Washington as I write, is for Israel to volunteer to invade Syria and Iraq as well as using its air force to supplement or replace the other air forces operating there. This option would be militarily painful for ISIS but would fit exactly into its long-range strategy.

Moreover, it would play havoc with the emerging anti-ISIS bloc of Iran, Russia and Syria. If Israel advances this idea, as I think likely, it will probably be rejected while Israel will be "compensated" with a large new grant.

A third option is for the United States to reverse its anti-Assad policy and join with his regime and with Russia and Iran in a coordinated campaign against ISIS. While this policy would be more rational than either of the first two options, and might be initially more successful, I do not believe that alone it will accomplish its objective.

Drone and special forces strikes are already being employed and will almost certainly be continued as an adjunct to whatever is adopted as the main thrust, but they have not proven decisive where tried elsewhere. Indeed, at least in Afghanistan, they have proven to be self-defeating.

As the "ISIS strategist" predicted, such attacks will increase local hostility to the foreigner while, if the ISIS combatants are wise, they will simply melt away to return another day. Worse, by "decapitating" scattered guerrilla units, they will open the way for younger, more aggressive and ambitious leaders to emerge.

Domestic Repression

Coordinated with any of the above three options, I think it is almost certain that the United States and the European powers will tighten their domestic security programs. Controls on movement, expulsion (particularly in France) of alien or quasi-alien populations, mounting of raids on poorer urban areas, increased monitoring and other activities will increase.

These tactics are what ISIS hoped would happen. Outlays for "security" will rise and populations will be "vexed." But these policies are unlikely to provide complete security. When terrorists are prepared, as those in the Paris attack were, to blow themselves up or be killed, attacks can be expected regardless how tight security measures are.

So what about non-military and non-police measures? What are the options that could be considered? Two combinations of economics and psychology come to mind:

The first is amelioration of the conditions in which the North African Muslim community now lives in France. The slums circling Paris are a breeding ground for supporters of ISIS. Improvement of living conditions might make a significant difference, but experience in America and also in France suggests that "urban renewal" is far from a panacea.

Even if it were, it would be hard for any French administration to undertake. It would be expensive when the French government believes itself to be already overburdened, and French anti-Muslim feeling was strong long before the Paris attacks. Now, the public mode is swinging away from social welfare toward repression.

As in other European nations, the combination of fear of terrorism and the influx of refugees will make implementation of what will be described as a pro-Muslim program unlikely.

Perhaps even more unlikely is one that I think ISIS would most fear. The "ISIS strategist" has told us that the major resource of the movement is the community, but he recognized that, despite horrific memories of imperialism, the public has remained relatively passive.

This attitude could change dramatically as a consequence of invasion and intensification of aerial bombing. ISIS believes it will, turning increased numbers of now "neutral" civilians into active supporters of the *jihadis* or into *jihadis* themselves.

Obviously, it would be to the advantage of other countries to prevent this happening.

Some prevention of ISIS violence can be accomplished, perhaps, with increased security measures, but I suggest that a multinational, welfare-oriented and psychologically satisfying program could be designed that would make the hatred that ISIS relies upon less virulent.

Inadvertently, ISIS has identified the elements for us: meeting communal needs, compensation for previous transgressions, and calls for a new beginning. Such a program need not be massive and could be limited, for example, just to children by establishing public health measures, vitamins and food supplements.

Organizations (such as Médecins Sans Frontières, the Rostropovich Foundation, the Red Cross and Red Crescent) already exist to carry it out and indeed much is already being done. The adjustment is mainly in psychology the unwillingness for nations to admit wrongdoing as we have seen in the German “apology” for the Holocaust and the failure of the Japanese to apologize for the Rape of Nanking. It would cost little and do much, but, in these times, it is almost certainly a non-starter.

So, sadly, I fear that we are beginning to move toward a decade or more of fear, anger, misery and loss of basic freedoms.

[For more on these topics by William R. Polk, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Why Many Muslims Hate the West.”](#) and [“Muslim Memories of West’s Imperialism.”](#)]

William R. Polk is a veteran foreign policy consultant, author and professor who taught Middle Eastern studies at Harvard. President John F. Kennedy appointed Polk to the State Department’s Policy Planning Council where he served during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His books include: *Violent Politics: Insurgency and Terrorism; Understanding Iraq; Understanding Iran; Personal History: Living in Interesting Times; Distant Thunder: Reflections on the Dangers of Our Times; and Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change.*
