

ISIL as a Mass Movement

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The Islamic State has inspired immense fear among Americans and our allies. My main purpose today is to discuss the nature of the threat it poses, and to differentiate reasonable from unreasonable fear.

As a journalist, I have access to no information other than what is publicly available and what I can discover in my own investigation and conversations. Over the past two years, these conversations have included a small number of individuals broadly supportive of the Islamic State. None is currently in Islamic State territory, and their excuses for not having traveled there to fight range from the plausible (revoked passports, physical debility) to the unconvincing or lazy (“God has not given me the time”). They all know people who have immigrated, and in most cases, they agree openly with the Islamic State’s theology and politics. They recognize Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as the political successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and they adhere to a harsh, intolerant form of Islam practiced by a small minority of Muslims worldwide. My opinions derive also from close reading of the group’s official propaganda; its leaders’ statements; the open-source chatter of those who support ISIL; and conversations with others who watch the group closely, including Muslim and non-Muslim opponents and analysts.

I will begin with the reasonable fear. Supporters of ISIL have given me little reason to believe that their most brutal and intolerant statements are mere bravado or exaggeration for effect. It is true that they have welcomed my questions and treated me gently in person. In most cases, they seem to appreciate the comforts of the developed, peaceful countries where they live. But their conviction is real. When they talk about putting the Shia to the sword, or reinstating slavery and other practices inconsistent with modern notions of human rights, they do so without apology, and at times with evident gusto. Their opinions are thoroughly premeditated, and they are based in an

interpretation of scripture and Islamic history, as well as practical considerations. It would be folly to discount their sincerity or to interpret their beliefs as idle, ill-considered, or foolish. The fanaticism is real, and it does not reduce to other factors.

Second, the support for ISIL is broad as well as deep. The demographics of supporters skew toward the young and male, as in all wars. But the diversity of national origin, age, education, and class is staggering -- and it is not reflected in the cartoon version of the ISIL recruit that one gets from some journalistic accounts. That media composite has, in recent weeks, focused on the Belgian and French criminal-underworld gangsters who appear to have perpetrated the attacks in Brussels and Paris. I have little doubt that these types are well-represented. But also present in the fraternity of ISIL fighters are doctors, engineers, and a panoply of autodidacts in whose writing and speech any educated person can recognize kindred spirits. The group includes men well past peak battlefield age, as well as women of all ages in non-military roles.

Third, the numbers are large -- far greater than any Al Qaida's during its heyday. These numbers deserve a moment's contemplation. Whereas the forces under the command of Osama Bin Laden for the "core Al Qaida" attacks on Western targets likely numbered in the hundreds at their peak, *tens of thousands* of ISIL fighters have already immigrated to Syria and Iraq. The counterterrorism strategies that have kept the United States safe from Al Qaida have treated the group as a conspiracy. But ISIL is a *mass movement*, and it will be impossible to shut down plots against America or its allies entirely, using the same tools. Attacks will occur, and they will terrify Americans. What will increasingly define bravery and integrity among politicians will be their ability to manage the expectations of their constituents rather than to exploit their fears, and to react to these attacks with empathy and rationality simultaneously.

I come, then, to the topic of *unreasonable* fear. First, we should note the mismatch between the soaring ideological claims of ISIL and its practical capability. Its mode of expansion in Syria and Iraq, through fast movement of light-armored vehicles in familiar terrain, does not readily transfer into most other places, and would certainly fail in Turkey or heavily Kurdish or Shiite areas of Iraq. It requires desperate, beleaguered local populations, with some base willingness to contemplate a harsh revivalist Islamism as an alternative to the status quo. The ideology of ISIL echoes Nazism in its genocidal ambitions and tone, but it is not matched by an equally powerful war machine. The ISIL military is not one of the world's most formidable, and we should not mistake the grandeur of its language for vast operational capacity.

Second, the Islamic State still prioritizes building a caliphate and protecting its diminishing core territories -- not in attacking Western targets in spectacular ways, *a la* September 11. I make myself hostage to fortune by advancing this claim. But it remains correct, Brussels and Paris notwithstanding.

- ISIL's propaganda has not deviated from its early message: that the primary obligation of supporters overseas is to immigrate, and only if they fail to do so should they undertake solo terrorist efforts of their own. The propaganda does not leave doubt; it is difficult to consume much of it without reaching the conclusion that attacks on America are not the primary job of American ISIL supporters still at home. They should buy a plane ticket instead.

- Spectacular attacks on the West are instead the job of dedicated cells, directed from Syria and staffed at least in part by fighters who have returned to their home countries for that purpose. These cells are a conspiracy within the mass movement, a little touch of Al Qaida within the Islamic State. Journalists who have reported on the size of this conspiracy have estimated its European members in the dozens, some of whom are already captured or dead. These estimates are conservative, and I would not be surprised at total mobilized figures in triple digits.
- ISIL brags relentlessly in its propaganda about its control of territory. Its foreign attacks are calculated for maximum effect with minimum blowback. I suspect that central planning and control allows ISIL to titrate the strength of these attacks to avoid a response that would involve loss of core territory. The attacks are nevertheless spectacular enough to allow ISIL to dominate news cycles and remain first among global jihadi equals. A spectacular mass attack on the US would, I suspect, overshoot the mark.

None of the above points implies that ISIL will not attack the US and Europe; on the contrary, I assume they will. And the group's changing fortunes could easily alter its calculations and compel it to invest heavily in foreign operations, at the expense of local ones. However, when they do so, they will not mobilize their differentiating strength, which is their enormous numbers. Instead, they will be revisiting an Al Qaida strategy that we have begun to learn to counter.

Finally, although the conversion into a mass movement makes ISIL less fragile and harder to counter, it carries important dangers for ISIL as well. Mass movements resist central control, and they are vulnerable to changes of style, culture, and generational preference. ISIL has thrust itself into the consciousness of many, many Muslims, and has thereby suggested itself as an outlet for existential, political, and religious desires. It has no way of ensuring that next year's seekers will direct their energies toward the same ends. A sophisticated policy response to ISIL's rise will take into account not only military and political dimensions, but also countercultural, religious, and existential ones. Unfortunately, since government is typically at its most hapless when trying to deal with these types of issues, much work remains to be done -- much of it not by government but by civil society.