Iran, Qatar, Terrorism, and the Wars for the Future of Islam

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There are times as we rush from crisis to crisis, and headline to headline, that we need to look at the broader pattern and connect the dots. This is especially true in the case of terrorism, where far too often the focus is on the actual act of terrorism and not the patterns and causes of violence that generate it. Reporting on terrorism almost always focuses on what is only a symptom as is if it was the disease.

The real disease, however, is a series of far more critical wars for the future of Islam—where Iran has played a key role, along with its Arab neighbors. Critical as counterterrorism is, it is still only a sideshow in comparison with the need to terminate actual wars and prevent new ones.

Terrorist actions by extremist movements like ISIS do dominate the patterns of Islamic violence in the United States and Europe. Such attacks, however, make up only a tiny fraction of the level of terrorism casualties that occur in the MENA region and Islamic countries—something around 4%, based on the START database and other sources. A Washington Post graphic of terrorist fatalities in the world between January 1, 2015 and July 16, 2016—using IHS Janes data—found 658 deaths in the United States and Europe compared with 28,031—only 2.3%—in the rest of the world. Almost all of those other deaths were in largely Islamic areas, and the vast majority were Muslims killing Muslims.

Even in the Muslim world, however, terrorism is a minor killing mechanism compared to civil war. There are no reliable figures, but it seems unlikely that there have been more than 30,000 deaths from terrorism in the MENA region since the political upheavals that have led to civil war began in 2011. The actual number may well be significantly below 20,000.

Consider the impact of civil war between Muslims in the states where Iran and Islamist extremist movements are directly involved. Working estimates by the UN as of April 2016 produced totals of around 470,000 dead for the Syria civil war alone. A low estimate by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reports that the death toll for civilians has reached 207,000, 94% of which were not from ISIS or terrorists—they came at the hands of the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance. Moreover, the civilians killed in this low estimate were estimated to include some 24,000 children and 23,000 women.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) also estimates that over half of the population has been forced from their homes, and 6.3 million are now internally displaced persons (IDPs), 4.8 million are refugees, 13.5 million require humanitarian assistance, including 4.6 million people in need trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, where they are exposed to grave protection threats. Large numbers of the people have been wounded, many have been killed and others are disabled or have grown up as a lost generation in war. Work by the World Bank and IMF also indicate that the economic consequences are so critical that they have cost Syria well over half its annual GDP and that it could take Syria a decade or more to simply fully recover.
Terrorism almost pales in significance by comparison. It is also important to remember that there are no clear data on combatant casualties, and they include large numbers of young Syrians, Iranians, Hezbollah, and other foreign fighters dragged into war for reasons most barely understand—at best. Moreover, the refugee and economic problems impact heavily on Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and the Arab Gulf states. Today’s wars cannot be contained within national boundaries.

The data on Islam’s other civil wars and near civil wars in the MENA region are less clear, and Iran’s role has been far more indirect. There are no meaningful casualty estimates for the fighting in Libya since 2011, although some estimates indicate there are at least 350,000 internally displaced persons.

Iraq—where Iran has played a major role in both creating Sunni-Shi’ite tension and violence and in fighting ISIS—had some 173,686–193,965 civilians die between 2003 and April 2017, according to Iraq Body Count. Some less reliable estimates go as high as 500,000. There are no accurate counts of refugees and IDPs, but the OCHA estimates some 3.0 million IDPs and 11.0 million Iraqis in need. These totals inevitably conceal many deaths, serious wounds, children, and others who become part of a lost generation, and the massive cost in terms of development. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that Iraq is now spending some 12% of its GDP on military forces.

Yemen—the most recent serious war in the region and one in which both Iran and Arab states, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, play a major role—seems to have produced more than 10,000 casualties by mid-2016 by UN estimates. However, there have been no credible totals since then and most data focus rather strangely on air attacks rather than the broader and more serious patterns in ground fighting—which are now compounded by Shi’ites fighting Shi’ites in the West and Shi’ite and Sunnis fighting Sunnis in the areas where AQIP dominates.

It is not direct deaths, however, which are the critical issue. The OCHA estimates that some 300,000 Yemenis may now have cholera as a result of the war, and that,

An alarming 18.8 million people - almost two thirds of the population - need some kind of humanitarian or protection support. Some 10.3 million are in acute need of assistance. This means they need aid to sustain their lives. This man-made disaster has been brutal on civilians. Currently, 17 million people are food insecure while a staggering seven million people do not know where their next meal is coming from and are at risk of famine. At least three million people have fled their homes, public services have broken down, less than half of the health centers are functional and medicine and equipment are limited. Access to safe water has become a major challenge and the lack of proper sanitation has increased the risk of communicable diseases. 

...A child under the age of 5 dies every 10 minutes of preventable causes...Overall, about 4.5 million children and pregnant or lactating women are acutely malnourished. This represents a 148 per cent increase since late 2014. Nearly 462,000 children are suffering from Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) – a nearly 200 per cent increase since 2014. In addition, 1.7 million children and 1.1 million pregnant or lactating women are suffering from Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM), while Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates are as high as 31 per cent in some locations
An estimated 14.8 million people lack access to basic healthcare, including 8.8 million living in severely under-served areas. Medicine and medical supplies/materials are in chronically short supply. According to WHO, more than 1,900 out of 3,507 health facilities in 16 governorates are either non-functional or partially functioning. Reported deaths and injuries from health facilities in Yemen reached 8,010 and 44,538 respectively, as of April 2017. Given that only 45 per cent of health facilities are functioning, the actual figures are likely to be higher.

Each of these wars, except Libya, have involved serious splits between the Sunni and Shi’ite branches of Islam, and ethnic and tribal conflicts which have sometimes interacted with fights over how to define a true Muslim—often involving violence within Sunni groups and between Shi’ite factions. The databases on casualties and violent events also show that there are many killings that are driven by sectarian violence that are not counted as terrorism because they do not have a clear sponsor or tie to terrorist groups, and that many estimates only count extremist groups and do not count state terrorism and killings. Wars and fighting between moderate Muslims and Muslim extremists have produced further major casualties and/or civilian suffering in Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia—as well as in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and increasingly in the rest of Asia.

None of this means that the fight against violent extremism and terrorism is not of critical importance. It does mean, however, that the key focus needs to be on ending the wars for the future of Islam, focusing on the role that given states are playing in supporting those wars, avoiding new potential sources of conflict like the feud between Qatar and its neighbors, and understanding just how destructive the fighting over religion has really become and how costly it already is for the development of the Middle East and North Africa and other parts of the Islamic world, and how much more costly it can be in the future.

MENA states need to be far more realistic about the cost of war. Muslim leaders need to look beyond the immediate threat of terrorism, and fully consider what is really happening. They need to consider just how much damage today’s conflicts and religious disputes are doing to the Arab world. They need to focus on containing Iran’s hardliners, rather than moving towards deeper sectarian conflict, and finding ways to show Iran’s moderates that different Iranian policies will provide a clear path to a peaceful and better future.

Outside states, like the United States, need to focus on ending today’s conflicts once ISIS is defeated. They too need to deter Iran’s hardliners while offering its people a clear alternative in terms of progress and development. They need to look beyond terrorism, and focus on helping their strategic partners bridge over their differences and help the region terminate its conflicts and move towards stability. The immediate crises in Iran and over Qatar are only the latest warning signs of problems that go far, far beyond a war on terrorism.

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