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Defending the Island: Kurdistan's Dunkirk and the Fate of a Free Middle East

What are the West's principal security objectives in the Middle East? For David Danelo, the two-part answer is simple – destroy the Islamic State, which poses an “irreconcilable threat to humanity,” and sustain a stable Kurdistan, which is critical to accomplishing the first objective.

By David Danelo for ISN

“Put down your weapons, and we will not harm you,” announced Islamic State (IS) fighters, just before gunning down every Yazidi man that had previously been holding a weapon. In early August, the Yazidis became the latest casualties in the maniacal scourge of violence Islamic State terrorists have unleashed. Using concealed mobile phones, female Yazidi prisoners telephoned horrific dispatches to Rudaw, a Kurdish news network. “Every day the *emir* fighters pick two or three pretty girls,” said a 24-year-old Yazidi, held captive as a sex slave. “When they return, they are exhausted and humiliated. So far, a number have committed suicide.” The call ended abruptly, according to the news network. “Hang up, hang up. They are coming.”

In the countries that were once called Syria and Iraq, IS fighters control a swath of territory that, at its apex, was the size of Switzerland. They believe Westphalian notions of statehood and national borders must be discarded, and are less interested in governance than imposing submission to a specific Sunni Islam way of life through robberies, extortions, rapes, murders, public executions, crucifixions, and beheadings. During the World Cup, IS fighters dribbled severed heads, boasting on social media that “our football is made of skin.” Women are banned from any occupation outside the home, and basic human rights mean nothing compared to strict religious purity.

The nature of the threat that IS poses means that the security of the West depends on two things: the destruction of IS and the preservation of a stable Kurdish region.

An Irreconcilable Threat to Humanity

As Russia invades Ukraine, sectarian strife destroys Libya, and the Ebola virus marches across West Africa, the Yazidi genocide is only the latest of several atrocities IS has inflicted upon humanity. In early August, the Yazidis were assaulted with an intention to “wipe them from the face of the earth.”

In analyzing the world's many troubled regions, international security scholars often confront the rhetorical danger of equating every authoritarian figure with Adolf Hitler. Before the 2003 ground

invasion of Iraq, United States officials often compared Saddam Hussein to the Nazis, drawing parallels between the Ba'ath regime abuses and the Holocaust. Although Saddam's cult of personality and aggression against Iran and Kuwait gave credence to such assertions, later reviews suggest Bush Administration officials may have been overzealous in their portrayal.

Inappropriate comparisons with the Nazis can sound like the proverbial "boy who cried wolf" when genuinely irreconcilable threats to humanity emerge. The Islamic State represents such a threat. It may be the rare case where comparison with the Nazis is no exaggeration. The thousands of bloodthirsty men who have enslaved millions under their desert jackboots have established their writ through genocidal actions of which they boast. No international criminal tribunal would be sufficient to shame them of their crimes against humanity, for they do not seek to conceal the carnage they create. Their political ideals are incompatible with any international institution. Their message is straightforward to all who fall under their control: submit or die.

Sinjar Mountain and the Kurdish "Dunkirk Spirit"

The only force standing between the Islamic State and their expanding sphere of brutality is the Kurdish *peshmerga*. In a region filled with guerrillas, militias, and paramilitaries, the 300,000-strong *peshmerga* stand out as the West's only dependable regional ally and the region's only real hope for destroying the Islamic State. If manpower estimates are accurate, the Kurdish warriors tie with France as the world's fifteenth largest army—not insignificant considering Kurdistan is not even a recognized state.

Like the French before World War II, the Kurds have also constructed a solid defensive perimeter in the decade since their last war ended. And just as when France's Maginot Line crumbled under attack, the Kurds—and their Western allies—were surprised when Islamic State weaponry overwhelmed their defenses. On August 7, as *peshmerga* defenders fell back and the Yazidis took refuge in Sinjar Mountain, IS turned their artillery towards Erbil, shelling Kurdish positions in and around the regional capital. Had the United States not acted immediately, the *peshmerga* would still be scrambling to save the ancient Kurdish city.

A similar World War II turning point—in spirit, if not tactics—followed the June 1940 British evacuation of 340,000 Allied soldiers and civilians under siege at Dunkirk. Prior to Germany's invasion of France, the United Kingdom had not been directly threatened following the declaration of war on land. But when France fell, compelling what Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the "miracle of Dunkirk," British resolve hardened. "We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be," said Churchill in one of the war's pivotal speeches.

Although the pivotal battles in this third Iraq War have yet to happen, the international response following Sinjar Mountain—particularly the decisive U.S. commitment of forces in support of Kurdish operations—represents a defining moment in the West's resolve to destroy the Islamic State. Just as the British rallied around the "Dunkirk spirit," American intervention has reinvigorated Kurdish determination to destroy the Islamic State. President Barack Obama lacks Churchill's resolute rhetoric, but authorizing airstrikes demonstrated critical and timely leadership that proved far more influential than mere denunciations.

Beyond the Islamic State

One way or another, IS has permanently reshaped the relationship between Islamic governments by forcefully dismissing their validity. "The Islamic State doesn't want relations with any other

government—especially not in the Islamic world—because it sees itself as the radical alternative to all of them,” writes Muslim-American scholar Hussein Ibish. “It shows neither any interest nor ability to enter into such arrangements.”

Unlike even the Nazis, IS is not interested in maintaining any semblance of the existing international order in the regions it rules. There will be no embassies or consulates in Raqqa or Mosul while under Islamic State writ. While the West wishes for stable regimes to return to Damascus and Baghdad, the Syrian and Iraqi governments lack either the capacity or intent to defeat IS. Although Bashar al-Assad’s forces have offered an alliance with the Kurds against the Islamic State, the Syrian government’s resources—both materiel and moral—have been spent after three years of a civil war unlikely to end anytime soon. And beyond Baghdad and the Shiite South, Iraq’s fragile government lacks an army to impose its authority.

Ultimately, the West’s best ally in this fight—both to destroy IS and prevent it from rising again—are the Kurds. For this reason, Western governments should maintain sustained and strong political support for the autonomous Kurdish region, regardless of who is Baghdad’s prime minister. Although such support does not require endorsement of an independent Kurdish state, Western authorities would benefit from more liberal dealings with the Kurdish region, not only on arms deals but also energy investments. Focusing on state structures and national borders distracts from the two most important regional goals: the destruction of IS and preservation of a stable Kurdish region. Western security depends on achieving these aims.

“The crisis in Iraq is several orders of magnitude worse than those we faced in 1991 or at any time since the 2003 invasion,” wrote retired Marine Corps General James Jones, who served as President Obama’s first national security advisor. “The consequences of failure are too great to opt out.” Jones echoes the December 1940 words of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, urging the U.S. Congress to embrace the Dunkirk spirit in support the British struggle against the Nazis: “There can be no reasoning with incendiary bombs.”

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