

# Defusing ISIS: Protracted War or Peaceful Negotiation

Ranadeep Mitra

**Abstract—** The American-waged war on terror has seen a major increase in force in the past decade, even after the withdrawal of American troops in 2011. Our military invasion of the Middle East against ISIS has continued to escalate, but it will not end the war. This paper proposes that a peaceful negotiation might prove to be a more effective strategy than an escalation of violence. By becoming a friend to the members of ISIS, we can diplomatically cripple and deflate the terrorist organization. We have lost many lives and a great deal of resources to the war. Now more than ever, the U.S. government must reevaluate the situation to understand the ineffectiveness of war in resolving differences. History and brain science have shown that the only effective approach to resolving differences between nations is non-violence. Violence only invites violence.

**Index Terms—**ISIS, violence, wars, peace, negotiation, evolution

In the recent decades, activity in the Middle East has dictated the military and political actions of nations around the world. The rise of radical groups such as ISIS has introduced the need for the suppression of global terrorism emanating from the Middle East. For the most part, the United States has dealt with terrorist groups using ground troops and air strikes. In the past few months, the Trump administration has called for an increase in military force in Iraq and Syria in an effort to “destroy” ISIS [1]. The administration has also expressed interest in forming a coalition with Russia to assist with this objective. The general goal is to increase military pressure on the Middle East until it buckles. After that, the United States will most likely interfere with Middle Eastern governments with the hopes of keeping them in the government’s pocket. Regardless of the plans of the future, the United States and its Coalition allies have continually focused on military escalation in the Middle East. This may turn out to be a very shortsighted and counterproductive decision. Brain science and historical precedents show that military intervention in the Middle East is a tremendous waste of American lives and resources. Instead of invading Middle Eastern countries, the U.S. government should seek to open friendly relations with ISIS and Middle Eastern governments.

## I. THE IMPORTANCE OF REVALUATION

For the most part, the attacks on ISIS have been an impulsive reaction to their acts of terrorism. Discussing the

concept of diplomacy with ISIS has become somewhat of a taboo in American society. It is difficult for many Americans to accept that we may have to negotiate with a group of people who have killed so many civilians. With nearly 1.3 million lives lost (as of 2015) [2] and the \$1,725.1 billion spent on the war, it has become a tremendous drain on the country. The time has come for us to reevaluate the situation. In doing so, we must consider the factors that dictate our enemy’s actions and the effects our choices have. Sending troops and bombing the Middle East is too costly and counterintuitive. Psychologically speaking, our military involvement only depicts us as invaders to the Iraqi and Syrian citizens. This sentiment towards the American Government is the prime motivator for violence and is barring the possibility of peace. Furthermore, even if the United States militarily overpowers our enemies, another terrorist organization would only take their place.

It is important to recognize that terrorism is a device employed by the weaker adversary to retaliate against the stronger adversary by striking soft targets. No matter how strong the stronger adversary, there will be no dearth of soft targets. Tact is likely to be more effective than force. Instead of escalating the war, the United States should aim to let ISIS terminate itself. This can be achieved by ending all foreign military presence in Iraq and Syria. To understand how this will work, we must first understand the psychology of our enemies.

## II. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ISIS

ISIS has become an organization known primarily for the radical interpretation of Islam. The group justifies their actions through their belief that they are carrying out a sacred duty: their permutation of the concept of jihad. But at its core, ISIS’s resentment of foreigners stems from the fact that, in the minds of many Middle Eastern citizens, Americans and other foreign powers are invaders and manipulators.

