Let's not help ISIS create chaos

By Steve Thorngate
November 18, 2015

As Rusty Foster would say, the takes are in. Everyone's got something to say about global terrorism, ISIS, and refugees, and some of it is even worth reading.

If you're only going to read one longer piece, I recommend this one by Scott Atran and Nafees Hamid. Among other things they quote from *The Management of Savagery,* a 2004 manifesto by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which later became ISIS. That document's points include:

- Attacks should focus on tourist centers—which will respond by increasing security, at great expense.
- Attacks should aim to draw the U.S.—and by extension, its European allies—into deeper, more direct military conflict.

According to Atran and Hamid, the major goal for ISIS here is to create and manage chaos. "The greater the hostility toward Muslims in Europe and the deeper the West becomes involve in military action in the Middle East," they write, "the closer ISIS comes to its goal."

Ezra Klein adds that a U.S. ground war would present ISIS with a better means of recruiting people to its chaotic cause: "A chance to fight the infidels in defense of your land is more appealing than a chance to die at the hands of their superior [bombing] technology."

You could argue that a full-on assault of ISIS is just what we need to do anyway, even if it does play into their horrifying pursuit of violent chaos. Destroy them; destroy their ability to create more chaos. You could even suggest that anyone who doesn't want to send thousands of American ground troops into Syria and Iraq is just a squishy peacenik, someone to whom nothing ever looks like a nail on account of refusing to wield a hammer in the first place.

Thing is, we've been there before. Not just the general place of contemplating a military invasion when we're terrorized and afraid—we've been *there,* in the geographical area where ISIS is now strong, and quite recently. To say our military occupation didn't fix things is putting it mildly. We beat some bad guys; others took their place; now, this is happening.

What should we do about ISIS? That's far from clear—but the burden shouldn't fall on those of us who are deeply skeptical of getting involved in another land war in the Middle East. It should fall on those who believe that the thing that badly backfired a few years ago will somehow be effective now.

And [when a presidential candidate refers to a "clash of civilizations"](#)—to a binary distinction between Islam and the West—there's no reason to believe that ISIS responds in fear of his resolve. After all, they agree with him. While their ultimate goal is to defeat their enemy, their more immediate project is to eliminate what they have called the "[grayzone](#)" between them and their enemy: the notion that Islam can exist as part of pluralistic democracy rather than as one of two global sides squared off against each other in chaotic war.

We can't beat them by ceding them this point. But with this week's backlash against Syrian refugees—aka the predominantly Muslim victims of ISIS—we seem awfully eager to try.