The European Union and the Rise of the Islamic State

Shimon Stein

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the European Union has found it difficult to find a solution for the political chaos and the accompanying violence that has overtaken much of the region south of its border – the Middle East and North Africa. The policy with which the EU has attempted to stabilize the region socio-politically and economically for nearly two decades has failed. In the course of 2016, the EU is supposed to formulate yet another policy to resolve problems within the region, which is currently in the throes of "violent transformation."

The emergence of the Islamic State[1] as an actor with aspirations vis-à-vis the world as a whole and the Middle East in particular has created a new geopolitical reality that requires the European Union to take more urgent action. This article frames the threat posed by the Islamic State to the EU and its member states, and surveys the European efforts to formulate a solution. It discusses the issues as they relate to both the Middle East and Europe, and also examines the humanitarian problem that has resulted from the crisis.

The collapse of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen has accelerated the disintegration of the Middle East established by the Sykes-Picot agreement, which was in effect for close to a century. The rise of the Islamic State, a consequence of events in Syria and Iraq, threatens to nullify the principle of territorial integrity and national borders in the region, a principle that has served as the bedrock of international order. Were the Islamic State comparable to other terrorist organizations operating in the Middle East, it could be tackled with the standard means used to deal with such struggles: a direct military campaign against it. However, by declaring itself a caliphate and challenging the old order, the Islamic State has aggravated the situation and

impeded efforts to combat it. The Islamic State phenomenon also complicates all attempts – and the European Union is a party to these efforts – to resolve internal conflicts in Syria and Iraq and restore the previous situation while preventing the collapse of the old state order. The establishment of branches of the Islamic State in an ever-growing number of Arab countries that are highly important to European interests, such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan, threatens to heighten the instability in Iraq and Syria, as well as the region as a whole.

Although the threat posed by the Islamic State is central to the Middle East, it is not limited to its borders. A string of attacks carried out by supporters of the Islamic State in several European capitals (Brussels, Paris, and Copenhagen) in 2014 and 2015 have made the destructive potential of this group entirely clear to EU member states and illustrated the danger of ignoring or attempting to downplay its severity.

The extreme violence surrounding the sectarian struggle in Iraq and the civil war in Syria, both caused in part by the Islamic State's seizure of substantial parts of territory in the two countries, has led to the most serious global humanitarian crisis since World War II. Millions of Syrians have abandoned their homes and migrated elsewhere in Syria or beyond to neighboring states (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt). Many others have attempted to make their way, via difficult routes, to the safer shores of Europe. Thus far, the European Union has extended approximately €3.7 billion in humanitarian aid to the refugees, and intends to allocate an additional €1 billion in 2015-2016. The scope of this assistance has placed the EU at the top of the list of states providing aid to the refugees. In addition to the aid flowing from the EU as a whole, member states are providing bilateral aid to huge numbers of refugees.

The number of refugees who have moved and will continue to move to the countries neighboring Syria and Iraq is much higher than the number of those who have reached and are still expected to reach Europe. Nonetheless, for a variety of reasons the 28 members of the European Union have found it difficult to contend with the influx. In 2015, nearly one million asylum seekers arrived in Germany.[2] Other European countries serving as magnets for refugees include Sweden, Italy, France, and Hungary. This unprecedented flow of refugees caught Europe by surprise – and unprepared. The more than 850 refugees who drowned off the coast of Libya in April 2015[3] forced the

Europeans and their decision makers to deal (not for the first time) with the urgent need for a multi-systemic solution to the growing problem.

In addition to its humanitarian dimension, the problem poses an internal threat caused by the appeal of the Islamic State narrative to young European Muslims who are joining the ranks of the Islamic State in ever-growing numbers. Alienation, unemployment, difficulties with integration, access to social networks that revile the decadent West, and the heroism assured to those who join the Islamic State – against the hopelessness and unclear future that face those who remain in their home countries – create fertile ground for Islamic State recruitment. According to a report by the International Red Cross, approximately 3,850 of the 20,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq in the second half of 2014 hailed from European Union states. The threat becomes even graver given the expectation that these fighters, steeped in anti-Western ideology, will eventually return to Europe, equipped with combat experience and prepared to carry out attacks at any time.[4] Another threat is posed by "lone wolves" – those who have not been on the battlefield but have been exposed to the narrative of the Islamic State through social media and, inspired, are prepared to carry out attacks.

The working assumption of EU states dealing with the threat is that the crisis caused by the Islamic State and the religious and ethnic rivalries in Iraq and Syria is rooted in internal crises within these countries. Consequently, they feel that all efforts must be directed toward stabilizing the situation in the Middle East. The key word in this context is "inclusiveness," that is, the inclusion of all relevant forces in the formulation of a political solution that is based on the desire to preserve the multinational, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic character of Iraqi and Syrian society.

