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WORLD | MIDDLE EAST CROSSROADS

Response Against Islamic State Hinges on Whether to Treat It as a State

Western leaders divided on the question



This undated image obtained by the Associated Press and posted to a militant website on Jan. 14, 2014, which has been verified and is consistent with other AP reporting, shows fighters from the group now called Islamic State marching in Raqqa, Syria.



By

YAROSLAV TROFIMOV

Nov. 19, 2015 5:30 a.m. ET

PARIS—The way the international community responds to the Paris attacks hinges on a fundamental question: the extent to which Islamic State is actually a state.

The militant group meets the textbook definitions of state. In western Iraq and eastern Syria, a landmass the size of Great Britain, it holds the monopoly on violence and exercises authority over citizens—to a higher degree than many members of the United Nations.

French President François Hollande nodded to this nature of the enemy with his choice of words after the Paris killings. France is “at war” after being attacked by “an army,” he said in a Monday address to parliament.

Speaking on the same day, President Barack Obama adopted a completely different vocabulary. He described Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, as “simply a network of killers.”

“We play into the ISIL narrative when we act as if they’re a state, and we use routine military tactics that are designed to fight a state that is attacking another state. That’s not what’s going on here,” Mr. Obama said.

MIDDLE EAST CROSSROADS

The

- Columns by Yaroslav Trofimov (<http://www.wsj.com/news/types/middle-east-crossroads?mod=mec>)

difference is critical. If Islamic State is treated mostly as a terrorist network, then the effort against it is essentially a counterterrorism operation in which the goal, as often stated by Mr. Obama, is primarily to undermine the group’s narrative and its appeal to Muslims world-wide. Militarily, this means focusing on narrow targets, such as its operatives, and taking utmost care to avoid civilian casualties.

But if Islamic State is treated as an enemy state, then the primary goal is the same as in conventional wars—first, destroy its ability to operate, including its infrastructure and economic base, and then eventually conquer its real estate.

THE ATTACKS IN PARIS

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- U.S. Eyes Russia-Iran Split in Bid to End Syria Conflict (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-russia-iran-split-in-bid-to-end-syria-conflict-1447895357>)
- Europe File: Post-Paris Politics Will Decide Europe's Economic Fate (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/post-paris-politics-will-decide-europes-economic-fate-1447884761>)

The ability to run a de facto state—the group has called on all Muslims to move there—is a crucial part of Islamic State’s narrative.

The group’s propaganda materials focus as much on the public services it provides as on how it is killing apostates and infidels. There are glossy reports of new bus services, of new school textbooks and streetlight repairs, as well as of pizza parlors, burger restaurants and espresso coffee shops that operate in Mosul and Raqqa.

“From an analytical perspective, it is certainly a state, but an unconventional one in the way it conceives of territory,” said Cole Bunzel, a scholar of jihadist groups at Princeton University.

Islamic State, he added, has two kinds of territories—actual ones such as the parts of Syria and Iraq it controls, and fictional ones such as the “provinces” it claims in Saudi Arabia or Algeria. Overall, Islamic State sees the whole world as territory it should rule, and the group has emblazoned the map of the planet on its currency.

At the heart of Islamic State’s appeal to Muslim radicals world-wide is its ability to persist in Syria and Iraq, despite a coalition of more than 60 nations arrayed against it. The training camps and manufacturing facilities on its territory are also used to export terror attacks beyond its borders.

Some of those who participated in the Paris attacks had traveled to Syria.

For now, neither France nor the U.S. want to send ground troops into the fight against Islamic State. But French officials already argue for dramatically expanding the kind of targets to be hit in the air campaign they launched on Islamic State following the Paris attack.

“When you bring order, food and health you have a degree of legitimacy among the population, even if terror is also part of your modus operandi,” said Bruno Tertrais, a fellow at the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique and a former

policy adviser to the French defense ministry. “What’s needed is to make sure this becomes an entity that can no longer call itself a state, and that can no longer govern.”

While the U.S. has been bombing Islamic State since mid-2014, most of its targets until recently were strictly military, such as armored vehicles, heavy weapons and concentrations of troops.

Administrative buildings used by Islamic State to govern, infrastructure such as power stations and communications towers, and the industrial base have been largely left unscathed. It is only in recent days that the U.S. struck the convoys of trucks with which Islamic State transports oil, a key source of revenue.

Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a prominent Iraqi parliamentarian and former national security adviser, said the targeting must become much less selective to effectively damage Islamic State.

“It’s the most horrible, criminal, ruthless state that has existed in history. The coalition led by the U.S. should target its infrastructure, its supply lines, its high-value targets. We need to cripple it,” Mr. Rubaie said.

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