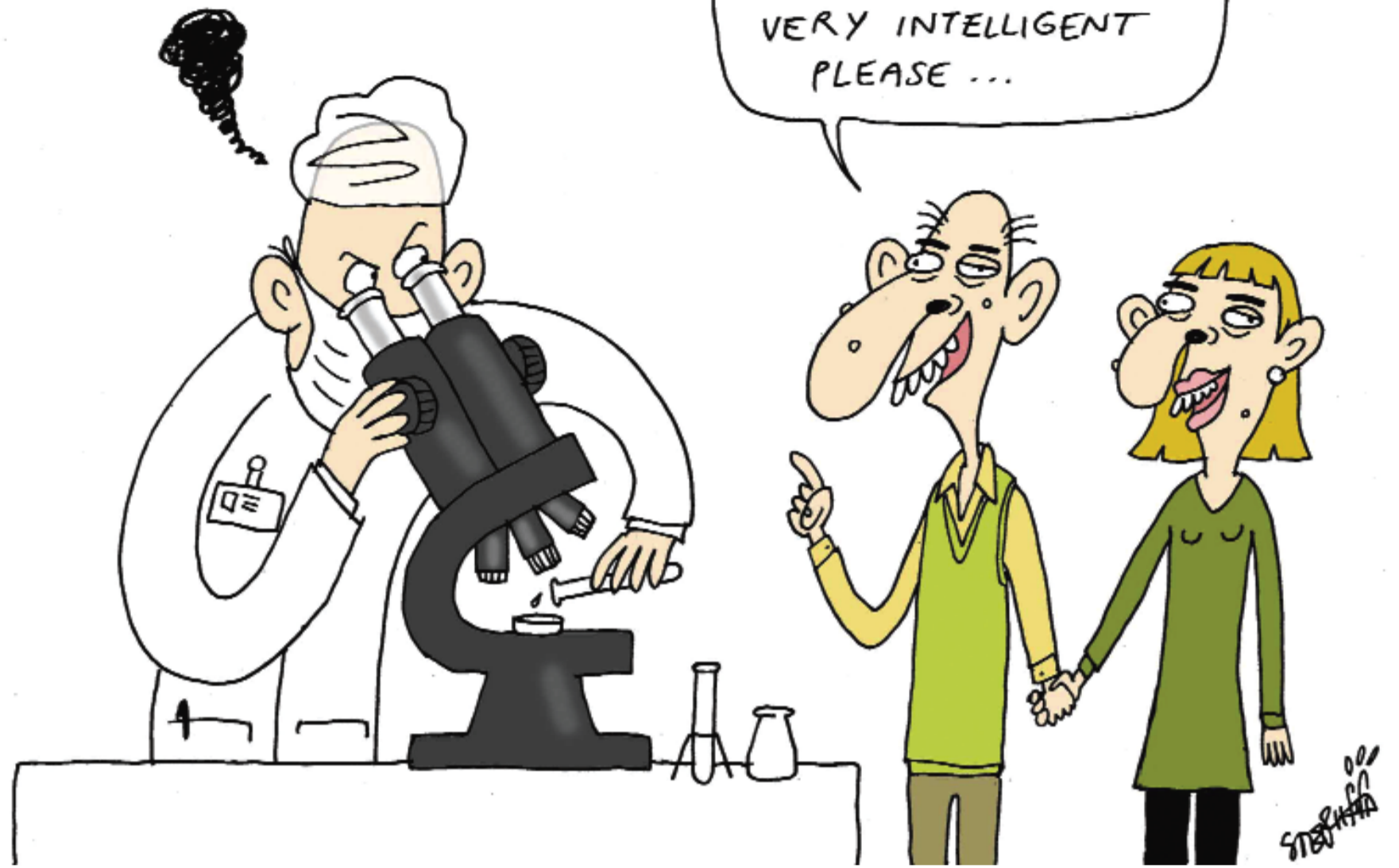


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GREEN LIGHT TO GENETICALLY  
MODIFY HUMAN EMBRYOS ...

