Hard Talk

ISIS

As the US wages war on ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq, Jordan’s stability is again being called into question. In this exclusive interview, Jordan Business talks to Peter Harling, senior adviser for the Middle East at the International Crisis Group, about the rise and evolution of ISIS, the risks it poses and whether the appeal of the Islamic State is present in Jordan.

Q: For the readers who don’t know, how and from where did ISIS evolve?
A: At its core, Daesh is an outgrowth of the Jihadi experience in Iraq where al-Qaeda gradually assumed, between 2003 and 2006, a dominant role within the Sunni Arab militant scene. After 2007, it quickly lost ground, mostly because its extreme forms of violence increasingly turned inward: from the US occupier to a local Shi’ite enemy through to growing numbers of individuals decayed as apostates within its own, purported Sunni Arab base. The ensuing frustration within its immediate environment created the right conditions for an anti-al-Qaeda uprising that the US could capitalize on. By 2012, al-Qaeda in Iraq was down to a re-cluse elements operating out of the desert. ISIS then bounced back as a result of a combination of factors: the sectarian polarization and radicalization deliberately sought by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which enabled the movement to slowly rebuild a genuine social base, and to which Iran and the US chose to turn a blind eye until recently; the gaping hole to which Iran and the US chose to turn a blind eye until recently; the gaping hole in Syria, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories.

Q: What lies behind the ability of ISIS to take over large swathes of land in Syria and Iraq?
A: ISIS essentially moves in to areas abandoned by others; its advance stops when it faces genuine resistance: simply because its resources, at this stage, are rather limited. Assuming the figure of 30,000 fighters enjoying no serious state backing, how does that compare with Iranian militias in central Iraq, with Hezbollah, with the Peshmerga, with the Syrian regime?

Q: How viable is this proposition when it faces genuine resistance, such as US strikes?
A: ISIS can be more powerful in the realm of imagination than in the real world, however, much damage is caused in the latter. It knows it and it places the struggle to a large extent in the former: thus it ‘erased’ with great fanfare the Iraqi Syrian border in a gesture that speaks to the psyche of people across the region, and stirs within them very profound emotions. However, the border is still there, controlled in large part by other players. I find it useful, at least heuristically, to see ISIS as a kind of ectoplasm giving shape to fears and fantasies felt in the region or, for that matter, in our own Western societies. It may represent the end of Sykes-Picot and the distorted ‘order’ it came to define; or an elusive ‘purity’ of Islam, expressed if only via the determination of its fighters; or on the contrary its basest and most threatening form, a product of and a distraction from their obvious failures and a compelling reason to continue doing more of the same. The set of divisive trends the region is caught in may ultimately break the legacy of 20th century states, but ISIS cannot do this alone.

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Where would you place Turkey and Iran in this rather messy picture?

A: ISIS did not change anything to their postures. Turkey still wants a solution to the problem posed by a Syrian society that has been split down the middle: it also wants to isolate the Syrian PKK (or PYD) and force it both to distance itself from the regime and to make space for other rival Kurdish factions, in particular Peshmerga sent by the Iraqi KRG. It views ISIS as part of the problem. Iran, meanwhile, wants an Iranian neighbor that remains weak and under influence: it wants the Syrian regime to endure and be accepted as the lesser evil, without making any hazardous changes to its precarious structure; and it wants to market itself as an incontrovertible regional power that may ultimately make some concessions, but only if it is fully accepted as such. Again, ISIS appears less as an urgent threat than as a means to pursue the same aims.

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Q: Minorities in the Middle East are worried about calls by ISIS for their slaughter! Is this part of the ISIS narrative? If so, where does it come from?

A: Minorities in the Middle East have long feared eradication, with or without ISIS. Christians, for instance, have been emigrating en masse for decades, and many have grown deeply alienated from their Muslim environment when the uprisings took place in 2011. In Mosul, they expressed their fear of Salafism even in the 1990s, under Saddam Hussein's rule. It is all too easy to bring the threat down to ISIS, as if communal conviviality had been the norm until then. The problem runs deep and calls for rethinking all kinds of issues: why regimes were consolidated rather than diminished communal barriers; how minorities themselves have closed in, cutting themselves apart from broader society; what Muslim clerics have to say; explicitly about non-Muslim citizenship; how regional minorities treat local minorities in areas where they happen to be a majority (as in the case of the Kurds and the disputed territories in Iraq); or why minorities have had so little to contribute, intellectually and in practice, to the change at play since 2011, unlike the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Q: Some have argued that US policy towards Syria and Iraq has contributed to the creation of ISIS. Where do you stand on this?

A: It is convenient, as always, to blame the US for everything going wrong in the region and simultaneously to assume that a different US behavior will make things right. Certainly, the fact that Washington’s most pressing objective has been to distance itself from conflicts it feels could suck it in left Nouri al-Maliki and Bashar Assad confident that they could get away with all kinds of bad behavior. It also created a bigger vacuum: in this respect, ISIS is just like the uprisings, should spur the concerned to work harder on all the well-known, long-standing and growing set of problems that bedevil every state and society around the region. What is troubling is that those best equipped to deal with them find solace in their relative stability, instead of using the opportunity to actually make a difference. Fear of ISIS may well be used as an excuse and an asset in doing nothing, in doing more of the same. However, that will only work well in the short term.

Q: As the number of refugees coming from Syria to Jordan edges close to 1.5 million, there is a growing fear in the Kingdom that with this flow will come other threats to stability, and ISIS is no exception. What are your thoughts?

A: European states would like to think that supporters of ISIS are something foreign within our own societies, something you can ‘profile’, single out, expunge and something that deserves all our attention because it is the epitome of evil. However, at the end of the day, the real threats to our societies have nothing to do with ISIS. At best, it expresses and exploits a certain malaise. That malaise is what we need to think about and address.

Q: Though Jordan undoubtedly has ideological supporters in Jordan, the appeal of the group is limited because the country has a professional army, a relatively homogenous population and strong state institutions, unlike in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Do you agree with this line of thinking?

A Seeking comfort in what ‘isolates’, a particular state from problems faced by its neighbors reminds me of the absurd speculation of early 2011 regarding the ‘Syrian exception’, when pundits and diplomats enumerated reasons why the regime would not face popular unrest. ISIS, just like the uprisings, should spur the concerned to work harder on all the well-known, long-standing and growing set of problems that bedevil every state and society around the region. What is troubling is that those best equipped to deal with them find solace in their relative stability, instead of using the opportunity to actually make a difference. Fear of ISIS may well be used as an excuse and an asset in doing nothing, in doing more of the same. However, that will only work well in the short term.

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