

Normality comes before moderation

BY FARISH NOOR

LAYING FOUNDATIONS: Efforts to normalise the lives of people living in war zones must take into account their societal needs

NOW that the international campaign against the radical group Islamic State (IS, formerly known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) is under way, there is much talk of military strategy and the methods that may be contemplated and used against the group to contain its advance across the Arab world. While many governments in the region and beyond have come to see IS as an existential threat to their own states and governments, there seems to be less consensus as to what to do and what kind of military pressure ought to be asserted upon it. There has been talk of the use of airstrikes, drones, high-technology weapons and the like to prevent the movement from solidifying into a semblance of an armed force akin to an army, but this approach takes IS to be a military threat, primarily.

The problem with such an approach is that it does not take into account the political economy of radical movements, and how they often thrive and grow in states of crisis and violence in the first place. Here is where we need to remember the facts on the ground: the IS phenomenon is a complex one that has many facets; on the one hand, there is the confounding phenomenon of educated young people from developed countries travelling to Iraq-Syria to get themselves involved in the fighting there. But, it has to be remembered that the movement also has an organic face to it, which emerged out of the chaos and instability in parts of the Arab world itself. We need to remember that for many local Arab supporters and members of IS, the transition to join a radical militant group is not so wide a phenomenal gap in the first place.

IS is not the first radical militant group to appear in that part of the world and even if it is defeated militarily, it may not be the last. For as long as there is no state apparatus that can deliver the necessary services expected of a state — healthcare, education, public security — the conditions remain ripe for radicalism to emerge.

Here, we need to appreciate the prolonged effects of normalised violence and the breakdown of states: for thousands of Iraqis, violence has become a commonplace and routine part of their daily reality for more than a decade. We need to understand that an Iraqi child born in 2000 would have, by now, experienced violence on a regular basis for almost 1½ decades. These are children who have lived in war zones and for whom the spectacle of shootings, bombings, suicide attacks and indiscriminate violence have become normal, daily occurrences, and for whom violence is the new norm. Under such circumstances, it is not difficult to understand how and why so many young people who live in those parts of the world view militancy as a run-of-the-mill alternative to their lives that are already bereft of hope and prospects for the future.

We cannot seriously expect young people in places like that to not turn to the gun, as long as the rule of the gun remains the only operative norm in society. Once order has broken down and the state is no longer able to protect its own people, the rule of the gun becomes the most expedient method of establishing any semblance of order in such conflict zones, and this does not only apply to places like Iraq and Syria, but also in other parts of Africa, too.

In my own work on political violence, I have lived in, researched in and worked in such places, where children no longer know what a normal life looks like. In some cases, I have visited conflict zones where something as mundane as going to school is regarded as an extraordinary privilege beyond the

grasp of most. We take it as a given that our kids can go to school, study and come home safely every day — yet, do we realise that for the thousands of people the world over, the simple act of going to school, learning a lesson and coming home alive is a gamble that they need to take on a daily basis? Under such circumstances, we cannot seriously entertain the hope that radical groups like IS would simply vanish if they were bombed into submission, for the very act of bombing them merely reproduces and perpetuates the cycle of routine violence that was one of the root causes of radicalism in the first place. Thus, while there is now a campaign to restore “moderation” in the conduct and praxis of politics and governance in the Arab world, we need to begin by laying down the foundations of a normal life for the millions of people who have been displaced, traumatised and robbed of their education over the years.

For most of us who live in countries that have, thankfully, been spared the blight of war, the daily reports we receive of bomb attacks, killings and mass violence in other parts of the world are troubling enough, but try to imagine, if you will, the lives of those who have known nothing but war since their early childhood, and for whom going to school, having a textbook to read and having a teacher to teach you are a luxury beyond their calculations.

For this reason, the campaign to secure and normalise life in Syria and Iraq has to be a comprehensive one that takes into account the political economy of the situation and the societal needs of the people there: what these countries need is not only peace, but in real terms — they need teachers, social workers, doctors and other assorted human resources to restore to them a sense of normality that has been denied for so long. Failure to address these concerns may simply lead us to another military campaign that may succeed on the battlefield, but fail in the hearts and minds of the people themselves.

Farish Noor is Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and Visiting Fellow at ISIS Malaysia