## COALITION AIMS TO RECAPTURE IS 'CALIPHATE'

By Samia Nakhoul

The US-led coalition fighting Islamic State aims this year to recapture Iraq's second city Mosul, working with Iraqi government forces, and drive the jihadis out of Raqqa, their stronghold in northeast Syria, Arab and Western officials say. If it succeeds, the coalition will have struck a crippling blow against Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The strategy is to regain territory at the heart of IS' cross-border state, take both its "capitals", and destroy the confidence of its fighters that it can expand as a Sunni caliphate and magnet for jihadis, according to these Arab and Western officials, few of whom were willing to speak on the record on a matter of such strategic sensitivity.

"The plan is to hit them in Raqqa in Syria and in Iraq at Mosul, to crush their capitals," said an Iraqi official with knowledge of the strategy. "I think there is some speed and urgency by the coalition, by the US administration and by us to end this year with the regaining of control over all territory." Iraqi officials say 2016 will witness the elimination of Daesh (IS) and the Americans have the same idea - get the job finished, then they can withdraw and (President Barack) Obama will have a legacy," said a diplomat in Baghdad, emphasising the Iraqi part of the operation. "The day Mosul is liberated, Daesh will be defeated." The war against jihadi insurgents in this turbulent region has had its twists and turns but there is a palpable sense in Baghdad that the tide has turned against IS.

## Twin-Pronged Anti-IS Strategy

In the year after the jihadis' summer 2014 surge back into Iraq from the bases they managed to build amid the chaos of Syria's civil war, IS momentum as a rapid, flexible and brutal military force seemed unstoppable. But in the past nine months IS has lost swathes of territory and strategic towns. In Iraq it was driven out of Tikrit and Sinjar in the north, the oil refinery town of

Baiji in central Iraq, and Ramadi west of Baghdad in Anbar province, the heart of insurgency after the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam.

In northern Syria, US-allied Kurdish militia of the People's Protection Units (YPG) have taken vital territory and border crossings below the frontier with Turkey, after breaking a long IS siege at Kobani and later taking Tel Abyad, north of Raqqa and a key supply line for the jihadi capital. "Daesh are losing their ability to hold onto territory in Iraq and to stage the kind of complex attacks that allow them to hold the towns they seized," said a US official, adding that the recapture of Mosul would start in 2016.

Lieutenant-General Sean MacFarland, Baghdad-based head of the US-led coalition, emphasised to a group of reporters last month the twin-pronged approach to operations against IS in Iraq, "in conjunction with something we might have going on over in Syria about the same time (and) see if we can put pressure on the enemy in two places at once and create a dilemma." Hisham Al-Hashemi, an Iraqi expert on IS who advises the Iraqi government on the group, points out that as a result of last year's setbacks "out of seven strategic roads between Iraq and Syria they (IS) now have one; they cannot move with ease and Turkey has tightened the noose on them." IS is under pressure across many other fronts apart from its ability to deploy. The collapse in oil prices has dented its revenue from oil smuggling, now through a less permeable Turkish border, from captured Syrian and Iraqi fields.

## Covert Operations

Coalition air strikes recently incinerated a stockpile of cash from looting and kidnapping, taxation and extortion, forcing IS to cut wages. It is losing top cadres. More than 100 mid-level to senior leaders have been killed since May, according to coalition spokesman Colonel Steve Warren, who says that "works out to an average of one every two days." The place where they were holding huge cash reserves was targeted

and destroyed," the diplomat told Reuters. "Daesh will be defeated in Iraq. It is not a question of if but when," added another senior Western diplomat in Iraq. A top Iraqi official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Mosul operation would require delicate collaboration between the US air force, the Iraqi army, local Sunni tribal forces, and Peshmerga fighters from the self-governing Kurdistan Regional Government east of the city. "Most likely, coalition special forces will be embedded with the Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga will close on Mosul from the north and east."

