

A dangerous contagion spreads. Editorial, *The Australian*, 3 November 2014

AS a counter-insurgency expert, the Washington-based former Australian Army officer David Kilcullen has few peers. His conclusions in *The Weekend Australian* that Western strategy has collapsed, that we are worse off than before 9/11 and that a complete rethink is needed should resonate with national leaders as they confront the insidious spread of Islamic State contagion.

It is hard to argue with Kilcullen's sobering assessment. Expectations that Islamic State's medieval depravity might have sapped it of support in the Islamic world and elsewhere have not been realised. To the contrary, estimates are that it has more than 30,000 fighters. Half of them, according to a new UN report, are foreigners drawn from 80 countries as disparate as Australia, Norway, the Maldives and Chile. In London, an astounding poll reported by *The Times* suggested one in seven young British adults had "warm feelings" towards Islamic State. Academics warn of a surge of "anti-politics" sentiment among disaffected under-35s. In Jordan, next door to the murderous horrors being perpetrated daily in Iraq and Syria, only 62 per cent of respondents in another poll regarded Islamic State as a terrorist outfit. In key NATO member Turkey, the signs are similarly depressing, with pro-Islamic State students demonstrating in support of the extremists, contributing to President Erdogan's obstructionism towards the US-led coalition.

The contagion is also evident in the way Islamic State and its self-styled caliphate have won declarations of allegiance or support from militant groups across the world, including the chief spokesman of the Pakistan Taliban and five of its key commanders. It also has the support of the dastardly Boko Haram in Nigeria and militants among Sunnis who make up 27 per cent of Lebanon's population. Tunisia, the lone success story from the Arab Spring, held a democratic election last week. Despite this, Tunisia is the source of more foreign fighters joining Islamic State than any other country. More than 3000 have joined so far.

Militant groups in Libya as well as Algeria have also sworn allegiance to Islamic State, proving their credentials by carrying out beheadings. In Egypt, President el-Sisi has warned of a growing existential threat. He declared a state of emergency in Sinai following beheadings of soldiers by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis militants, who have also pledged loyalty to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

A heavy price is being paid, as Kilcullen points out, for President Obama's precipitate withdrawal from Iraq and the weakness this telegraphed to Iran and Russia over the uprising in Syria. This led to the emergence of Islamic State from the ashes of al-Qa'ida. The jihadist contagion will be halted only if perceptions of Western weakness are overcome.

Much is riding on the protracted battle for the highly strategic Kurdish town of Kobane on the Syrian-Turkish border. A setback would be a crushing blow for the coalition fighting Islamic State. Victory for the jihadists would further boost perceptions of their strength that are drawing support from other terrorist groups.

The US-led coalition's strategy based on airstrikes and limited ground engagement, training and logistical support is working as far as it goes. But much more is needed if dangerous perceptions of Islamic State's strength are to be defeated.

