THE NEW WAVE OF TERRORISM: THE ISIS CASE

A WISE MEN BOARD REPORT

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Author:
Prof. Atilla SANDIKLI

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Mecidiyeköy Yolu Caddesi No:10
Celil Ağa İş Merkezi Kat:9 Daire:36
Mecidiyeköy / İstanbul / Türkiye
Tel: +90 212 217 65 91   Faks: +90 212 217 65 93
www.bilgesam.org
bilgesam@bilgesam.org

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FOREWORD

During the last 40 years, first the Soviet invasion and then the US-led coalition’s military intervention in Afghanistan, Israel’s massacres and annexation strategy through settlement construction in the occupied Palestine, the state collapse in Iraq following the US invasion, the Iran-backed Maliki government’s ensuing sectarian policies against the Sunni Arabs, the chaos in Libya after the international intervention and the protracted Syria crisis have created conditions in Muslim countries that the terrorist groups could exploit. Also, the rising Islamophobia in the West in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Iran’s and Saudi Arabia’s sectarian policies in the Middle East exacerbated these conditions favorable to the religiously motivated terrorist networks.

The Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM) published the report titled “The New Wave of Terrorism: the ISIS Case” originally in Turkish in accordance with the reviews made during the 23th Wise Men Board Meeting in May 2015. The current English publication includes only the Executive Summary of the original long version in Turkish and aims to share its essence with the international audience. I extend my gratitude to the Wise Men Board members for their invaluable contribution to this study and hope that it could be a modest introduction to start understanding the dynamics behind the rise of the ISIS and a useful source for decision makers to design the measures that should be taken against this terrorist group.

Prof. Atilla SANDIKLI
The President of BILGESAM
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first part of the report “The New Wave of Terrorism: the ISIS Case” gives theoretical information about the concept of terrorism, historical process and waves of terrorism. It continues with the terrorist group al-Qaeda’s foundation and development process as the starting point of the new wave of terrorism and the ISIS case is analyzed in detail. The analysis part covers the characteristics of religiously motivated terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is followed by ISIS’s strategy and probable course of action and the combat strategy against this terrorist group. Then, possible future scenarios are envisaged. As the result of analyses and scenarios proposed, the effects of probable developments on Turkey are assessed and proposals are made.

Throughout the historical process, there have been several terrorism periods with different conditions, causes, objectives and functions. The historical development process of terrorism with present day implications can be examined in five waves: anarchist wave, ethnic wave, ideological wave, religious wave and cyber wave. The waves are not distinctly divided with clear boundaries. The name of a wave was determined considering the main objective and characteristics of the terrorism intensely experienced in that period. Hence, we can see the reflections of previous waves in terrorist incidents that occur every period as well as evolutionary traces of the subsequent wave.

The emergence of the new wave of terrorism and its increased effectiveness first started with the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. Many Muslim volunteers from different countries swarmed to that country to help Afghan people. Al Qaeda came into being at that time and rapidly grew with the US invasion of Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq. Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad organization formed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Afghanistan in 2000 moved firstly to Iran and then
Iraq following the US invasion of Afghanistan. After the US invaded Iraq, the organization increased its attacks on coalition forces and took the name of “Al Qaeda in Iraq” in 2004. Following Zarqawi’s death in 2006, Abu Ayyub al-Masri became the new leader of the group and it was renamed as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Taking advantage of weakened central authority due to the civil war, ISI moved to Syria expanding the area under its control and changed its name again as “Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIS)” in 2013.

Religiously motivated terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and ISIS are global terrorist groups targeting the Western-led global order with networks and extensions in several countries, carrying out attacks in different parts of the world. These organizations thrive in global instabilities, power gaps and collapsing government systems. When oppressed and exploited countries in the last century are analyzed, nearly all Muslim countries could be mentioned in this group.

In the last 40 years, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union and then by the US-led coalition, the destruction of the state and all institutions in Iraq during the Gulf wars, Israel’s massacres and annexations through settlement construction in Palestine, Libya intervention and collapsing state in Syria have created traumas. Increasing Islamophobia and opposition to Islam in western communities have strengthened the perception of otherness among Muslims. When such traumas coalesced with the perception of marginalization, it resulted in certain sensitivities in Muslim societies that could be exploited by terrorist organizations.