In Syria, he said, the likely combination would involve coalition air strikes with special forces and US-led covert missions operating alongside mainly Kurdish fighters of the YPG and other Syrian rebels. "They have some special forces on the ground in Syria in Hasaka, on the outskirts of Raqqa with the rebels," the Iraqi official said. An airstrip at Hasaka is being prepared by the United States for this purpose.

The official warned, however, of the need for coordination with Russia, which brought its air force to Syria last September to shore up the Iran-backed rule of President Bashar al-Assad, and is using an airstrip in Qamishli further north, but focusing most of its fire on mainstream and other Islamist rebels rather than IS. This "competition between the two superpowers is really very, very dangerous," he said. "There must be coordination (around) the complex operations that will take place."

## Libya, New IS Destination

Yet even in the unlikely event that all these plans go like clockwork, that alone would not put an end to IS. The group, IS experts say, has become expert at defensive warfare, and is spreading its tentacles from Europe to North Africa. Inside the recaptured city of Ramadi the Iraqi army found a warren of underground tunnels the jihadi forces used for shelter, mobility and escape. Mosul, a far bigger city with one million people and a river on one side, is heavily

defended and tunnelled, with berms, trenches and hidden bombs.

Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the IS "caliph" still based near Mosul, has already begun to anticipate tactical reverses. Arab and Western security sources say he has recently sent several hundred of his top lieutenants to Libya, to consolidate the existing IS bridgehead there amid the chaos of a splintering country, and to offset diminishing revenue in Syria and Iraq by creaming off Libyan oil resources. Coalition dependence on Kurdish forces in both northern Syria and Iraq, and the Iraqi army's reliance on Iran-backed Shiite militia up until the reconquest of Ramadi by regular forces, were and are being exploited by IS as a means to rally Sunni Arab grievances. Battlefield success will count for little, officials and diplomats say, without political reconciliation and power-sharing to heal the wounds opened in the ethno-sectarian bloodletting that followed the overthrow of Saddam's minority Sunni Arab rule in 2003.

## After Mosul?

Islamic State, whose forerunner first emerged as a Sunni reaction to the US installation of Shiite majority rule in Iraq, twisted the sectarian knife in the country. But after the fall of Mosul, then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, leader of the Shiite Islamist Dawa party, who had alienated the Sunnis by tearing up a power-sharing pact with them and the Kurds, was pushed aside. He was replaced by a more conciliatory Dawa leader, Haider Al-Abadi.

Most observers give Abadi credit for trying to be more inclusive by negotiating oil revenue sharing with the Kurdistan Regional Government, proposing a National Guard, under which the different sects and ethnic groups would police their areas, and setting out a vision of a decentralized, federal Iraq. Yet distrust of the Dawa is now so engrained it extends to Abadi. "The problem among the Shi'ites, especially in Dawa, is that there is a deep anti-Sunni feeling," said one Iraqi leader. — Reuters

WANTED: A GRAND  
BARGAIN TO RESCUE  
EU FROM 'POLYCRISIS'

By Paul Taylor

The European Union needs an ambitious grand bargain at its next summit to rescue itself from an accumulation of crises that threaten to blow apart its model of integration. Like children at a birthday party, each leader has to get a going-home present. And as with many children's parties, there may be a tantrum along the way. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is at risk at home from a backlash against a mass influx of Syrian refugees. British Prime Minister David Cameron is trying to win a referendum on staying in the EU and cannot help her due to public hostility to immigration. Nor can French President Francois Hollande, who is struggling for re-election in a country transfixed by the threat from Islamist militants.

Berlin, the EU's pivotal power, sees controlling migration as the central priority as it tries to cope with one million asylum seekers who have arrived in the last year. Ideally, EU leaders need to forge a deal on Feb. 18-19 that encompasses effective action to strengthen Europe's external borders and share the refugee burden, and a mutually acceptable solution to Britain's demands to change its membership terms.

