

Towards a realistic strategy to combat ISIS in Syria

'ISIS-first strategy' doomed to fail, as it is ineffective, counterproductive and unrealistic

In the aftermath of the 13 November Paris attacks, several countries involved in the Coalition against ISIS are reconsidering their strategy towards ISIS in Syria. France has increased its bombing campaign on ISIS in Syria while UK and several other European countries are considering whether or not they should do the same. Acknowledging that ISIS is a real threat to civilians in the Middle East, in the West, and especially in Syria and Iraq, PAX asserts that ISIS is not so much the cause but rather the result of the conflict in Syria. The real root of this conflict is the Assad regime's ruthlessly violent response to the Syrian people's call for dignity and freedom, and its enabling of the rise of ISIS and other radical groups.

In this Syria Alert, PAX sets out how an "ISIS-first strategy" which addresses the symptom - ISIS - and leaves the cause - Assad - to be addressed later, will prove ineffective because it is counterproductive and unsustainable. PAX believes that a military strategy to combat ISIS is only realistic if it is part of a coherent policy to build an alternative inclusive governance arrangement based on a political process laid out in the Vienna declaration.

1. ISIS is not the cause but result of the conflict in Iraq and Syria

ISIS is primarily the result of conflict and the power vacuum in Iraq. The Syrian conflict has served as a catalyst as ISIS could take power in areas where the Syrian regime had lost control. The cause of the conflict in Syria was the dictatorship that lacked legitimacy and accountability and denied fundamental rights and freedoms to its people. When people rose up in a call for freedom and dignity, the Assad regime reacted with extreme violence, successfully achieving its aim to militarise the uprising. When the regime lost control of parts of the country to the opposition, it started bombing them in order to prevent the moderate opposition from establishing a political alternative: The opposition was working on a *de facto* bottom up-transition to responsive and inclusive governance but the Assad regime partly succeeded in bombing that strategy to pieces. ISIS was able to step into the power vacuum by taking many regions that were controlled by armed opposition groups. In areas where the opposition was well organised, ISIS had much more difficulty gaining ground. The fact that the Assad regime has targeted its military operations against the moderate opposition and barely attacked ISIS indicates that this opposition is considered to be much more of a threat to the regime than ISIS.

An ISIS-first strategy ignores the fact that the Assad regime has enabled ISIS to grow. There is a long history of cooperation between the Assad regime and radical Islamists as well as regime support to jihadist resistance to the US in Iraq¹. Since the beginning of the uprising, the Assad regime has tried to frame the opposition as Islamic radicals. The rise of ISIS helped the regime make the world believe that the choice was either Assad or ISIS, and that the Assad regime was the lesser of two evils.

In June 2011, only months after the start of the popular protests, the Assad regime declared an amnesty for political and criminal prisoners that in fact left many civil activists in prison but led to the release of thousands of jihadist prisoners who first joined Jabhat Al Nusra and at a later stage formed the Syrian core of ISIS. The Assad regime was conscious of this effect and considered the released jihadists as "useful"². Since ISIS began expanding its territory, the Assad regime has made minimal effort to stop it. In some cases, the regime even attacked the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other opposition groups, thus enabling ISIS to

¹ Weiss and Hassan, "Isis inside the army of terror", pages 99 and following

² Ibid, page 131 and following

expand. A well-known example is how the Assad regime allowed ISIS to expand in the Northern Countryside of Aleppo in June this year³. This again underlines that the choice should not be between ISIS and Assad as they're two sides of the same coin. A democratic, inclusive alternative is the only sustainable option.

2. **ISIS-first strategy is counterproductive as it strengthens ISIS discourse and sectarianism**

An ISIS-first policy, aiming at combating ISIS militarily and dealing with Assad at a later stage, is hard to explain in the Syrian context. The fact that the international coalition does operate against ISIS but has made no efforts to protect Syrian civilians against the attacks by the Assad regime (causing seven times more victims than ISIS) causes great resentment. PAX's Syrian contacts repeat time and again how offended they feel because the West only takes action against ISIS.⁴ Syrians don't understand that the world leaves the Assad regime and its Russian, Iranian and Hizbollah allies to continue their violent campaigns against opposition-held areas, including aerial bombardments targeting civilians and sieges of towns and neighbourhoods. In the words of Planet Syria, a network of 100 civil society groups within Syria⁵:

"One of the main drivers of recruitment to Isis is the fact that the world is doing nothing to protect Syrian civilians from government attacks"

It reinforces the sentiment that the "whole world is against them" and causes further radicalization and strengthening of the ISIS constituency. Over the past year, people have turned to ISIS as the only party that can bring (relative) security, as the moderate armed groups have been further weakened. For example, last November thousands of Syrians from the northern countryside of Homs fled to ISIS-controlled areas.⁶ Also, fighters from armed opposition groups turn to the more radical groups. Joining the military campaign against ISIS in Syria would feed into the existing discourse of ISIS propaganda of Sunni victimhood of Shia, Western and Russian aggression. As long as the anti-ISIS Coalition has no strategy to stop Assad's large-scale, ruthless and deliberate targeting of civilians, an ISIS-first strategy will only drive more people into the arms of ISIS.