The reason ISIS continues to grow is that its members view American presence as an invasion. It is the same reason why the question of Russian infringement and collusion with America sparks resentment and hatred towards Russia among United States citizens today. The premise of foreign interference in sovereign American affairs is angering to many of us. This type of manipulation will always be deemed unacceptable by the citizens of the manipulated government as it takes the power away from their hands. One of the most infamous examples of the reaction to foreign intervention was

the Cuban Batista dictatorship. In 1952, the United States backed the Batista regime in Cuba to protect American interests in the Western hemisphere. However, the regime created repressive conditions that ended with the deaths of 20,000 Cubans [3]. The Batista dictatorship's corruption and abuse of its own people triggered the Cuban Revolution. Under their leader, Fidel Castro, Cuban revolutionaries fought and prevailed against American attempts to re-establish the dictatorship. For several of the following years, Cuban extremists launched several terrorist attacks against America out of their hatred of foreign manipulation.

The Vietnam war is another infamous example of this behavior. While American troops were fighting the North Vietnamese army, the group known as the Vietcong also mounted attacks against United States troops. The Vietcong was made up of South Vietnamese citizens and mistaken for those the American troops were fighting to protect. These citizens would often pretend to be friends to the Americans. But during the night, they would attack troops in their own camps. By invading Vietnam, America invited attacks on its own army.

Similarly, the CIA hired Saddam Hussein to establish a United States sanctioned Iraqi puppet government. It was only when Hussein had Iraq invade Kuwait that the United States withdrew its support of the regime it had helped create. Hussein's government caused the death of hundreds of thousands of Middle Eastern citizens. America's hand in establishing the puppet government is one of the several factors that paint the Americans as invaders to the Middle East. Leaders of ISIS manipulate the hatred of American foreign intervention to convince their followers to act against America and our allies. Religion simply acts as a conduit for this manipulation and serves to perpetuate the organization. Though these are only a few examples, they prove that resentment towards invasion is a common theme in world history.

### III. HUMAN "GROUPISHNESS"

In January 1961, President Dwight Eisenhower said, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists, and will persist." Events of the last half-century have repeatedly proved him correct.

Brain science tells us why. The concept of groupishness, as introduced by psychologist Johnathan Haidt in *The Righteous Mind*, explains terrorists' collective motivation towards retaliation. Haidt claims, "Because effect trumps rationale, we [humans] naturally group, and ignore evidence we don't agree with [4]." It is groupishness that obfuscates humans' views on their enemies. As a war draws on, people begin to view their enemies as less than human. That is why each side of this conflict continues to fight. There is a general lack of understanding and compassion among each side that prolongs the war. Unfortunately, as long as we remain at war with ISIS, Middle Eastern citizens will believe their actions against the

United States are morally justified. Psychologically speaking, the concept of morality blinds the brain to the consideration of other opposing information. Groups like ISIS use religion to morally legitimize their attacks. In his psychological analysis of suicide bombers, Noam Shpancer, Ph.D., claims that a terrorist is a "true believer" in their religion. Shpancer defines "true believerism" as "the conviction that you and your group are in possession of The Truth." Simply put, true believers regard other beliefs as inferior or fundamentally incorrect. Professor Shpancer also claims that the desire to spread terror is rational among those engaged in the ideological or territorial struggle [7]. Because extreme actions such as suicide bombing are shown to be effective and the enemy is believed to be less than human, terrorism becomes more of a social ritual than an act of insanity. The self-destructiveness of a terrorist is justified by their groupish belief that we are an inhuman enemy.

Due to how ISIS views America, invasive attacks in the Middle East do not invite attacks on only soldiers, but civilians as well. The recent air strikes invite attacks on innocent citizens because ISIS cannot directly confront actual military leaders. ISIS has come to realize that attacks on ordinary citizens have become a far more effective tool to spread fear than direct confrontation. At this point, it is our own military policy that has elicited the global terrorist attacks we are fighting to stop.

### IV. A PEACEFUL APPROACH

Therefore, it is crucial that we end the war as soon as possible. First, our government must understand that to do so requires us to treat the members of ISIS as humans. It is very easy for us Americans to consider Middle Eastern terrorists as inhuman. Their actions are unforgivable and, to us, morally wrong, but their motives are just as human as ours. Violence and invasion are counterintuitive as it only reinforces the terrorists' true believerism towards violence against America.