Al Qaeda aimed at the US troop’s withdrawal from the Arab world, subversion of pro-western Muslim states and systems, and establishing a so-called Islamic state governed by a caliph in the Middle East. As the latest example of religious wave of terrorism, ISIS differs from its predecessors with such characteristics as taking control of a vast geog-
raphical area, establishing a pseudo-state apparatus, employing strategic and tactical principles in using its force against hostile armed forces and the ability to self-finance.

ISIS ideology comprises Salafism, antagonism against the West and terrorism. The interaction of Marxism and Arab nationalism observed in Baath regimes is reflected in the interaction of Marxist-Salafi proviolent jihadism. Western interventions and people’s lack of alternatives caused the politicization of Salafism and Wahhabism as advocates of violence. Salafi tradition can be exploited by terrorist organizations due to its strict literalism, avoidance of reasoning and disregard for methods like analogy and vote.

Although ISIS is a religiously motivated terrorist organization, it has implemented Mao’s three phase strategy. The strategy involving strategic defense, strategic balance and strategic offensive phases is usually implemented by separatist terrorist organizations. ISIS remained on strategic defense until taking control of a particular area and gaining sufficient power in Iraq in 2014. Next, it proceeded to the second phase - strategic balance- and seized Anbar, Falluja, Ramadi and some other areas. Having achieved easy and rapid success thanks to the vulnerabilities in Iraq and Syria, the group moved to the strategic offensive phase without reaching sufficient strategic balance and occupied Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq soon.

ISIS’s achieving strategic balance and strategic offensive phases in a very short time period increased its vulnerabilities at the same time. In addition, massacres conducted by the group in the occupied areas spread terrorism leading to reaction among people. ISIS attacks on Baghdad in the south and Erbil and Kobane in the north were slowed down with intensive airstrikes conducted by the US and coalition forces. The attacks were repelled by counter-attacks carried out by the Iraqi Army
backed by volunteers, Kurdish Peshmerga and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the terrorist PKK/KCK’s Syrian offshoot. ISIS soon reached to its climax in military terms and lost its offensive power. Its air force and air defense capability is almost non-existent. It is vulnerable to the US airstrikes. Thus, the group probably prefers a defense based on urban terrains rather than open areas.

The US implements a strategy of “offensive containment” which is a combination of limited military tactics and a broad diplomatic strategy to halt ISIS’s expansion, isolate the group, and degrade its capabilities. The US strategy against ISIS comprises four pillars: systematic airstrikes, support for actors on the ground, humanitarian assistance and international counterterrorism activities.

Destruction of ISIS terrorism can be achieved with a comprehensive, sustainable and long term strategy. Implementation of this strategy which is different from traditional counterterrorism strategies depends on the formation of a strong coalition. The vital point for success is Sunni tribes’ halting support for ISIS. Similarly, fatwas issued by Islamic scholars against terrorism and Muslim world’s adopting an attitude against terrorism pursuant to such fatwas will also be a significant contribution.

Three probable scenarios can take place depending on the success of the operation to be conducted by the US led coalition according to the above mentioned strategy. In the first scenario, the operation fails and ISIS continues its existence in the area under its control similar to the Taliban existence in Afghanistan. In the second scenario, the operation will be partly successful, ISIS will be disabled in Iraq, but still continue

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1 Although still it is referred by its old name the Kurdistan Workers Party-PKK, since 2007 the terrorist group has been using “KCK-Kurdistan Communities Union” as its title in its organizational documents and statements. Therefore, the title “PKK/KCK” is preferred for the organization in this report.
its presence in Syria. In the third scenario, the operation will be successful and ISIS will be destroyed both in Iraq and Syria.

Every development taking place in Iraq and Syria affects Turkey in political, military, economic and socio-cultural terms. Opportunities and risks created by political and economic relations as neighboring countries, providing border security and even domestic security concerns, reflections of external interventions, migration and problems of Syrian refugees estimated around 2 million are some examples. Turkey’s foreign policy towards the region has been influenced by the ruling political elite’s aspirations and the experience gained during the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, in which Ankara hesitated and was late to take position. In addition, Ankara’s early decision to take position in Syria crisis relying on the cooperation with the US, and then being left alone in the half way has also affected the Turkish foreign policy in the region. When Turkish and US policies intersected on ISIS problem, Turkey having experienced the previous traumas faced a dilemma between not losing the opportunity and being bypassed in the decision making process.

What Turkey expects from the US and Western countries is establishing buffer and safe zones and declaring no-fly zones, hindering the Assad regime’s airstrikes on Hama, Homs and particularly Aleppo and by this means halting the flow of refugees to Turkey. Turkey also states that the Assad regime is an important part of the issue, and problems in the region cannot be solved without a regime change in Syria.

