

Islamic State (ISIS)

The “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Da’ish) represents an extraordinary chapter in the history of modern Islamist movements. At a time when it appeared that al-Qa’ida represented the most extreme and violent movement in modern times, the phenomenon of ISIS has exceeded it in ideological, strategic, territorial, and tactical reach.

ISIS would not of course exist were it not for the US invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Ba’th regime there. ISIS first emerged under the name of “al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” where its first task was to fight the US occupation. This task represented a new opportunity for al-Qa’ida headquarters in Afghanistan since it had previously lacked a significant presence in Iraq. Resistance to the US military presence would provide a popular cause.

While both al-Qa’ida and ISIS are jihadi organizations, the differences between them are nonetheless striking and rest on personal, tactical, and ideological foundations. Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, and of what was to become ISIS, revealed early disagreement with al-Qa’ida, particularly with ‘Usama bin Laden’s deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. There were five crucial differences between them.

First, al-Zarqawi, as an operative in Iraq, demonstrated intense anti-Shi’ite feelings; this was especially so after Iraq’s Shi’ite majority came to power in free elections, after the US invasion overthrew Saddam Hussein. While al-Qa’ida itself is theologically hostile to Shi’a on religious grounds, it opposed wholesale gratuitous alienation of the Shi’a at a time when al-Qa’ida sought to gain a foothold in Iraq.

Second, al-Qa’ida advised Zarqawi to be less violent in his general treatment of other Muslims. It opposed the lurid violence portrayed in ISIS videos, pub-

lic beheadings, and other gruesome forms of execution that could alienate the general public and drive them away from the movement. Zarqawi and his successors, on the other hand, believed that policies of “shock and awe,” compulsion and fear, rather than suasion, would be the most effective means of gaining and maintaining control over populations.

Third, al-Zarqawi had a vision of territorial control within distinct borders, something which al-Qa’ida had never done. Al-Qa’ida saw no urgency for the proclamation of an Islamic State until conditions were ripe, when there would be strong public backing for such a move. Zarqawi, however, believed in the importance of creating a specific territorial presence on the ground. Al-Qa’ida had never established a territorial quasi-state presence.

Fourth, al-Qa’ida felt it was highly premature to proclaim a Caliphate, as Zarqawi proposed. Again, it believed the conditions were not ripe, and the public not ready for such a step, nor did it represent a priority goal, compared to the need of building strong cadres and driving the US out of Iraq.

Fifth, Al-Qa’ida opposed the creation of ISIS as a movement independent of itself and hoped to keep it subordinate to al-Qa’ida.

Zarqawi was killed in 2006 by a US strike. His successors immediately declared an Islamic State, contrary to al-Qa’ida’s preferences. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi eventually took over the movement and declared himself Caliph—a major ideological precedent in jihadi history. Unlike ‘Usama bin Laden, who was largely a self-taught student of Islamic law, Baghdadi had a doctorate in Islamic studies from the University of Baghdad. He had even considered proclaiming himself “the Mahdi,” the final Islamic ruler who will emerge in the apocalyptic conditions of the End of Days.

In terms of arguing for the establishment of a Caliphate, there is only one other main group which has seriously examined in detail the issues involved in establishing the political architecture of a modern Caliphate: Hizbut Tahrir (Hizb al-Tahrir, or Liberation Party). This group is a movement rather than a political party; it is based in the UK but with worldwide affiliates, especially in Central Asia. It is pan-Islamic in outlook, looking for the ultimate creation of a single global Islamic State. It produces a great variety of

literature and public statements. It is technically a non-violent movement that preaches highly conservative social Islam and seeks to slowly build a mass following that will one day form the foundation of an expanding Islamic State and Caliphate. Hizbut Tahrir, as a non-terrorist organization, is legal in many countries in the West. It, too, is hostile to ISIS on numerous tactical, political, and ideological issues, apart from sharing the goal of an ultimate overarching Islamic State under a Caliphate.