A comprehensive package would also need to address Italy's political and economic frustrations with the EU, Greece's quest for substantial debt relief, and Poland's wish to see NATO raise its military presence in eastern Europe to deter Russia. "These deals are only possible when countries are in a state of symmetrical despair," said Laszlo Andor, a professor at Brussels' ULB University and former Hungarian EU commissioner. A package deal might yield a more integrated "core Europe", adding an EU border and coast guard and a common asylum policy, and a looser union for countries like Britain that opt to stay outside the 19-nation euro single currency area. A deal seems within reach with London that would formally exempt the UK from the EU goal of "ever closer union", shield its financial sector from being regulated abusively by the euro zone and let it withhold some benefits from new migrant workers if its social welfare system were under great strain. The EU would cease to be a "two-speed Europe", with all 28 members converging at different paces towards the same goal, and become a permanent two-tier or multi-tier construction, possibly with an outer circle of associates such as Turkey and Ukraine.

## Tipping Point

While European leaders' despair may not be symmetrical, the refugee crisis is concentrating minds on a threat that could break the union, fan populism and alienate British voters. European Council President Donald Tusk has warned that the EU is close to a tipping point, saying it has only six to eight weeks left to save the Schengen zone of passport-free travel or see national barriers slam shut for the duration. That raises the urgency of a deal with Greece and Italy, the main arrival points for migrants from Turkey and North Africa.

Horse-trading to accommodate multiple national interests is a classic technique for advancing European integration and seems designed to break logjams in what Juncker calls a "polycrisis". Rome is blocking an EU aid package for Turkey to help curb the influx of migrants into Europe; Athens stands accused of failing to guard its borders or to register and retain asylum-seekers on its soil; and Warsaw is under scrutiny in Brussels over laws shackling the judiciary and the media.

Each of those countries has hinted it is willing to do more to help others if its own interests are taken into account. Merkel is keen to help Cameron win his planned referendum on whether Britain should stay in the EU, but she is increasingly fighting for her own political skin in the refugee crisis. Berlin feels it has received little solidarity from its EU partners, while elsewhere there is a sense that reluctance to share the refugee burden is partly payback for perceived German bullying during the euro zone crisis.

Germany and its Dutch, Austrian and Finnish allies are more inclined to use sticks than carrots with Greece. The European Commission this week gave Athens three months to fix "serious deficiencies" in its management of the bloc's external frontiers or face suspension from the Schengen area. That deadline expires just as Greek debt talks are due to start. Domestic headwinds may make it harder for Merkel to use her dwindling political capital to offer concessions to Greece on rescheduling its debt to euro zone countries.

Many in Berlin and Brussels doubt Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras can deliver tighter border controls or keep tens of thousands of migrants penned up in Greece until they can be relocated to reluctant EU countries. Yet the chancellor has voiced understanding for Greece's plight as a frontline state and says she wants a "European solution" to the refugee crisis. No one wants another "Grexit" crisis this year on top of the EU's other woes. If Greek compliance is uncertain, Turkey's cooperation in preventing migrants leaving its shores for Europe in return for 3 billion euros in aid is subject to deep scepticism. — Reuters

## CUBA RACIAL INEQUALITY DEEPENS WITH BOOM

By Chris Arsenault

As warming relations with the United States bring new money and tourists to Havana, some black Cubans like Miguel Campuzano Perez say racial inequalities are widening and they are being left out of a potential capitalist boom. Cuba's economy grew by 4 percent in 2015 and more than 3.5 million tourists visited the island in the year Washington and Havana restored diplomatic ties, ending more than five decades of Cold War animosity. New hotels and restaurants are opening around the capital famous for its colonial architecture and 1950s American cars, and Cubans with money to invest in businesses have seen living standards improve.

But with no access to capital, and no family living abroad to send back money, 54-year-old Perez said he and other black Cubans are being excluded from the benefits of economic liberalization. "The black people don't have powerful families, and that continues generation to generation," Perez, a musician and former soldier, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "The people benefiting from remittances are white; the landlords are white."