3. **Combating ISIS only by aerial bombardment is ineffective**

The ongoing military campaign against ISIS that began in the summer of 2014 has not yet defeated ISIS, but the reason is not a shortage of bombs. There are hardly any historic examples of conflicts won solely by aerial bombardments and attacks. Even three years of aerial bombardment by the Assad regime, with the addition of active Russian support in the past few months, on opposition-held towns and neighbourhoods has not led to a military let alone a political victory for the Assad regime.

Aerial bombardments are one of the main causes for civilian casualties in the Syrian conflict, cause substantial environmental harm and leave areas ungovernable, but do not defeat armed groups. The effects of Coalition bombardments on the power of ISIS is equally limited. Reconquering territory from ISIS has until now only been done by providing air support to ground operations by effective local armed groups (YPG and Syrian opposition in Syria, and Peshmerga, Iraqi Army in Iraq). Kurdish YPG groups have proven to be among the most effective ground forces, in particular in Kobani and Tal Abyad, yet, Syrian Kurds will only operate in areas with a largely Kurdish population.

As the West has been reluctant to support the FSA, while regime allied militias and radical armed groups have received military support from abroad, effective and legitimate ground forces have only limited presence in most of Syria⁷. Even if ISIS could be destroyed by air campaigns, they would leave the vast area presently controlled by ISIS, and the millions of people living in it, in a complete power vacuum, which could be taken over again by other jihadist groups like Jabhat Al Nusra. It is precisely this situation in which jihadist groups can operate and build their power base, as ISIS has done in Iraq, and jihadist movements have done in Afghanistan and various other countries before those.

Re-conquering the main parts of ISIS territory in Syria and filling the post-ISIS power vacuum would require the development of a legitimate and inclusive Syrian army and responsive and legitimate local governments which can only be the result of a political transition process.

³ <http://uk.businessinsider.com/why-assads-air-force-is-now-a-force-multiplier-for-isis-2015-6?r=US&IR=T>

⁴ See also <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/29/raqqa-exiles-bashar-al-assad-isis-bombing>

⁵ <https://stopthebombs.planetsyria.org/uk>

⁶ <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/11/10/14408/>

⁷ Charles Lister estimates that the number of "moderate" opposition fighters is around 65,000 troops

<http://blogs.new.spectator.co.uk/2015/11/yes-there-are-70000-moderate-opposition-fighters-in-syria-heres-what-we-know-about-them/>

4. Military cooperation with Russia is counterproductive as long as Russia targets civilians and non-ISIS armed groups

Since Russia began its aerial bombardments on Syria, it has mainly targeted areas where there is no ISIS presence. It has caused massacres when bombing market places, for example in Ariha on 29 November. According to Doctors Without Borders (MSF), by the end of October Russia had hit at least 12 hospitals and killed at least 35 patients and medical staff⁸. According to international humanitarian law, such attacks constitute war crimes. Furthermore there is evidence that Russia is either using cluster munitions in Syria or is providing the Syrian air force with new types of cluster munitions to use. HRW has documented for instance renewed use of air-dropped cluster munitions as well as ground-fired Russian-made cluster munition rockets as part of the joint Russian-Syrian offensive in northern Syria⁹. Moreover, the Russian attacks cause further radicalisation of Syrian civilians and “moderate” fighters, as was confirmed in recent interviews by PAX with anonymous civil society activists. The Russian attacks on moderate armed groups have resulted in fighters joining Jabhat Al Nusra and ISIS, while civilians have taken refuge in ISIS-held areas because they feel safer there than in regime-controlled areas. Military cooperation with Russia would be morally disputable and counterproductive as long as Russia continues its attacks on Syrian civilian targets. The international community should do its utmost to stop war crimes and end the Russian air strikes on civilians and “moderate” armed groups, which only cause further radicalisation and polarisation.

5. Reconquering territory from ISIS is unsustainable without a political strategy

Capturing areas from ISIS without robust inclusive civil governance and peacebuilding plans endorsed by all stakeholders risks increasing sectarian divides and the strengthening of ISIS. In the cases where ground forces have been available and able to capture areas from ISIS in Syria and Iraq, sectarian tensions have deepened. The main weakness in current strategies is that the Coalition relies on sectarian armed groups that have the military capacity to combat ISIS, but do not have support of the population. What is lacking is a political strategy on how to govern the areas in an inclusive and responsive way after they are reconquered from ISIS. Political agreements by stakeholders from different sectarian groups and peace building plans should be part of such a strategy, in order to ensure that all citizens regardless of sectarian background enjoy security.

For example, when Tel Abyad was captured, tensions between Arabs and Kurds flared up because there was no plan on how to govern the city after retaking it from ISIS. The YPG, being the strongest military party in the area, led the military campaign and took control of the area, much to the concern of its Arab inhabitants. There have been allegations that the YPG ethnically cleansed Arab villages. Arabs see the YPG as a threat to their security and might seek refuge in ISIS-controlled areas.

