Marketing Utopia: The Pragmatic Realities of the Islamic State

Lecture by Peter Harling, Regional Analyst and Former Advisor to the Special Envoy to Syria

January 8, 2015

Summary by Amani Majzoub

The Islamic State (IS) has been able to fill existing ‘voids’ in the region in terms of structure, identity and policies, according to Mr. Peter Harling, Project Director for the International Crisis Group. A former advisor to the Special Envoy to Syria, Mr. Harling discussed the rising phenomenon of IS and its impact on the region, in a lecture hosted by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

At the beginning of the lecture, Harling put forth an interesting question: “What does the Islamic State represent to you?” Harling explained that, structurally speaking, IS is attempting to fill the gaps, or ‘voids’, in regions where other players have retreated (such as northeastern Syria, where the Syrian regime has largely withdrawn). To support his claim, Harling clarified that IS was able to take over Mosul, Iraq with a relatively small number of fighters, moderate logistics, and minor preparations because of two main reasons: (1) the weak Iraqi security apparatus – which has become a realm of cynicism for people who are not motivated, not well-equipped, and have no sense of purpose or belonging, and (2) the fact that local Sunni-Arab elites were essentially ‘sold out’ to Baghdad. Harling continued, stating that IS has truly benefitted from a profound ‘identity crisis’ especially within the Sunni-Arab world, in addition to the loss of any frame of reference, taking into account the historical perspective of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. More importantly, according to Harling, the successive failures in the region ranging to the events of the Arab uprisings have made it easier for IS to market what he calls a “utopia”.

Moreover, in his lecture, Harling shared the four major trends which he sees as currently growing in the region. First, there are players who tend to inflate and deflate in a very short period of time in the context of the chaotic ‘re-invention of affairs’. For example, the role of countries such as Turkey and Qatar has deflated as a consequence of the events back in 2011, while the role of a country like the United Arab Emirates is inflating, mainly in Iraq, due to their financial and military capacities.
Harling also gave the example of “Hutheen” in Yemen who have grown beyond their ability to sustain themselves and which he predicted would ultimately shrink in the near future. Following this line of logic, in Harling’s opinion, IS has grown beyond its ability to sustain itself and might deflate in the long run. The second trend involves a phenomenon shift, from political movements which are hierarchal to something which is organic and can take different shapes; thus, building from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down. The third important trend involves the devolution of power in the region, such as the chaotic decentralization and fragmentation which has overcome many countries of the Middle East. IS is yet another form of devolution of power (putting its moral standpoint aside). If IS is viewed through the lens of a local governance power, then they represent a network of educated individuals who communicate effectively through modern technology. With this configuration they offer minimum levels of basic services in relatively effective ways compared to other players. For instance, IS was successful in creating one cohesive response to the needs of the people in Deir el Zour, Syria. Although people in these areas might prefer the regime, they have succumbed to the reality they have been subject to and are trying to adapt to it. The last trend discussed by Harling concerns the semantics of the Islamic State and the lack of clarity vis-à-vis their ultimate plan. The name Islamic State – or, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – is not clear; as it appears they do not have a clear theory or concept for the Islamic State.

Harling concluded his lecture by saying that in the region, the name of the game right now is an 'arms race' and a variety of players are engaged in a proxy war supporting all kinds of factions whose presence and growth ultimately affect the structure of states in the Middle East. IS has come to catalyze this 'arms race' – and their filling of the 'void' has given Arab states the opportunity to reorganize and look into their failures (although not admitted by these states). Nevertheless, Harling asserted that IS will indeed pay the price of their actions on the long run.