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United Service

Informing the defence and security debate since 1947

Fascist imperialism: a 21st century national security challenge

The Ottoman Empire's victory over the combined British Imperial and French forces at Gallipoli a century ago (see pp. 24 – 28), was its last. Within a decade, the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate¹ was replaced by a secular Turkey led by a Gallipoli hero, Mustafa Kemal. A new Muslim caliphate was established in Saudi Arabia, but this caliphate did not gain the widespread recognition in the Arab world that its predecessor enjoyed. Events of the last decade, however, have rekindled a belief among some fundamentalist Muslims that a widely recognised caliphate is achievable in the 21st century.

The al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 triggered the ill-conceived United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. This released a chain of events in the Arab world which are still playing out. The 'Arab Spring' democracy movement overthrew some dictators, but others have held on and new ones have emerged. The resulting ongoing chaos has been fertile ground for the development of political movements, such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram in Sub-Saharan West Africa, each committed to re-establishing the caliphate. While both use terrorism as a tool, it would be a mistake to view them simply as terrorist organisations. As Peter Hartcher² has pointed out, they are developing the characteristics of fascist³ regimes with their own conventional armies. While their immediate objectives are local – the carving out of an Islamic nation-state governed by sharia law – they have imperial ambitions, fuelled by historic grievances. Indeed, in this they are not dissimilar to China, seeking to overcome its 'century of humiliation'; and Russia, seeking to regain the power and prestige of the Soviet Union and an earlier Imperial Russia; both of which also exhibit fascist characteristics.

As we noted in March, there is scope for Islamic State and Boko Haram to export their campaign to places in our region such as the southern Philippines, southern Thailand and parts of Indonesia. They also have demonstrated their ability, via social media, to appeal to Australians, young and old, marginalised and mainstream. A paper in the March issue by Dr James Carmel provided some insight into the origin, philosophy and laws of fundamentalist Islam [*United Service* 66 (1), 21 – 23]. In this issue (pp. 9 – 12), Captain Mona Shindy examines the Muslim experience in contemporary Australia and what is needed to break the terrorist cycle. I commend both papers to you.

¹A caliphate is a form of Islamic government embodying sharia law. It is led by a caliph, a person considered a political and religious successor to the prophet Muhammad and a leader of the entire Muslim community.

²*The Sydney Morning Herald* 3 March 2015.

³Fascism is a form of centralised authoritarian government with radical hyper-nationalist and socialist characteristics. It bodes no dissent internally and rides roughshod over the rights of other peoples.

In short, while terrorism continues to be a major national security challenge for us, so too is 21st century-style fascist imperialism as being practised by Russia in Eastern Europe; China in East, South-East and South Asia; and Islamic State and Boko Haram in the Middle East and West Africa.

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