6. Inclusive governance to counter ISIS and Assad is essential for a sustainable strategy

The most serious threat to ISIS as well as Assad is not bombs but a credible inclusive political alternative to the sectarian proposition of ISIS (and Assad). The core of a political strategy to combat ISIS should be to establish viable inclusive civil governance. Establishing an inclusive form of governance that provides security to all members of the community is essential to prevent the post-ISIS communities and cities from falling into sectarian conflict.

However, we know that precisely the areas where such inclusive civil forms of local governance were developed were the main targets of air attacks by the Assad regime. This shows that the Assad regime perceives inclusive civil governance as a substantial threat. An ISIS-first strategy which does not protect moderate opposition in areas captured from ISIS against Assad’s bombardments will not only jeopardize the stabilization and reconstruction, but will also make the creation of a political alternative to ISIS and Assad a failure.

A good example is Saraqeb, where a strong and inclusive civil society movement and local council led to a situation where ISIS could only control the town for a limited period and was not able to control the society.

⁸ attacks against medical facilities in general with reference to Russia: <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/russian-warplanes-strike-medical-facilities-in-syria.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/> and more recently one on Aleppo in particular: <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/reports/aleppo-abandoned.html>

⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/10/syria-new-russian-made-cluster-munition-reported>

7. The Vienna process is an opportunity for a diplomatic breakthrough

While the Vienna process is an important diplomatic step towards political transition, which is the only sustainable way to end the Syrian conflict and stop the reign of terror by Assad and ISIS, its success will be determined by the way it is able to secure a broad representation of Syrians and to increase human security. The negotiations between Western and Arab countries, Iran and Russia united in the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) in Vienna constitute an opportunity for a diplomatic breakthrough to launch a political process to end the conflict in Syria. The fact that all these countries, including Saudi Arabia, Russia, the US, Iran and Turkey agreed on a joint statement of principles is a step forward in itself. In the end, a political transition process for Syria is the only way to develop inclusive and responsive governance and counter the roles of Assad as well as ISIS.

However, there are some serious challenges with regard to the Vienna process. The first one is who will represent the Syrian people in Vienna. The ISSG decided to list the “terrorist groups” that need to be excluded from the negotiations, yet the definition of “terrorist group” remains questionable as almost all parties involved in the conflict in Syria did commit war crimes and civilians were targeted not only by ISIS and other jihadist groups, but even more by the Syrian army and regime-loyal forces. The choice for a list of “terrorist organizations” is basically a political choice and is presently left to Jordan. In fact, the Vienna process would benefit from a process that would include the main armed groups in Syria, including non-ISIS Islamist and jihadist groups. Excluding these groups would only increase their potential to be a spoiler in the political process.

A second challenge is the extremely low trust Syrians have in the international community and the low expectations they have from Vienna. In order to secure popular support for the Vienna process, it is essential that Syrian civilians feel that the political process leads directly to increased security. Two main ways to do that, which are mentioned in the Vienna statement are: (1) Ending the use of indiscriminate weapons. And (2) Securing humanitarian access, which would effectively mean lifting the sieges.

The Vienna process should include a mechanism to secure these steps as confidence-building measures and monitor their implementation.

Recommendations

- ◆ A realistic and coherent strategy to combat ISIS in Syria should explicitly recognize that ISIS is not the cause, but the result of the political conflict. Lack of legitimacy, accountability and inclusiveness of the Assad regime is in fact the original cause of the conflict.
- ◆ An ISIS-first strategy is counterproductive as it will strengthen the ISIS discourse and sectarianism.
- ◆ Combating ISIS by aerial bombardments without a credible ground force is ineffective. At present neither Syrian army, nor Kurdish YPG fighters, nor the armed opposition, have capacities or legitimacy to take that role, and none of the countries involved in the Coalition against ISIS is willing to do so, either.
- ◆ Military cooperation with Russia, beyond deconfliction arrangements, is both morally unacceptable and counterproductive as long as Russia targets civilians and non-ISIS armed groups.
- ◆ Without a political strategy, re-conquering territory from ISIS will prove to be unsustainable. Rebuilding inclusive and credible governance in territories retaken from ISIS and opposition held areas needs to be at the core of a comprehensive political strategy.
- ◆ The Vienna process is currently the greatest opportunity for a political process to end the Syrian conflict, and therefore also a major element in a political strategy, but can only be effective if it includes as main elements:
 - A cessation of violence, which should lead to increased human security including an end to use of explosive weapons with wide area effect on populated areas and unimpeded humanitarian access to besieged areas
 - A broad participation of the different forces and communities, including non-ISIS jihadist movements
 - Political agreements by stakeholders from different sectarian groups and peace building plans should be part of such a strategy, in order to ensure that all citizens regardless of sectarian background enjoy security.

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