



PERSPECTIVES

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Islamic State Should be Wiped Out

by Prof. Steven David

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Prof. Efraim Inbar is wrong to argue that the West is better off with Islamic State organization maintaining its caliphate. On the contrary: Defeating IS and the horror it perpetuates requires nothing less than the elimination of its caliphate. Through control of territory, IS is able to inspire and train recruits, to direct terrorist attacks, and to demonstrate the West's inability to eradicate a pressing threat.

Prof. Efraim Inbar recently [argued](#) (August 2, "Destruction of Islamic State is a Strategic Mistake," BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 353) that although the West should attempt to weaken Islamic State (IS), it should refrain from seeking its destruction.

According to Inbar, IS does not pose much of a threat to the West. Its armed forces are too feeble to defeat determined opposition. Terrorist attacks done in its name are carried out by "lone wolves" with little or no connection to the group. Moreover, IS does the West a service by attracting would-be terrorists, making it easier for intelligence services to identify those who are not killed in battle.

An IS without territory, Inbar claims, would focus its efforts on promoting terrorism throughout the world, indirectly strengthening the hand of Assad and his Iranian benefactors. In Inbar's view, the brutality of IS should not obscure that its presence allows "bad guys to kill bad guys," ultimately serving Western interests. Therefore, the best policy is to contain IS, but keep its caliphate alive.

Inbar deserves credit for his provocative and original analysis. But he is wrong. The existence of IS hurts the West in many ways, making its elimination an urgent priority.

The principal threat to the West from IS stems from its support of international terrorism, and this threat is made much worse by the existence of its caliphate. Many terrorists thought to be “lone wolves,” it was later determined, had close ties to IS. Rather than acting on their own or simply being inspired by IS, they were trained, equipped, or directed by operatives of IS acting from its capital of Raqqa.

It stands to reason that directing a terrorist network is easier when territory is held than when activities must be conducted in the shadows of hostile states. It is far easier to train recruits, prepare false documents, and plan attacks in one’s own country, free from the fear of police surveillance.

It is noteworthy that much of the planning and training for the 9/11 attacks was carried out in the welcoming land of Afghanistan. In response, the US toppled the Taliban government and installed an occupying force to ensure that its territory would never again be used to plot against American soil. The same logic should be applied to the caliphate of IS, which regularly plans and directs terrorist attacks against the West and much of the rest of the world.

The caliphate also hurts Western interests by serving as an inspiration for terrorist acts. Inbar assumes that IS attracts individuals already bent on terrorism, but ignores that IS’s very existence inspires terrorists.

Why has IS eclipsed Al-Qaeda as the principal threat to the West and worldwide stability? In large measure, it is because of the restoration of the caliphate. Al Qaeda reserved the prospect of such restoration for some distant, unknown future. IS appeals to those who are energized by the notion that the caliphate has now been established. So long as the caliphate endures, so too will the appeal of IS.

IS is also more attractive than Al Qaeda because of its slick media campaigns. The videos it posts of its military actions and horrific acts have attracted volunteers from throughout the world. IS’s use of social networking media would not be nearly as effective if it did not have the freedom of its own territory in which to film whatever it chooses.

Most important, the persistence of IS is unacceptable because it demonstrates the impotence of the West. In the heart of the Middle East, IS thumbs its nose at the world, killing hundreds of innocents while destabilizing a critical

region. What does this say about the West's ability to protect its own? With each terrorist outrage and triumphant claim of responsibility from IS, the West's credibility shrinks.

If a collection of the world's most powerful states cannot eliminate an ongoing threat to its interests perpetuated by maybe 30,000 fanatics armed with little more than pick-up trucks, the ability of the West to ensure the security of its own countries – to say nothing of creating a liberal world order – is called into question.

The collapse of IS will not, as Inbar suggests, create a terrorist diaspora. Rather, it will demonstrate the bankruptcy of IS's ideas, much as the end of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union did much to undermine their respective ideologies. Nor will the end of IS result in the victory of Assad and his Iranian backers. Assad (and Iran) have many other foes throughout the Middle East, all of whom are far more palatable than the brutes of IS. It is far better to align with them than to make common cause with IS, even indirectly.

There are valid disagreements about how best to eliminate IS. It is not easy to determine, for example, whether it would be better to rely on indigenous actors or Western intervention. If the West does intervene, the scale and nature of that intervention is and should be the subject of debate.

What is clear, however, is that the West and the broader international community would be much better off if IS, and the horrific activities it spawns, were wiped off the face of the earth.

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