



America Is Acting Locally, the Islamic State Is Thinking Globally

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(FP) The Islamic State has marked the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan with a global wave of terror. Its attacks in Istanbul; Baghdad; Dhaka, Bangladesh; and at multiple sites across Saudi Arabia have claimed hundreds of lives. These attacks follow a landmark mass-casualty shooting in Orlando, Florida, by a gunman who answered the Islamic State's call to attack the United States directly.

U.S. special envoy Brett McGurk has called the Islamic State's recent attacks a sign of weakness, spurred by its mounting losses in Iraq and Syria. "ISIL and its leaders have retreated to the shadows," he testified recently, using another acronym for the jihadist group.

In fact, the opposite is true. The Islamic State's attacks prove that, despite its recent losses, it remains strong and capable of executing its global strategy to undermine modern states, expand as a caliphate, and spark an apocalyptic war with the West. The United States will fail to defeat the Islamic State and protect the homeland if it does not reframe its strategy to contend with the Islamic State globally, rather than focusing on tactical successes in Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State's strategy is both local and global. The group pursues interlocking campaigns across multiple geographic areas: Its local strategy in Iraq and Syria is to remain in control of terrain as a caliphate, while its regional strategy is to expand that caliphate across the Middle East by incorporating more fighting groups, which will allow it to further destabilize states and gain control of more terrain. Its global strategy, meanwhile, is to set the conditions for an apocalyptic war with the West, first and foremost by polarizing societies to be for or against Islam.

This final objective seems too big to be true. Policymakers tend to discount the Islamic State's grandiose public messaging about its global aspirations as overblown and comfort themselves with estimates of its military losses. But in fact, the Islamic State is operating from a position of strength: It is not only poised to remain in Iraq and Syria, but to prosper worldwide in the near-term. Given this reality, it is important not to discount the threat of the Islamic State's global strategy out of hand.

It's true, the Islamic State has lost ground in Iraq and Syria over the last year. These battles are critical prerequisites to defeating the group. But McGurk and other officials tend to draw false conclusions on the basis of tactical wins when they should be focusing on the next challenge. For instance, it would be wrong to assume that the Islamic State has lost its military capability because it has not yet retaken any of the cities it has lost. In most cases, the Islamic State chose to withdraw rather than fight to the death — a sign of control, military calculation, and intent to preserve force for future operations.

Similarly, President Barack Obama's administration tends to misconstrue the Islamic State's spectacular attacks as a sign of weakness and proof that the group is reverting to less impressive means. Actually, the explosive attacks the Islamic State launched over Ramadan are consistent with its attacks during this holiday in previous years. They have only increased in size and lethality.

The Islamic State has always been a hybrid force, and mass casualty attacks have always been a hallmark of its annual Ramadan campaigns. It adapted by incorporating conventional maneuver warfare into its playbook in 2014, seizing large swaths of terrain in Iraq and Syria following the fall of Mosul. The Islamic State's conventional maneuver capability still exists if it can execute tactical withdrawals, and it is still using that capability in the active defense of Manbij, Syria.

The argument that the Islamic State is about to lose because it cannot contest frontal attacks by the U.S.-led coalition provides a false sense of security. The way in which the Islamic State is engaging on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria is logical, predictable, and oriented to set conditions for a new phase of growth after the departure of the United States from the region. The group is already destabilizing the weak states in the neighborhood: Its mass-casualty attack in Baghdad shows that it can achieve political reverberations through isolated attacks that are carefully planned.

Policymakers are also failing to recognize that the Islamic State's regional and global operations support independent objectives beyond the defense of its core territory in Iraq and Syria. Its recent wave of attacks in Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon were not reactions to its territorial losses, nor even a recent expansion. It has been building capacity in these countries, and these attacks were part of a pre-existing strategy to expand its caliphate to include the entire Muslim world. If it can weaken these states, or even get them to focus on their domestic security at the expanse of the wider fight against the Islamic State, then the coalitions threatening its core terrain would fizzle.

The Islamic State is trying to break modern states in a way that will cascade. And some of these states, especially Jordan, are under duress. Jordan and Lebanon remain vulnerable to state collapse under the combined weight of terrorist attacks, refugee flows, and political deadlock. The Islamic State attacked both countries across their borders with Syria over Ramadan.

This is not the time to be overconfident. The United States should be working to constrain the Islamic State's regional expansion, not trivializing local Salafi-Jihadi groups as dissociated from U.S. national security. McGurk described some of the Islamic State's global affiliates as "pre-existing terrorist organization[s] ... [that] chose to wave the black flag of ISIL," suggesting that these groups are not critical components of the anti-Islamic State fight. In fact, these groups are how the Islamic State gain a global reach.

Contrary to the Obama administration's narrative of a weakened Islamic State, the group appears to be unequivocally winning its fight against U.S. strategy in the region. Its activities worldwide, especially its attacks in the West, are not attempts to divert attention from its regional campaign. They are both part of a strategy to set conditions for a global war between Muslims and non-Muslims. It could very well succeed, because the Islamic State is not the only actor driving society toward greater polarization.

The Islamic State knows that successful attacks in the West will cause societies to turn on immigrant populations, particularly in the context of Europe's migrant crisis. Given the rising tide of nationalist and anti-immigrant parties erupting throughout the West, the barriers to this polarization may be dwindling. Military coalitions like NATO may even fracture. The United States has the most powerful military in the world, but the world order is shifting before our eyes, and it favors the Islamic State and other threats that can better leverage uncertainty and disorder.

This is the head space in which the Islamic State is evaluating its strategy. When policymakers focus on individual battles in Iraq and Syria, they miss the grand scope of the Islamic State's vision. And even though recent gains against the Islamic State have been real, they will be ephemeral if policymakers do not have a coherent idea of what to do next. No one seems to want to talk about rebuilding Iraq and Syria, but something of that nature will be required. Otherwise these states will be undone once again within a few short years. The Islamic State could go into hiding, reconstitute, and mount a resurgence fueled by new lessons learned. Alternatively, al Qaeda could take advantage of the temporary vacuum to dominate the Salafi-Jihadi landscape in Iraq and Syria, which has grown more fertile as Sunni Arab populations in those countries have become more alienated from their governments.

If the United States wants to reverse course, it needs to change its anti-Islamic State strategy to make it truly global. It needs to acknowledge the foundational threat posed by local Salafi-Jihadi groups in other parts of the world that align with the Islamic State and allow it to operate around the world. And it needs to develop a parallel and concurrent strategy for al Qaeda to block the group from gaining greater traction and usurping the tactical gains won against the Islamic State.

But at the most basic level, the United States needs to adapt in order to be as agile as the Islamic State. If it does not, it risks discovering a few years down the line that it did many things right and still ended up a day late and a dollar short in a world that has turned upside down.

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