The solution is to pursue and establish a friendly relationship with ISIS and the governments of Iraq and Syria. President Obama already took the first step by withdrawing troops from the Middle East in 2007. The next step is to halt our invasion. By doing this, we will gradually allow those in the Middle East to stop thinking of us as invaders. Once their focus has shifted from fighting their invaders, we can begin global negotiation efforts. Throughout this process, the United States must allow the current regime to stay in place. As history has shown, the establishment of puppet governments and authoritarian regimes have been met with conflict. Replacing the Iraqi or Syrian government with our own preferred government only invokes further resistance from the people.

Why is this more effective than war? A military takeover of ISIS would not prevent another similar terrorist organization from taking its place. The difficulty with organizations such as these is that it does not need to forcefully control its population. Rather, it is the citizens of Iraq and Syria that support ISIS and its growth. To prevent the rise of another

terrorist battery we must ensure that the citizens of the Middle East do not support another terrorist group to resist American presence in Iraq and Syria.

Once we are no longer at war with ISIS, we can increase the flow of information between the Middle East and the world. In time, each party must grow tolerant of the other's ways of life. If the Iraqi government also becomes a friend to ISIS by allowing it to be a democratic part of their government, this will hasten its end. At that point, ISIS will no longer have a major foreign enemy to band against. With time, the citizens of Iraq and Syria will realize the immorality and destructiveness of their own agenda. By stopping our attacks, ISIS will lose to its own people. An example of this is the former USSR. President Nixon was the first to open up communication with communist China and the USSR. At the final stages of the Cold War, the Soviet masses realized the self-destructive nature of communism. Once citizens came to understand that their system of government was not stable, they worked to reform their government through the policy of a government that is transparent with its people. Eventually, the Soviet Union fell apart and reformed into today's constitutional Russian republic.

The war on terror has been a series of shortsighted decisions. The United States' desire for control in the Middle East has led to somewhat impulsive decision making. In this war, our number one enemy is our brains, not ISIS. Intuitions always come first, strategic reasoning second. We as a nation see ISIS as a faceless and formidable enemy. But we must realize that our enemy is as human as we are. By invading the Middle East, we are directly motivating ISIS to fight back. But by becoming a friend to ISIS, we can increase the flow of information between the two entities. While ISIS can indefinitely supply their military defense against America, peace will cause them to eventually lose the support of their own people. ISIS will shrink through diplomacy, not military force, just as the USSR did during the cold war. It is critical that we stop wasting our national resources on this counterintuitive invasion of the Middle East. Too many lives have already been lost to the war. It is time for our nation to consider the alternative and become friends with ISIS as it the only way to end the war in the Middle East.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. Juyang Weng for his guidance, reasoning and direction. Without him, this paper would not have been written.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Airwars. (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2017, from <https://airwars.org/>
- [2] Fathollah-Nejad, A. (Trans.). (2015). *Body count: casualty figures after 10 years of the "War on Terror": Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan*. Washington, D.C.: Physicians for Social Responsibility.
- [3] Kennedy, J. F. (1960, October 06). Speech of Senator John F. Kennedy. Speech presented at Democratic Dinner, Cincinnati, Ohio. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project.
- [4] Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- [5] Farley, F. (n.d.). Speaking of Psychology: Understanding mass violence [Interview by A. Hamilton]

- [6] Borum, R. (2004). *Psychology of terrorism*. Tampa: University of South Florida.
- [7] Shpancer, N., Ph.D. (2010, September 23). Understanding the Suicide Bomber. Retrieved July 23, 2017.



**Ranadeep Mitra** is a senior at Okemos High School, in Okemos, Michigan. He has been working with Brain Mind Magazine as an assistant editor. Though his interests lie mainly in computer science, he has entered the field of brain science under the guidance of professor Juyang Weng. He hopes to continue work on the Brain Mind magazine in the future.