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Judgement Day for ISIL and What It Would Mean for Canada

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Despite the carnage wrought by ISIL around the world, the days appear numbered for its caliphate in Syria and Iraq. We are likely talking the shorter to medium term at most. ISIL faces intense military pressure on all fronts. It continues to lose territory and its leadership figures are being targeted and killed. Increasingly ISIL faces significant challenges in replenishing its losses due to efforts by Turkey and most nations internationally to block the flow of foreign fighters into the caliphate. As leadership figures are eliminated, internal factionalism will create serious stresses and vulnerabilities. The forces aligned against ISIL are powerful, despite conflicting agendas. Add to this reports of financial problems, including a strained ability to pay its militants, and the result is a picture of an entity on a downward trajectory. This in no way means that the caliphate or its extremist message will die easily or that we are nearing an end to the scourge of ISIL inspired terrorism – only that its ability to sustain itself territorially has limits.

If one accepts the above assessment, now is the time to consider what this will mean. Now is the time for thinking and planning directed at dealing with the eventual collapse of a self-proclaimed state in which countless thousands have been radicalized, traumatized, received military and terrorists training, let alone the reality of child soldiers and intense psychological scarring caused by ISIL. We should be worried. Many militants will be killed as the caliphate eventually goes through its death throes or splinters apart. Some will re-align themselves within the Islamist extremist movement. Others, including hundreds and perhaps thousands of foreign fighters will attempt to return home, some to North America, large numbers to Europe and countries throughout the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Many will want to put the past behind them, while others will almost certainly remain committed to the cause. We've already seen the impact of foreign fighters returning to countries in Europe and the numbers will grow. We likewise should not forget the role played by returning foreign fighters following the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan in the late 1980's, helping to launch an international Islamist extremist movement.

In keeping with the Liberal's 2015 election platform, the Canadian government has committed to "renovating" the country's national security framework. As the government undertakes promised

consultations, we should consider not just the current threat environment, but also look forward and recognize that the ISIL caliphate is not permanent. When it eventually fractures or collapses, large numbers of trained foreign fighters will be on the move internationally and Canada will see its fair share return home.

Canadian government plans concerning revisiting the Anti-Terrorism Act (C-51) and establishing a more coherent Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program will be critical if Canada is to be positioned to deal with a fluid and difficult security environment. The list of challenges is lengthy. Full identification of Canadians fighting for ISIL and other groups in the Syrian conflict can prove difficult given the use of aliases and what is often fragmentary information. Some returning fighters will be prosecuted but in other cases the evidence against them may be incomplete and the challenges around using intelligence as evidence in court proceedings will hamper prosecution. Some may face only short prison terms or peace bonds, while others may return undetected. Assessing who or who may not be a returning foreign fighter at airports and border access points will become even more critical. All this will place added pressure on already strained police, border and intelligence resources.

Canada has now seen a number of lone-wolf style attacks or incidents by untrained individuals who failed in their efforts to travel to Syria. We should now give serious thought to what our national security model should look like in a world in which numbers of trained fighters would be in our midst, some hopefully imprisoned, but not all. There continues to be much debate around questions of threat reduction activities, preventative detention, intelligence to evidence and various other aspects of Canadian counter-terrorism legislation and practices. The Canadian government has also committed to a more coherent counter-radicalization model, after much foot-dragging and false starts over the past decade. Many CVE questions need answers; who leads and what is the role of the police and community groups?; what does CVE look like in prisons?; can counter-radicalization programs be forced on an individual?

As Canada debates such issues, it is critical that we respond not just to the current threat environment, but that we also attempt to look over the horizon and ensure we are prepared for what may be the next phase in this struggle. Those preparations should include a clear vision on counter-radicalization that contains CVE programs in prisons. We should ensure our national security framework is fully connected, and maximizes intelligence exchanges so that we can identify and detain returning foreign fighters. Lastly, we should thoroughly review our intelligence to evidence model to be confident it will support effective prosecution.

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