

CURRENT HISTORY

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“There is no simple or quick solution to rid the Middle East of ISIS because it is a manifestation of the breakdown of state institutions and the spread of sectarian fires in the region.”

ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism

FAWAZ A. GERGES

In order to make sense of the so-called Islamic State (known as ISIS or ISIL, or by its Arabic acronym, Daesh) and its sudden territorial conquests in Iraq and Syria, it is important to place the organization within the broader global jihadist movement. By tracing ISIS's social origins and comparing it with the first two jihadist waves of the 1980s and 1990s, we can gauge the extent of continuity and change, and account for the group's notorious savagery.

Although ISIS is an extension of the global jihadist movement in its ideology and worldview, its social origins are rooted in a specific Iraqi context, and, to a lesser extent, in the Syrian war that has raged for almost four years. While al-Qaeda's central organization emerged from an alliance between ultraconservative Saudi Salafism and radical Egyptian Islamism, ISIS was born of an unholy union between an Iraq-based al-Qaeda offshoot and the defeated Iraqi Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, which has proved a lethal combination.

BITTER INHERITANCE

The causes of ISIS's unrestrained extremism lie in its origins in al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was killed by the Americans in 2006. The US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq caused a rupture in an Iraqi society already fractured and bled by decades of war and economic sanctions. America's destruction of Iraqi institutions, particularly its dismantling of the Baath Party and the army, created a vacuum that unleashed a fierce power struggle and allowed

non-state actors, including al-Qaeda, to infiltrate the fragile body politic.

ISIS's viciousness reflects the bitter inheritance of decades of Baathist rule that tore apart Iraq's social fabric and left deep wounds that are still festering. America's bloody vanquishing of Baathism and the invasion's aftermath of sectarian civil war plunged Iraq into a sustained crisis, inflaming Sunnis' grievances over their disempowerment under the new Shia ascendancy and preponderant Iranian influence.

Iraqi Sunnis have been protesting the marginalization and discrimination they face for some time, but their complaints fell on deaf ears in Baghdad and Washington. This created an opening for ISIS to step in and instrumentalize their grievances. A similar story of Sunni resentment unfolded in Syria, where the minority Alawite sect dominates the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Thousands of embittered Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis fight under ISIS's banner, even though many do not subscribe to its extremist Islamist ideology. While its chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has anointed himself as the new caliph, on a more practical level he blended his group with local armed insurgencies in Syria and Iraq, building a base of support among rebellious Sunnis.

ISIS is a symptom of the broken politics of the Middle East and the fraying and delegitimation of state institutions, as well as the spreading of civil wars in Syria and Iraq. The group has filled the resulting vacuum of legitimate authority. For almost two decades, “al-Qaeda Central” leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri were unable to establish the kind of social movement that Baghdadi has created in less than five years.

Unlike its transnational, borderless parent organization, ISIS has found a haven in the heart of the Levant. It has done so by exploiting the chaos in

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war-torn Syria and the sectarian, exclusionary policies of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki. More like the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s than al-Qaeda Central, ISIS is developing a rudimentary infrastructure of administration and governance in captured territories in Syria and Iraq. It now controls a landmass as large as the United Kingdom. ISIS's swift military expansion stems from its ability not only to terrorize enemies but also to co-opt local Sunni communities, using networks of patronage and privilege. It offers economic incentives such as protection of contraband trafficking activity and a share of the oil trade and smuggling in eastern Syria.

SECTARIAN WAR

Building a social base from scratch in Iraq, AQI exploited the Sunni-Shia divide that opened after the United States toppled Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime. The group carried out wave after wave of suicide bombings against the Shia. Zarqawi's goal was to trigger all-out sectarian war and to position AQI as the champion of the embattled Sunnis. He ignored repeated pleas from his mentors, bin Laden and Zawahiri, to stop the indiscriminate killing of Shia and to focus instead on attacking Western troops and citizens.

Although Salafi jihadists are nourished on an anti-Shia propaganda diet, al-Qaeda Central prioritized the fight against the "far enemy"—America and its European allies. In contrast, AQI and its successor, ISIS, have so far consistently focused on the Shia and the "near enemy" (the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, as well as all secular, pro-Western regimes in the Muslim world). Baghdadi, like Zarqawi before him, has a genocidal worldview, according to which Shias are infidels—a fifth column in the heart of Islam that must either convert or be exterminated. The struggle against America and Europe is a distant, secondary goal that must be deferred until liberation at home is achieved. At the height of the Israeli assault on Gaza during the summer of 2014, militants criticized ISIS on social media for killing Muslims while failing to help the Palestinians. ISIS retorted that the struggle against the Shia comes first.

Baghdadi has exploited the deepening Sunni-Shia rift across the Middle East, intensified by a new regional cold war between Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shia-dominated Iran. He depicts

his group as the vanguard of persecuted Sunni Arabs in a revolt against sectarian-based regimes in Baghdad, Damascus, and beyond. He has amassed a Sunni army of more than 30,000 fighters (including some 18,000 core members, plus affiliated groups). By contrast, at the height of its power in the late 1990s, al-Qaeda Central mustered only 1,000 to 3,000 fighters, a fact that shows the limits of transnational jihadism and its small constituency compared with the "near enemy" or local jihadism of the ISIS variety.

