Syria & Iraq Alert I:
The need for a comprehensive political strategy to counter ISIS

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The sudden and unforeseen expansion of ISIS in Iraq and Syria over the summer has led to a dramatic shift on the ground in the Middle East, in Western public opinion, and subsequently in the involvement of the international community. Even though ISIS had been a threat to civilians in northern Syria and Iraq over the past year, the potential genocide of the Iraqi Yezidi community, the capture of Mosul, and the images of journalists and an aid worker being beheaded by an English-speaking jihad fighter have caused an urgent sense that the crisis in Iraq and Syria cannot be solved without direct international interference.

PAX believes that the present predominantly military response of the US-led coalition against ISIS lacks a clear political strategy. A tactical military response that is not part of a comprehensive political strategy will lead to an open-ended military campaign with unclear goals, and is doomed to fail. The costs of setting unclear and moving targets are that violence is compounded while victory remains elusive.

ISIS is not so much the cause of the present crisis, but rather a result of it – there will not be a quick and easy answer to these root causes of the crisis in Iraq and Syria that led to the rise of ISIS. Neither direct international military action nor delivery of arms to the potential local opponents of ISIS can be excluded, as a last resort and under strict conditions to counter and contain clear and present danger of genocide, large-scale war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing.

However, these military actions are only short-term tactical responses that, if not part of a longer term political strategy, will fail to achieve the objective of neutralising or even eliminating ISIS, and will only serve to catalyse the root causes of the conflict. The emergence of ISIS did not occur in a vacuum, but was rather facilitated by ongoing local conflicts rooted in recent history. A political strategy needs to include the resolution of these local conflicts. PAX believes the following elements are essential in such a comprehensive political strategy:

PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS AND UN MANDATE

The primary objective of any action against ISIS should be the protection of all civilians, not only the various ethnic and religious minorities but also the Sunni Arab majority in the region controlled by ISIS, who are also victims of ISIS. Without increased human security for all, there will be no chance for a legitimate authority to re-establish trust among the population.

- Protection of Western interests, prevention of terrorist threats outside the region, or even the integrity of the states only come second after this most urgent and imminent threat.
- It should also be noted that public support for international military actions is higher in Iraq than in Syria. In Syria, there is enormous anger about people being left alone for years to face Assad's war, while there was such an immediate a reaction to ISIS. Military attacks, that do not lead to protection of civilians from the threats of ISIS and the Assad regime alike, will lead to increasing anger with the US and its allies, and as such could be counter-productive.
- Air strikes by the US-led coalition do not yet have a UNSC mandate. It is of utmost importance that the coalition of countries against ISIS seeks a mandate for the possible use of military force to protect civilians in Syria and Iraq, preferably from the UNSC or, as a last resort, through the UNGA.

INCLUSIVE CHARACTER

A response to ISIS must be inclusive in character, with a long-term objective of legitimate and responsive governments in Iraq and Syria. Years of repression and marginalisation fed into the population's frustration, particularly among young generations. Both in Syria and Iraq, the government

that is supposed to protect its own citizens against massive human rights violations and war crimes, has proved to be one of the worst threats to the population. This contributed to the radicalisation we have been witnessing.

- In Syria, the army is killing thousands and thousands of civilians by using explosive weapons in populated areas as well as weapons that have been banned such as cluster munitions (and in the recent past, chemical weapons) and deliberate starvation and deprivation of basic needs of civilians in areas under siege .
- In Iraq, the previous Maliki government used excessive violence against civilian protests in 2012 and 2013, and used barrel bombs in populated areas in cities like Fallujah after the takeover of ISIS in 2014.
- While in Iraq the change of the government offers a window of opportunity to re-establish trust between the government and the Sunni Arab population, in Syria, after almost four years of violent oppression and war crimes, the Assad regime lost its legitimacy and cannot be part of the solution to the current crisis.

RESILIENCE OF THE SOCIETY

The underlying factors that made Syrian and Iraqi societies vulnerable to ISIS differ between the two countries. A political strategy should take these differences into account in order to build the capacities of local communities to protect their own citizens, in particular IDPs and returning IDPs, vulnerable ethnic and religious minorities, and women.