As the Islamic State poses a threat not only to Syria and Iraq but also to the region as a whole and European stability, the quest for a political solution is conducted in tandem with military campaigns against the Islamic State. The European Union has developed a strategy for fighting terrorism and apprehending foreign fighters (the terrorists recruited into the service of the Islamic State) and has formulated two documents that in effect constitute a detailed working plan to resolve the crisis and prevent its spread.[5] According to one document, the EU's ability to achieve its aim hinges on developments on the ground, which include resistance to the Islamic State and the willingness of international and regional actors to take action to oppose it. The document also stresses that a resolution to the crises in Syria or Iraq will not in itself

promote political stability or economic prosperity in the region. In an attempt to avoid the errors of the past (e.g., the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan), the EU has again clarified the need for the states in the region to play a greater role in dealing with the crisis and leading the effort to resolve it. As part of the international community, the EU can provide assistance to military, political, and humanitarian efforts. However, the lion's share of the burden and responsibility should fall on the shoulders of the states in question.

While the EU recognizes, however, that military force should be an important (though not exclusive) tool in the eradication of the Islamic State, it has so far been unable to reach a consensus on the issue. Therefore it has permitted each of its member states to proceed as it sees fit. The EU has welcomed the decisions of its various member states to contribute their share to the struggle, but as an organization, it has stressed its non-involvement in either the actual fighting or the coordination of actions by member states that have chosen to engage in the situation. In fact, most EU members have extended their assistance to the campaign against the Islamic State, albeit not on a large scale; some are also helping to train soldiers in the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga. A small number of member states (Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, and Denmark) are also playing an active role in the airstrikes staged under US leadership against the Islamic State in Iraq.

The lack of a mandate from the UN Security Council is preventing the EU states from participating in the attack against the Islamic State in Syria. (This has not prevented the British air force from undertaking reconnaissance missions over Syria, however.[6]) Moreover, the scope of the airstrikes in Iraq (as compared to NATO strikes in Yugoslavia or air strikes in Afghanistan) attests to the fact that the effort is currently not a high priority among the countries involved. Furthermore, as of late 2015, no EU state has declared its intention to send its own ground forces ("put boots on the ground") to Iraq or Syria. This stance effectively expresses the policy noted above, namely, that the states in the region should deal with these challenges and not expect the international community to do the work for them. This fundamental position must also be understood within the domestic context of EU member states, in which many are fundamentally opposed to sending troops to the Middle East. Such an approach is likely to change (if at all) only in the event of a mass casualty terrorist attack directly attributable to the Islamic State, or with a significant increase in the threat posed to the political and economic interests of European countries.

Aside from their support of military efforts to defeat the Islamic State, EU member states clearly understand that any effort to contend with the phenomenon must be multidimensional; hence a strategy that brings together the many realms that must be addressed simultaneously: ideology, communications, economics, financial resources, and terrorism. The aim of this integrated strategy is to close all the possible cracks and loopholes that can be exploited by the Islamic State.

On the internal European level, the induction of thousands of EU citizens into the ranks of the Islamic State and the showcase executions broadcast over the media, as well as the terrorist attacks in Europe and elsewhere in which EU citizens have taken part (with the most recent and deadly attack in Tunisia in June 2015) have increased awareness of the threat posed by the Islamic State among European political leaders and their publics and intensified the need for an appropriate response to this threat. The formulation of an all-encompassing strategy that would address the threat on the ground is one way to deal with the phenomenon. Another equally important issue is to introduce measures to deal with the threat of "veterans," some of whom have returned to their countries of origin or are expected to do so, and "lone wolves," who never left Europe but may nonetheless attempt to carry out terrorist attacks on behalf of Islamic State guiding principles. The appeal of the Islamic State narrative, combined with the difficulty of dealing – in the short term – with the roots of the problem in its economic, social, and educational context, will presumably increase the number of new European recruits to the ranks of the Islamic State. The higher the numbers, the greater the threat posed by returning veterans and lone wolves.

Like other internal threats posed by extremists of the political left and right, that of the Islamic State inside Europe raises the dilemma that faces democratic societies in the struggle against terrorism. At its heart lies the desire to achieve a balance between individual freedom and the necessity of imposing limitations on individual liberties so as to minimize the threat of terrorism.

The terrorist acts perpetrated in France and Tunisia in 2015 may have raised awareness of the threat posed by the Islamic State, but most countries in Europe that are home to large Muslim populations – the main source for recruits in the ranks of the Islamic State – have yet to take adequate measures to address the problem. This is particularly true of Germany, Belgium, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden. In contrast, France and Britain, which have

already experienced attacks, are now better prepared to deal with the threat. This does not suffice, however. British Prime Minister David Cameron has recently emphasized the need to contend with the Islamic State's radical narrative, which he views as poisoning young minds.[7] In a speech delivered before the British Parliament following the terrorist attack in Tunisia, he compared the challenge presented by Salafi jihadist Islam to the challenge posed by communism during the Cold War.

