



Islamic State (IS) Thrives on War, Wahhabism and Western Policy, says Patrick Cockburn

Religious Minorities exposed to “reign of terror”, veteran Middle East correspondent reports at CSI event

ZURICH, October 10, 2014 --- The Islamic State (IS) has thrived as a consequence of war conditions in Iraq and Syria, the militancy of Wahhabi ideology, and miscalculations of American policy, Middle East specialist Patrick Cockburn proposed at a public lecture hosted by Christian Solidarity International (CSI) on the 8th of October. It now controls territory in Syria and Iraq the size of France.

The IS is a child of warfare in Iraq and Syria, according to Cockburn. These violent conflicts were triggered respectively by the American overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, and by the continuing Washington-backed efforts to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. He described the IS as a war machine rather like an “Islamic Khmer Rouge”. War conditions, Cockburn maintained, are vital to the success of the IS.

While President Obama ordered the bombing of the IS in Iraq in August, and the extension of air strikes to Syria last month with the aim "to degrade and destroy" the new jihadi state, the IS is still “quietly expanding,” Cockburn claimed. The psychological impact of this expansion in the face of U.S. firepower, Cockburn said, will be a great boon to the IS and will demoralize its opponents. Cockburn believes “the IS is here to stay.”

Half-hearted fight against the IS

The rise of the IS was fueled by Wahhabist ideology, and money and weapons sent from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. "In many respects, what the IS believes is only Saudi Wahhabism carried to its logical and most violent conclusion," Cockburn said. He also noted that Saudi Arabia is also not prepared to combat the IS effectively – nor are most of the other 44 nations that the United States has assembled for the fight. It is noteworthy, Cockburn said, that the forces with a credible record of fighting the IS, such as the Syrian army, the Syrian Kurds, Hezbollah, and the Iraqi Shiite militias, are not included in the US-formed anti-IS coalition. Nor are great powers like Russia and China.

40 years of radicalization leading to the end of religious diversity

According to Cockburn, the religious fanaticism of the IS is not a new phenomenon. During the last 40 years, Wahhabism has been extensively promoted globally by Saudi Arabia, and has become the dominant ideology within Sunni Islam. “Where Wahhabism is strong, the religious minorities are at risk,” Cockburn said, and they are currently facing a “reign of terror” from this force in Syria and Iraq.

Cockburn recalled finding enormous religious diversity in the Middle East's population on his first trip to Baghdad in 1977, and later in Syria. "And now all this religious diversity is ending," Cockburn said. "Christians are fleeing, Yazidis have fled, some of the other minorities have gone and it is difficult to see how this can be reversed." "Wahhabism does not tolerate other forms of Islam," Cockburn added. "In earlier times, the Shiites were considered as a different type of Muslim, but now they are not regarded as Muslim at all."

The West has offered "hardly any" resistance to the spread of Wahhabism in recent decades, Cockburn said. An important reason for this is Saudi Arabia's wealth and integration with the western economy. American arms exports to Saudi Arabia, Cockburn noted, amount to about \$90 billion annually.

What can be done?

"I do not think there is a short-term solution, because people hate each other too much," Cockburn said. The first and most important step towards peace would be a ceasefire between the Syrian government and non-IS rebels, he proposed. Only then can constructive conversations between the key belligerents take place in the context of a long cooling-off period. In Cockburn's view, the arrangement of ceasefires in Iraq and Syria, and the ultimate defeat of the IS will require cooperation between the United States and Russia and their regional allies. The abdication of President Assad, Cockburn advised, should not be a precondition of talks: "By insisting that Assad had to go, Western states have already turned the peace negotiations into a recipe for more war."

Cockburn's lecture was based on his widely-acclaimed new book, *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising*, OR Books, 2014, and was delivered in the context of the CSI-sponsored series: "The Future of Religious Minorities in the Middle East." The entire presentation can be viewed at: www.middle-east-minorities.com.

Patrick Cockburn has been a Middle East correspondent since 1979, first for the *Financial Times*, and currently for the *Independent*. He is the recipient of prestigious awards, including the Orwell Prize for Journalism and the Foreign Correspondent of the Year Award.