- In Iraq, a large part of the territory controlled by ISIS is disputed between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Autonomous Region. This area is historically home to several ethnic and religious minorities and has been subjected to various state policies aiming to alter the local demographics. Conflicts that have resulted from these policies are deeply rooted and ongoing. The already-affected social fabric has been further destroyed by the recent violence of ISIS, where local sectarian conflicts have become part of the dynamic. ISIS is an Iraqi phenomenon that subsequently spread beyond the border into a wider threat. It has fed upon various local Sunni frustrations, while at the same time the Sunni population used ISIS as an opportunity to settle historical and political grievances. People in Iraq are very worried about local revenge actions against communities currently supporting ISIS and foresee an exacerbation of already existing local conflicts and fault lines. An inclusive and comprehensive political strategy with a large reconciliation and peace building effort is needed to mitigate existing pressures, enable a safe return of IDPs, and prevent the potential of escalation. Failing to do so would mean leaving the ground open for an easy return of ISIS after the end of the international military campaign.
- In Syria, ISIS is dominated by foreign fighters and resented by the population. The violent repression of the revolution by the Syrian regime had already destroyed the fabric of society and basic institutions and infrastructure in large parts of the country. ISIS used the vacuum to gain influence not only through violence but also by filling the gap with basic services and aid. Local communities with provisional local authorities who manage to meet the basic needs of the population and have some form of control over local armed groups prove to be more resilient to ISIS, hence it is vital to support them.

RESPONSIBLE DELIVERY OF ARMS

With all of the conflicts unfolding, the Middle East is becoming more and more militarized by the day. Governments considering arms deliveries need to carefully assess the high risks attached to bringing more weapons into the conflict. As long as the Iraqi government continues to use explosive weapons in populated areas, it should be excluded from weapon deliveries. Delivering arms to the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq will have an impact on the delicate power balance in Iraq, especially with regards to the Iraqi disputed areas.

The following conditions should be applied at a minimum:

- Carry out a rigorous human rights risk assessment and establish a robust monitoring process which would enable all arms transfer proposals to be carefully considered before any approval is granted.
- Adopt strong mitigation measures so as to minimize the risk of arms being misused by recipients for serious violations of international human rights law or international humanitarian law.
- Put in place mechanisms to immediately halt any arms transfer in case of evidence or strong suspicion of misuse of arms, or their transfer to third parties.

- Information and awareness-raising initiatives towards the recipients of arms-transfers about international human rights and humanitarian law, so that they understand their obligations to uphold the relevant standards and their criminal liability under international criminal law should they fail to do so.
- The countries joining the coalition against ISIS should at least take steps to mitigate the tense relation between the KRG and the central government in Bagdad.
- Arm -deliveries to the Kurdish forces should be on condition of guarantees that all communities in the areas of their control are included, not by creating sub militias representing separate minorities, but through an integrated approach on all levels.
- If delivering weapons to the Lebanese army, how it will affect the conflict in Syria should be taken into account, as Lebanese state and non-state institutions have actively participated in the fight against different opposition forces, including the Free Syrian Army, which is supposed to be an ally of the US-led coalition.

CUT OFF THE SUPPLY LINES OF THE PERPETRATORS OF WAR CRIMES
The countries joining the coalition against ISIS should take bold steps to cut off the supply lines of ISIS and other perpetrators of war crimes. Neighbouring countries, in particular Turkey as well as the KRG, need to be pushed to prevent any smuggling of oil from ISIS-held territories. In particular, the Gulf States need to take steps to prevent any form of human trafficking, in particular of women, from ISIS-held territories. The smuggling of antiquities is another source of income for ISIS and swift action needs to be taken against this practice. Last but not least, it is vital to secure cooperation and active efforts by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in cutting off financial and other support for ISIS from within their territories.

REGIONAL PROCESS
To develop a comprehensive political strategy, it is imperative to work with a broad coalition and to engage with states in the region that have an interest in regional peace and security. The lack of a regional security architecture in the Middle East that includes not just the Arab countries but also the non-Arab regional powers Iran, Turkey, and Israel, is part and parcel of the crisis in the region.
- It is important to persuade other countries in the region, among them Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Egypt, Turkey and, one way or another, Iran, to engage in dialogue, take action and agree on a roadmap towards peace and security in the Middle East.
- Sustainable peace and security in the Middle East will only be achieved through a regional security architecture. In order to be effective, such an architecture should include all relevant players, and therefore go beyond the scope and present membership of the League of Arab States, which does not include the main non-Arab countries in the region. It will not be established overnight, and therefore is a long-term goal, but the present crisis, which affects nearly all of the countries in the region, is a powerful incentive for commitment from all stakeholders.
- To date, the international reaction to ISIS focuses on Iraq, but a solution must also include Syria. As long as the Assad regime continues committing war crimes and is not held to account, there will be a breeding ground for radicalism. Furthermore, as long as a power vacuum exists in Syria, radical armed groups will find a safe haven there.

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