The "poisoning" of these young people – most of whom were born in North Africa and the Middle East, or are children to immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East – is the consequence of the failure of integration efforts by the respective European states. This failure has led to radicalization, which provides fertile ground for the Islamic State and similar groups. European countries with large concentrations of citizens from Muslim countries urgently need to adopt active economic, social, and educational measures to integrate these young people into local society. Prime Minister Cameron was correct in pointing out that this is a struggle that will last for generations.

Regarding the ever-mounting flow of refugees and asylum seekers, the continent is not prepared to absorb these masses and deal with the phenomenon in the short, let alone the long term. At present, the European Union and its member states are still unable to formulate policy on the issue.[8] The drowning of many refugees in the Mediterranean Sea has forced the EU to adopt a number of measures aimed at preventing, to the extent possible, the recurrence of such incidents. Within this context, unrealistic suggestions have been made, such as the need to address the roots of the problem, that is, the political and economic situations, in the countries of origin.

European helplessness vis-à-vis the refugee problem is reflected in the decision by EU member states, following long discussions, to spread 40,000 asylum seekers among various nations, with the brunt of the burden falling on Germany, Sweden, France, Italy, Greece, and Hungary.[9] Without a doubt, it was the media coverage on the extent of the crisis that compelled the European political leaders to recognize the need for a short term solution. A long term solution that would significantly reduce the number of asylum seekers seems nowhere on the horizon. Side by side with the sympathy for the refugees demonstrated by some sectors of the European public and their willingness to help, lies a policy, advocated by those following the lead of populist parties, that will drastically limit immigration into Europe.

The handling of this issue will certainly not be liberal Europe's finest hour, which, true to form, continues to hope that solutions to the ethical and political dilemmas posed by the refugee problem will gradually emerge.

Conclusion

Since the launching of the Barcelona Process in 1995,[10] the European Union has attempted to deal with the ongoing crises of its southern neighbors, thus far without much success. The collapse of the state system in the Middle East, and especially the crises in Syria and Iraq, which gave birth to threats such as the Islamic State, are forcing the EU to make another attempt, on grounds of self-interest, at a solution. The comprehensive strategy it has formulated is meant to help Syria and Iraq implement a multi-systemic solution for the crises facing the two countries and, at the same time, to enable the countries of Europe to tackle the threat posed by their own citizens who support the Islamic State.

The European Union's ability to help resolve the crisis in Syria and Iraq and consequently reduce the scale of the threat posed by the Islamic State will depend on its determination and perseverance as well as its understanding that a long struggle lies ahead that requires the allocation of extensive resources. All of these efforts have one general goal: to ensure that the reality that Europe is gradually beginning to sense – and that can be summed up in the aphorism "if Europe does not visit the Middle East, the Middle East will visit Europe" – does not turn into a situation that spirals out of control.

Notes

The author would like to express his gratitude to Noa Saltzman for her help in assembling the material for this article.

1 The use of the term "Islamic State" reflects the interest in using unified terminology in this volume. The European Union uses the term ISIS. British Prime Minister David Cameron stated that the term "Islamic State" is an offense to many Muslims, and therefore prefers the ISIS acronym.

2 In addition to Syrians and Iraqis, the numbers of asylum seekers also include those from the Western Balkans, who constitute the largest group of refugees, as well as those from Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Afghanistan.

3 According to UN reports, by late July 2015, the number of refugees who drowned reached approximately 2000.

4 Daniel Byman has claimed that the threat posed by foreign fighters returning to their countries of origin is less serious then generally believed. Among his reasons is the fact that many fighters are killed in battle; that others refrain from returning

to their home countries and continue on to the next conflict; and that yet others sober up and cease to pose a threat. See Daniel L. Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Therapy of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," The Brookings Institute, January 2015.

5 See European Council, Council of the European Union, "Council Conclusions on the E.U. Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as Well as the ISIL/Da'esh Threat," March 16, 2015; "Response to Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Recent Terrorist Attacks in Europe."

6 For details regarding the involvement of EU members, see Justine Drennan, "Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition against the Islamic State," *Foreign Policy,* November 12, 2014.

7 See David Cameron's "Extremism Speech" in Birmingham in *The Independent*, July 20, 2015. In this programmatic speech, Cameron presented his ambitious five-year plan to address the roots of the problem of radicalism.

8 Although the number of refugees from Syria is constantly increasing, they are only part of a larger number of refugees, most of whom are arriving from the Western Balkans. The tendency in Europe is to send these refugees back to their countries of origin, which are considered to be politically secure.

9 For additional information, see "Which EU Countries had the Most Asylum Seekers," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2015; "Mediterranean Crisis: The Facts So Far," *Migrant Report*, 2015.

10 The Barcelona Process (the "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership") is the European Union's policy on the Mediterranean region. In 1995, this policy led to the signing of the Barcelona Declaration by fifteen EU countries and twelve Mediterranean countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus, Malta, Turkey, and the Palestinian Authority. The aim of the document was to establish a European-Mediterranean partnership based primarily on the creation of a joint area of peace, stability, and prosperity (including the establishment of a free trade zone by 2010), as well as the improvement of mutual understanding between its peoples.