The US expectations from Ankara will overlap with the expectations from the broad coalition considering Turkey’s geopolitical position and socio-cultural characteristics. These expectations are securing control over borders, preventing the flow of foreign fighters, blocking the ISIS’s financial resources, preventing oil sale and supporting efforts to
halt the flow of arms and equipment to this terrorist group. Disabling actors affiliated with the ISIS is also among such expectations.

The current conjuncture creates important opportunities in line with the PKK/KCK’s interests and Kurdish dynamics. PKK/KCK could aim at acquiring several rights, legitimizing Abdullah Ocalan as a leader and reinforcing the idea of independence among Kurds as part of the settlement process by conducting a political campaign in Turkey while establishing a center of gravity for the foundation of an autonomous state in northern Syria. Also the present developments could create opportunities for independence on the part of the autonomous Kurdish administration in Northern Iraq in the near future.

As the anti-ISIS operations and ensuing clashes increase, the terrorist group may target Turkey. The potential and risk of terrorist incidents in the Turkish territories could scale up. Turkey’s active participation in the operation will also increase the risk. Considering the heavy destruction in residential areas as a result of clashes in Iraq and Syria in the future, Turkey may also be subject to a new flow of refugees and the refugee problem may reach uncontrollable scales.

It is important to rehabilitate the environment helping global terrorism thrive in order to build a fairer global system and eliminate global instabilities.

The collapse of states as result of operations conducted within the scope of counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance or protection missions result in the evolution of stronger terrorist structures.

Multiculturalism and cross-cultural harmony themes should be included in the educational curricula in order to prevent ethnic or religious marginalization and hostilities.
Islamic religious scholars and lecturers should issue fatwas against the distorted religious references exploited by terrorist organizations to prevent such exploitation. Moreover, there should be efforts to bring forward religious references declaring terrorist actions against Islam.

As for Christian clergymen, they should avoid statements deepening hostility between Christianity and Islam that could be exploited by terrorist organizations.

Muslim countries should not use sectarian differences to expand their influence and effectiveness in the region.

It is also important to get support of the majority of the public to reach successful results in foreign and security policy.

It is necessary to implement governance principles in the planning stage when formulating foreign and security policy; get opinions of other political parties, universities, research centers and non-governmental organizations and call forth an optimal approach among diverse opinions.

It is useful to inform every segment of the society correctly about developments in the implementation stage of policies and receive their opinions concerning the implementation in terms of feedback. This is necessary to ensure the continuation of public support.

Similarly, opposition parties should not use foreign and security policy as a means of internal political struggle and should develop constructive critical approaches paving the way for the concept of governance while being open to conciliation.

The media should develop internal ethical rules concerning foreign and security policy and make programs that will inform the public correctly, allow for opinions of different approaches and reflect the opinions of
experts to the public rather than pursuing rating concerns. The media should also use a conciliatory language instead of a polarized discourse.

Turkey’s foreign and security policy should be redefined in consideration of the foregoing issues. In this framework, new approaches should be developed in the Middle East policy and relations with Syria, Egypt, Israel, Iran and other Arab countries should be revised accordingly.

Turkey should neither participate in combat operations in Iraq and Syria conducted by the US and coalition forces nor engage in close combat. However, Turkey should join the coalition forces to have a say in reshaping the region. Considering that conflicts in Iraq and Syria could draw in Turkey, sufficient military force should be deployed into the region to ensure deterrence.

Developments and possible scenarios might create important opportunities in line with the interests of PKK/KCK and Kurdish dynamics. Hence, integrated policies should be developed taking measures against certain risks, which are the terrorist organization’s attempt to found a PYD-led autonomous state in northern Syria and to control oil areas, declaration of independence by the Autonomous Kurdish Administration in northern Iraq, and PKK/KCK’s efforts to gain autonomy through organizing mass riots.

The efficient control of Iraq and Syrian borders is vital. Intelligence capacity should be developed and intelligence sharing with coalition countries should be maintained while utilizing technological means including physical and electronic security systems to ensure an acceptable level of control over the borders. In addition, legal channels, sufficient infrastructure and communication systems should be established between relevant state institutions for coordination.
ISIS cells and contacts in Turkey should be closely watched and preparations for terrorist actions should be prevented. Refugee camps should be efficiently inspected and terrorist activities in such camps should not be allowed. Measures for the security of diplomatic missions, businesses and citizens abroad should be increased.
BOOKS

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