Numbers alone do not explain ISIS's rapid military advances in Syria and Iraq. After Baghdadi took charge of AQI in 2010, when it was in precipitous decline, he restructured its military network and recruited experienced officers from Hussein's disbanded army, particularly the Republican Guards, who turned ISIS into a professional fighting force. It has been toughened by fighting in neighboring Syria since the civil war there began in 2011. According to knowledgeable Iraqi sources, Baghdadi relies on a military council

made up of 8 to 13 officers who all served in Saddam Hussein's army.

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RATIONAL SAVAGERY

In a formal sense, ISIS is an effective fighting force. But it has become synonymous with viciousness, carrying out massacres, beheadings, and other atrocities. It has engaged in religious and ethnic cleansing against Yazidis and Kurds as well as Shia. Such savagery might seem senseless, but for ISIS it appears to be a rational choice, intended to terrorize its enemies and to impress potential recruits. ISIS's brutality also stems from the ruralization of this third wave of jihadism. Whereas the two previous waves had leaders from the social elite and a rank and file mainly composed of lower-middle-class university graduates, ISIS's cadre is rural and lacking in both theological and intellectual accomplishment. This social profile helps ISIS thrive among poor, disenfranchised Sunni communities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

ISIS adheres to a doctrine of total war, with no constraints. It disdains arbitration or compromise, even with Sunni Islamist rivals. Unlike al-Qaeda Central, it does not rely on theology to justify its actions. "The only law I subscribe to is the law of the jungle," retorted Baghdadi's second-in-command and right-hand man, Abu Muhammed

al-Adnani, to a request more than a year ago by rival militant Islamists in Syria who called for ISIS to submit to a Sharia court so that a dispute with other factions could be properly adjudicated. For the top ideologues of Salafi jihadism, such statements and actions are sacrilegious, “smearing the reputation” of the global jihadist movement, in the words of Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, a Jordan-based mentor to Zarqawi and many jihadists worldwide.

NEW WAVE

The scale and intensity of ISIS’s brutality, stemming from Iraq’s blood-soaked modern history, far exceed either of the first two jihadist waves of recent decades. Disciples of Sayyid Qutb—a radical Egyptian Islamist known as the master theoretician of modern jihadism—led the first wave. Pro-Western, secular Arab regimes, which they called the “near enemy,” would be the main targets. Their first major act was the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

This first wave included militant religious activists of Zawahiri’s generation. They wrote manifestos in an effort to obtain theological legitimation for their attacks on “renegade” and “apostate” rul-

ers, such as Sadat, and their security services. On balance, though, they showed restraint in the use of political violence. Conscious of the importance of Egyptian and wider Arab opinion, Zawahiri spent considerable energy over the years trying to explain the circumstances that led to the killing of two children in Egypt and Sudan, and repeatedly insisted that his group, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, did not target civilians.

The first wave had subsided by the end of the 1990s. During the 1980s, many militants had traveled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet occupation, a cause that launched the second jihadist wave. After the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, bin Laden emerged as the leader of the new wave. The focus shifted to the “far enemy” in the West—the United States and, to a lesser degree, Europe.

To win support, bin Laden justified his actions as a form of self-defense. He portrayed al-Qaeda’s September 11, 2001, attack on the United States as an act of “defensive jihad,” or a just retaliation for American domination of Muslim countries. Baghdadi, by contrast, cares little for world opinion. Indeed, ISIS makes a point of displaying its barbarity in its internet videos. Stressing violent



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action rather than theology, it has offered no ideas to sustain its followers. Baghdadi has not fleshed out his vision of a caliphate but merely declared it by fiat, which contradicts Islamic law and tradition.

Ironically, Baghdadi—who has a doctorate from the Islamic University of Baghdad, with a focus on Islamic culture, history, sharia, and jurisprudence—is more steeped in religious education than al-Qaeda’s past and current leaders, bin Laden (an engineer) and Zawahiri (a medical doctor), who had no such credentials. Yet he surrounds himself with former Baathist army officers, rather than ideologues, and has not issued a single manifesto laying out his claim to either the caliphate or the leadership of the global jihadist movement. ISIS’s brutality has alienated senior radical preachers who have publicly disowned it, though some have softened their criticism in the wake of US-led airstrikes against the group in Iraq and Syria, which one ideologue described as “the aggression of crusaders.”

Bin Laden said, “When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse.” Baghdadi’s slogan of “victory through fear and terrorism” signals to friends and foes alike that ISIS is a winning horse.

Increasing evidence shows that over the past few months, hundreds, if not thousands, of die-hard former Islamist enemies of ISIS, including members of groups such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic Front, have declared allegiance to Baghdadi.

For now, ISIS has taken operational leadership of the global jihadist movement by default, eclipsing its parent organization, al-Qaeda Central. Baghdadi has won the first round against his former mentor, Zawahiri, who triggered an intra-jihadist civil war by unsuccessfully trying to elevate his own man, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, head of the Nusra Front, over Baghdadi in Syria.