As capitalism creeps into Cuba more than 60 years after a revolution that promised social equality, local residents and analysts are concerned about the gap between the haves and have nots and the ethnic undertones of growing inequality on the island.

## 'White Flight' - to Miami

Just under 10 percent of Cubans identified themselves as black in the country's 2012 census. But statistics on Cuba's racial makeup are

imprecise as more than a quarter of the population is a mix between various ethnic groups. Following Cuba's 1959 revolution, the government of Fidel Castro, brother of current president Raul, introduced laws on racial inclusion, launched a literacy campaign, and universal public services in an attempt to tackle entrenched inequality.

African slaves, primarily from West Africa, were brought to Cuba by Spanish colonizers from the 1500s to work on the sugar plantations. Slavery was formally abolished on the island in 1886 but blacks were still banned from some high-end establishments and excluded from well-paid, and most Afro-Cubans worked on plantations or as manual laborers. Free education and healthcare programs from the communist government helped made it possible for previously disadvantaged groups to get jobs as teachers, doctors or government workers in the 1960s, residents said.

"Afro-Cubans have been the biggest reservoir of support for the revolution and are those most affected by worsening inequality," Paolo Spadoni, a political scientist at Augusta University in the United States told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Today, outright discrimination isn't the main cause of the growing wealth gap between blacks and whites, Havana residents said. Rather, migration networks, remittances and broader economic changes are the driving factors.

Much of the island's predominately white business elite left following the revolution with many settling in Miami, Florida, just 150 km from the Cuban coast. "The vast majority who left to live abroad happened to be white

Cubans," said Isaac Saney, a Canadian university professor who researches ethnic issues in Cuba. "They are sending remittances home and their relatives can invest in small businesses. This has led to an increase in racial inequality," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

## Two Economies

In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's main trading partner, ravaged the island's economy, making life particularly difficult for residents who didn't have family members abroad. The average salary for a government worker, about \$25 per month, has lost three quarters of its purchasing power since 1989, Spadoni said. While poorly paid, many state workers continue to receive other perks like subsidized food, and accommodation.

Cuba has two currencies - the Cuban peso which is paid to state employees and is worth about \$0.04 and the Convertible Peso, which is worth one US dollar. In the pursuit of foreign currency, professors left university jobs to work as hotel waiters and doctors took to driving taxis. Some black Cubans say they have trouble getting comparatively lucrative jobs in hotels, because of discrimination. "You need to be white to get good work," said Daniel Alberto Suarez, 42, an informal tour-guide, while drinking rum with two female European clients. "Hotel and bar owners are making good money, but for regular people life is hard. I have no family abroad to send me money."

A raft of economic reforms beginning in 2008 made it easier for Cubans to open private businesses, intensifying the importance of remittances as start-up capital. Miguel Hernandez, who has light skin, manages a

restaurant popular with foreigners in old Havana earning \$100 per day, a large salary by local standards. "There is a lot of inequality between my friends who work for the state, and me who works in tourism," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "People will study to be a doctor, hang the title on the wall, then go work in a restaurant."

## 'Preserving the Revolution'

While many young people, black and white, said they're positive about Cuba's new direction, some older Cubans are concerned about what they could lose and what it could mean for the island's society. "We need keep the ideas of the revolution: Free education, health-care, taking care of the elderly and racial equality," Maria Luz Fernandez, 52, a primary school administrator, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Earning \$40 per month, Fernandez, who is of mixed race ancestry, is well aware she earns less than young waiters from her neighborhood who walk by the school wearing flashy clothes and knock-off designer watches. Young people want big houses and cars, but "the revolution can't afford to provide that for everyone," she said, her long, gold fingernail extensions tapping the table.

With more foreign money coming into the economy, she hopes the benefits will trickle down, and teachers and other state employees will eventually see higher salaries. "When the Americans come, (there will be less) equality," she said, as children wearing school uniforms and carrying pink Barbie backpacks wait for their parents. "The government needs to share the new wealth with the people." — Reuters

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