

Disproportionate Response?

The military offensive against ISIL and the internal defence of the West

By John Bruni

The strongest democracies flourish from frequent and lively debate, but they endure when people of every background and belief find a way to set aside smaller differences in service of a greater purpose.

BARACK OBAMA, press conference, Feb. 9, 2009

...the "delicate balance" between freedom and security would have to shift for some time in light of the heightened terror risk.

TONY ABBOTT, address to the Australian parliament, Sept. 22, 2014

Five years after President Obama was ushered into the American polity on a tidal wave of international public expectation that the United States would decisively move away from the hawkish era of



the Bush presidency, Washington has cobbled together another international coalition of the willing to fight another Middle East war against a foe so wretched, that the price the West must now pay to fight this evil is a suspension of democracy. Not a suspension that is necessarily

obvious to most people, though one suspects that members of the media and the skeptical commentariat will find it harder to express opinions that might be construed as ‘critical of government national security policy’.

As with the old foes – the Taliban and Al Qaeda – ISIL is geographically and organizationally constrained.

Being a terrorist group, it is not in command of well-armed and funded military forces such as tanks, planes and ships. The ‘fighters’



that constitute ISIL are for the most part lightly armed militias and the existential threat they pose is not to the United States, nor to any Western state, but to the crippled countries of Syria, wracked by civil war, and an Iraq that has internally flipped from a stable autocratic Sunnism to an unstable autocratic Shiism. In both cases, the uncomfortable truth is that contemporary Syria and Iraq are the stepchildren of Western strategic policy. The current failure to buy-out the regime of Bashar al-Assad prevents the West from using him as an ally to stabilize Syria’s internal dynamics.

The failure to make peace with Ba’athist Iraq (note, not necessarily with dictator Saddam Hussein) destroyed the cornerstone of sectarian order (based on historic Sunni leadership). Now, Baghdad, under the [second era of al Dawa](#) rule led by Haider al-Abadi who promised to be more

Western-orientated than his Shiite predecessor Nouri al-Maliki, but whose party is still open to Iranian influence, is having to deal with the disenfranchised Sunnis who still believe they are being punished for the ‘sins’ committed during the Hussein era. This perception has driven many Iraqi Sunnis into the arms of ISIL, a group that is totally antithetical to any form of Shiism, religious or secular in nature.

And then we have Muslim radicalism. The Bush legacy casts a very long shadow over the Middle East and Central Asia. There are areas of Pakistan so agitated over the drone war that started under Bush and continued under Obama, that Islamabad, always a difficult partner in the War on Terrorism, has slipped into a state of decrepitude in the country’s hard to control northwest provinces. Afghanistan, in spite of the billions spent on shoring up that country’s security and investing in national reconstruction following the dethronement of the Taliban in 2001, is hardly a model of a just, pluralistic society.

Pockets of jihadist sympathizers among the Arab, Pakistani and Afghan Diaspora communities in the US, UK, France and Australia are now seen as willing participants/agitators in a ‘Holy War’ against the apostate forces of the West, and as such are becoming the ‘enemies within’. Hard fought for civil liberties in the West are now being curtailed in ‘the national interest’. Our democratically elected leaders tell us that security trumps freedom whenever the homeland is threatened. And indeed, during the first part of the ‘War on Terrorism’ (2001-2009) there was a lot of talk about the need to strengthen internal security. Consequently, national counter-terrorism policies were given more leeway. But public (i.e. media) scrutiny was never far behind, keeping a modicum of ‘over watch’ on the

internal security and legal processes involved. In a democracy, the public good is not a zero-sum game between civil libertarians and security hawks. It is about liberty and its preservation without which democracy ceases to exist. This is a philosophical position which is harder to sustain where media is less critical of government, where media acts on governments’ behest regarding threats to the nation-state, and where the public unquestioningly accepts the conflated images of the so-called 5th columnist threat where a terrorist lurks around every corner. We need security that is robust but not disproportionate to the threat. We need subtle, and in many instances, covert security that goes about its business without spreading undue alarm throughout the body politic, especially in a multicultural setting. No country has a silver bullet to combat this situation. The victimization felt by many young, disenfranchised Muslim men will be made all the worse by the new war against ISIL.

For the West, after some 12 years of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, the security of the Middle East and Central Asia has been fatally compromised. But it does not stop there. The Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Arabian Peninsula have broken states with significant radicalized Muslim groups within them, all seeking to be seen as a unified anti-Western bloc. Internally, within the West, the concept of multiculturalism has been fatally compromised as well. Unity in diversity within the context of a sustainable conglomeration of ethnic and sectarian separatisms may very well be sacrificed for the eventual reestablishment of openly integrated national norms, where someone’s ethnic or religious origins are no longer considered valid or attractive social or political identifications, but where the adoption of a single national citizenship and loyalty to

that citizenship becomes the most important condition of a peaceful life.



P.S. Sunday, September 28 on the ABC current affairs show, [The Insiders](#), Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop was quizzed over the Abbott government's decision to withdraw financial support for the Australia Network (a part of the ABC that provides news and views from Australia to the Asia-Pacific region). One of Ms Bishop's criticisms was that the Australia Network appeared biased against the government and thus presented Australia in a poor light and was of little utility to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's public diplomacy. Seen from another perspective however, this action could be construed as the first open move toward media censorship by the Abbott government – not necessarily a good signal to a region replete with political autocracies. Furthermore, any curtailment of civil liberties *by our own hand*, implicitly or explicitly using the threat of domestic terrorism, is a strategic win for the forces we seek to defeat abroad.

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

Images Accessed: 29/09/2014

Obama image

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/for-obama-a-swift-leap-from-no-strategy-to-a-full-battle-plan-for-islamic-state/2014/09/27/4e700f02-45be-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html

ISIL fighters image

http://media.farsnews.com/media/Uploaded/Files/Images/1392/11/30/13921130000448_PhotoI.jpg

Terrorism suspect detained in Australia image

<http://images.smh.com.au/2014/09/18/5785797/Article%20Lead%20-%20wide6133055510iir4image.related.articleLeadwide.729x410.10iij.png1411007341493.jpg-620x349.jpg>