RECRUITING TACTICS

However, the so-called Islamic State is much more fragile than Baghdadi would like us to believe. His call to arms has not found any takers among either top jihadist preachers or leaders of mainstream Islamist organizations, while Islamic scholars, including the most notable Salafi clerics, have dismissed his declaration of a caliphate

as null and void. In fact, many of these same renowned Salafi scholars have equated ISIS with the extremist Kharijites of the Prophet’s time. ISIS also threatens the vital interests of regional and international powers, a fact that explains the large coalition organized by the United States to combat the group.

Nevertheless, ISIS’s sophisticated outreach campaign appeals to disaffected Sunni youth around the world by presenting the group as a powerful vanguard movement capable of delivering victory and salvation. It provides them with both a utopian worldview and a political project. Young recruits do not abhor its brutality; on the contrary, its shock-and-awe methods against the enemies of Islam are what attract them.

ISIS’s exploits on the battlefield, its conquest of vast swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq, and its declaration of a caliphate have resonated widely, facilitating recruitment. Increasing evidence shows that the US-led airstrikes have not slowed down the flow of foreign recruits to Syria—far from it.

The *Washington Post* reported that more than 1,000 foreign fighters are streaming into Syria each month. Efforts by other countries, especially Turkey, to stem the flow of recruits (many of them from European countries) have proved largely ineffective,

according to US intelligence officials. ISIS fighters have also highlighted the important role of Chechen trainers in developing the group’s military capabilities. Some reportedly have set up a Russian school in Raqqa for their children, to prepare them for jihad back home.

Muslims living in Western countries join ISIS and other extremist groups because they want to be part of a tight-knit community with a potent identity. ISIS’s vision of resurrecting an idealized caliphate gives them the sense of serving a sacred mission. Corrupt Arab rulers and the crushing of the Arab Spring uprisings have provided further motivation for recruits. Many young men from Western Europe and elsewhere migrate to the lands of jihad because they feel a duty to defend persecuted coreligionists. Yet many of those who join the ranks of ISIS find themselves persecuting innocent civilians of other faiths and committing atrocities.

HEARTS AND MINDS

Now that the United States and Europe have joined the fight against ISIS, the group might gar-

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ner backing from quarters of the Middle Eastern public sphere that oppose Western intervention in internal Arab affairs, though there has been no such blowback so far. More than bin Laden and Zawahiri, Baghdadi has mastered the art of making enemies. He has failed to nourish a broad constituency beyond a narrow, radical sectarian base.

There is no simple or quick solution to rid the Middle East of ISIS because it is a manifestation of the breakdown of state institutions and the spread of sectarian fires in the region. ISIS is a creature of accumulated grievances, of ideological and social polarization and mobilization a decade in the making. As a non-state actor, it represents a transformative movement in the politics of the Middle East, one that is qualitatively different from al-Qaeda Central's.

The key to weakening ISIS lies in working closely with local Sunni communities that it has co-opted, a bottom-up approach that requires considerable material and ideological investment. The most effective means to degrade ISIS is to dismantle its social base by winning over the hearts and minds of local communities. This is easier said than done, given the gravity of the crisis in the heart of the Arab world. The jury is still out on whether the new Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, will be able to appeal to mistrustful Sunnis and reconcile warring communities. Rebuilding trust takes hard work and time, both of which play to ISIS's advantage.

Equally important, there is an urgent need to find a diplomatic solution to the civil war in Syria, which has empowered ISIS, fueling its surge after its predecessor, AQI, was vanquished in Iraq. Syria is the nerve center of ISIS—the location of its de facto capital, the northern city of Raqqa, and of its major sources of income, including the oil trade, taxation, and criminal activities. More than two-thirds of its fighters are deployed in Syria, according to US intelligence officials.

In the short- to medium-term, it would take a political miracle to engineer a settlement in Syria, given the disintegration of the country and the fragmentation of power among rival warlords and fiefdoms, not to mention the regional and great power proxy wars playing out there. Until there is a regional and international agreement to end the Syrian civil war, ISIS will continue to entrench itself in the country's provinces and cities.

Yet even ISIS's dark cloud has a silver lining. Once Baghdadi's killing machine is dismantled, he will leave behind no ideas, no theories, and no intellectual legacy. The weakest link of ISIS as a social movement is its poverty of ideas. It can thrive and sustain itself only in an environment of despair, state breakdown, and war. If these social conditions can be reversed, its appeal and potency will wither away, though its bloodletting will likely leave deep scars on the consciousness of Arab and Muslim youth. ■

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“As the cases of Lenin, Nasser, and Khomeini show, defeating—or containing—their attempts to foster transnational revolution did not stop others from seeking to emulate them. The same may well prove true for bin Laden. Even if he and his Taliban allies are completely defeated, someone else—inspired by their example—may try to begin where they left off.”

Mark N. Katz “Osama bin Laden as a Transnational Revolutionary Leader,” February 2002

