

## Arab world must rejoin the fight against Isis in Syria

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The lack of reaction from the Arab and wider Muslim world after the [terrorist attacks in Paris](#) and Beirut is both shameful and unfortunate. The US-led coalition to fight Isis in Iraq and Syria is reeling from desertions by Arab states that have increasingly found excuses not to take part in military actions against the Islamist militant group, even though some of their own capitals have been targets.

The Paris aftermath has led in the west to an excess of discussion on military and political policy on Iraq and Syria, how to deal with the Syrian leadership and how to cope with the refugee crisis. Yet in the Arab world there has been little policy reassessment or debate.

International pressure is mounting on the Arab states. [Anwar Gargash, the United Arab Emirates minister for foreign affairs](#), was quoted on Monday by the official WAM agency as saying that the UAE would “participate in any international effort demanding a ground intervention to fight terrorism” in Syria. But unless western nations galvanise the states into action and their governments to act more responsibly over the crisis in the Middle East, the situation across the Muslim world will become increasingly dangerous. Isis is already [killing far beyond its heartland](#) – most recently in [Afghanistan](#) and Bangladesh.

After Paris, there have been no urgent meetings of the Arab League or the Organization of the Islamic Conference – the premier Arab and Muslim policymaking groups. There have been no united calls to combat and defeat Isis, while individual states have excused themselves from taking any action.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia long ago stopped bombing Isis targets in Iraq and Syria, claiming that they were too busy with Yemen – where the conflict is localised rather than a regional threat. (Remember the smiling face of the [UAE female fighter pilot](#) who took part in the first bombing runs of the coalition earlier this year? Well, that participation has ended.) Bahrain is too busy battling its own majority Shia population. In November, at a conference in the Gulf, officials from numerous Gulf states told me that they considered the Iranian threat far more serious than that posed by Isis. For Iran, read the presumed Shia threat, even though all the Gulf states have some Shia population. Last month’s suicide attacks in Paris, Beirut and Tunis and the bomb placed aboard a Russian airliner in Egypt have done nothing to change that analysis.

Iran certainly has been predatory in the Middle East, creating Shia militias and opposition groups in Lebanon and Iraq and funding groups opposed to the royal families of Saudi and Bahrain, according to their governments. But it is not now trying to bomb every Arab city, seize Arab oil or kill off every ruling family, as Isis would like to do.

There is deep, misplaced suspicion among Arab states that after the nuclear deal with the US, Washington is trying to leverage Iran into playing a major security role in the Gulf, displacing the Arabs – even though Iran does not have the capability to do so and the US’s current oil-rich allies are far more valuable than an unknown quantity such as Iran. The wealthy Arab states also cannot agree on who to finance and arm among the myriad Syrian groups, causing competition among them. Nor have they provided enough funding for UN and other aid organisations operations in the refugee crisis that erupted in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon and has now spread to Europe. While the Europeans debate how many refugees to take in, the wealthy Gulf states have yet to agree to rehabilitate any Syrian or Iraqi refugees.

The struggle against Isis has to be Arab-led and Arab-fought, although doubtless with US and European backing. Politically, it must present an Arab face to win the ideological battle against Isis. After the disastrous US occupation of Iraq, Arab leaders are well aware that the more the US increases its exposure in the Middle East, the greater the anti-American feeling in the region, and the more difficult it becomes to gain support for action from a reluctant White House and Congress.

The 21-nation [talks in Vienna](#) led by the Americans to decide on a common policy towards Syria and the future of President Bashar al-Assad have offered the first real opportunity in five years of mayhem in the country for all parties to achieve common policy goals. But the Vienna talks cannot succeed unless the Arab states show determination and unity. Sunni and Shia must fight together, not each other.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, most recently ‘Pakistan on the Brink’