

# The Lesson of Daesh's Triumph

The proper response to the so-called “Islamic State” should not be laser-guided missiles and crackdowns but good governance.

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Some have seen fit to draw comparisons between the upheavals currently taking place in the West Asia region and the Thirty Years' War fought in Seventeenth Century Europe. One might be tempted to interpret similarity between the political internal strife of Christendom at this historical juncture and today's seemingly burgeoning antagonism between politically motivated Islamists. Parallels in dynastic rule and rivalry, as per the House of Habsburg and the Kingdom of France in the 1630s, may be traced in the ongoing rivalry between the pseudo-Sunni and Shi'a militancy. And one might choose to see the birth of a fundamentally new regional order in the forging of a so-called “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria, in the same way that the Peace of Westphalia irrevocably altered the order and cartography of Europe over three and a half centuries ago.

However, these facile comparisons reveal a deep-rooted misunderstanding of the ongoing crises in West Asia-North Africa. The sensational erasure of a stretch of the Iraqi-Syrian border by the militants of Daesh earlier this year was a shrewd attempt to strike a powerful chord in the minds of the many people in this region for whom the colonial legacy of Sykes-Picot is to blame for their problems. But the so-called Islamic State was born, not of over a century of wars of religion emanating from the broader upheavals of a religious reformation (as in Europe), but of several

decades of persistent destruction and devastation in Iraq. From geo-political and ideological rivalry with neighbouring Iran, to the persecution of Kurdish and Shi'a communities at the hands of Saddam Hussein, to the chronic suffering wrought by a decade of sanctions and foreign intervention, strife in Iraq can no longer be blamed solely on artificial borders. The essential corollary to this point is that this crisis cannot be mended by mere redrawing of borders.

One-dimensional analysis simplifying the current crisis in Iraq and Syria to a religious-sectarian proxy war for a broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry is vastly oversimplified. The hatred industry has produced a plethora of armed militias across our region, of which Daesh is just the latest to draw the attention of the mass media. Furthermore, such an analysis is to ignore the fact that Daesh is more of a radical parallel army than a religious organisation. It is opposed by Sunni and Shi'a alike, and its support in Iraq and Syria can be better explained by the group's ability to provide cash and food assistance to marginalised citizens, rather than by popular adherence to a warped interpretation of Islamic principles. Indeed, the depraved acts perpetrated by Daesh amount to Hadd crimes and Ta'zir crimes that are incontestably prohibited by Islamic Law.

An inherent irony of such simplistic comparison of the modern Middle East with Seventeenth century Europe is that out of the Thirty Years' War came the Peace of Westphalia, which laid the foundations for progress towards (eventually) greater peace and prosperity. By stark contrast, the militias of Daesh, utterly void in their appropriation of the word of Islam, are rapidly plunging areas of Iraq and Syria back into the age of jahiliyyah (ignorance of divine guidance). The gravity of this chaos is perhaps best illustrated in Syria, where hopes have declined from orchestrating a peace settlement to establishing minimalist zones of refuge, from building a better Syria to helping its civilians survive.

Max Weber defined the fundamentals of the modern state as a triad composed of: a continuous administrative staff (bureaucracy), an organised military with a monopoly over the use of legitimate violence and a functioning financial and tax-collection apparatus. But these are just some of the most important bones in what is ultimately the physical skeleton of the state. In order to function well, a national spirit is equally imperative because herein lies the origin of citizens' responsibilities to one another - hence it is from here that good governance stems. Direct comparisons with the European experiences lose their worth in the face of the

significantly different historical experiences of the development of statehood in the West Asia-North Africa region. Nomadic pastoralism, tribalism, colonialism and the rich cultural heritage of Islam are just some key factors that serve to distinguish this region and its needs. There are hard lessons to be learned from Iraq since 2003, one of the most critical being that one cannot simply impose Weber's three requisites and expect a modern state in the European or North American style to follow.

Good governance is the antonym of corruption. Daesh and other destructive actors thrive when governance fails; this failure is what triggered the wave of Arab uprisings in 2011 and needs to be addressed throughout the Arab world. When citizens cannot rely on their government for security and rule of law, they turn to pre-existing ethnic or religious structures, and a vacuum is left for ambitious warlords from Afghanistan to Mali. Iraq and Syria are effectively now in freefall and at the heart of these countries' collapse is a failure of nationhood and good governance. The tensions leading to bloodshed on the battlefields of Mesopotamia are political in origin. They arose, at least in part, because governments in Iraq and Syria resorted to securing power through patronage and by vilifying the other rather than building up national sentiments of Iraqi or Syrian solidarity.

Governments heeding the lessons of Daesh's triumph must address the symptoms that originally created these vacuums of power. The proper response should not be laser-guided missiles and crackdowns against domestic support for such fanatics, but rather it must be through good governance, which means inclusivity and is the opposite of corruption and patronage. Rifts exist within any society and in times of strife, it is easy to pull at the seams. But statesmen and women must work to actively strengthen our ties. It is essential that we remind ourselves and teach our younger generations of our shared, distinguished heritage, our *Mare Nostrum*.

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