The nearest likely equivalent to ISIS at the moment may be Boko Haram, a murderous movement based in northern Nigeria that controls some shifting back-country territory and proclaims itself an Islamic Emirate. Its politics are intimately tied up in regional struggle, local politics, tribes, gangs, and crime, and it has a similar record of gruesome slaughter of civilians. Boko Haram recently declared its allegiance to ISIS, but in the main this step is best seen as an opportunistic effort to trade on the ISIS “brand.”

When ISIS first came to major international attention during the jihadi struggle against the US occupation of Iraq and proceeded towards building a state, its rapid conquests and establishment of a crude but functional working state were astonishing. It thrived on the chaos and turmoil of post-Saddam Iraq. It gained a large pool of professional cadres from ex-Ba’th Party officials, former Iraqi military officers, as well as from jihadi and anti-US resistance groups and from anti-Shi’ite groups who opposed the new Shi’ite-dominated government, despite its legitimate election.

A second contributing factor to the rapid rise of ISIS was the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011, which provided the political and social turmoil in which ISIS could develop a base and draw on anti-Asad Sunni forces struggling against the nominally Shi’ite regime of Bashar al-Asad. Unlike in Iraq, neither the US or Europe could be seen as directly responsible for the Syrian civil war; blame here must be laid squarely at the door of Bashar al-Asad himself and his brutal suppression of anti-regime protests from the early days.

A third factor contributing to the unusual character of ISIS is the apocalyptic character of the movement: its choreographed, grisly executions filmed with great professionalism, along with its frequent apocalyptic invocation of the End Times. The overall violence of the Syrian civil war and the Iraqi inter-

nal struggle also helped create an apocalyptic mood; such an environment posed some attraction to disillusioned Muslim youth who felt drawn to participating in a polarizing moment in the history of Islam and the anti-Western struggle. Indeed, ISIS has characterized US and Western forces in the region as the “New Crusaders,” lending a deeper sense of religious struggle between Islam and the West. ISIS describes these forces as a coalition of Jews and Christians fighting under the banner of the Antichrist against Islam. These represent emotive concepts to impressionable minds. Even the name of the slick ISIS publication, *Dabiq*, refers to a town in Syria associated with the Apocalypse.

All this might have gone on largely outside of public attention and interest, within the borders of Iraq and Syria, and without engaging the West. It was the theatrical violence as well as the filmed hideous executions of especially Western hostages, however, which helped propel the US and the West into direct engagement in the struggle against ISIS. Finally, of course, ISIS’ sudden recourse to major terrorist operations in the West made it nearly impossible for the West to avoid turning to some military means to degrade, and destroy, ISIS.

IS ISIS ISLAMIC?

This question is highly politicized, and the answer depends on viewpoint and even on political agenda.

Yes, ISIS is Islamic. Al-Baghdadi, with his doctorate in Islamic Law, is better educated in Islam theology than any other political leader in the Middle East today. Nearly all of ISIS’ actions are justified in terms of certain texts in the Qur’an and the Hadith (sayings and doings of the Prophet.) These texts are consistent with radical readings of Salafism or Wahhabism. They are of course also highly selective, sometimes subject to dubious interpretation, taken out of context, or represent an outmoded interpretation that would be rejected by nearly all Muslims today, such as issues of execution of non-Muslims, slavery, and especially sexual slavery—part of warfare since the dawn of creation. Baghdadi did not just invent these things.

But no, ISIS is not Islamic. It does not represent the kind of Islam supported by the vast majority of Muslims in the world today. It does not represent the kind of society in which Muslims wish to live. Above all, it violates the spirit of Islam. Even Bin Laden and his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri criticized violence—at least on a pragmatic basis. For most Muslims and scholars of Islam it is not enough to cite narrowly and selectively from holy texts. There is a need for a broad interpretation of Islam. The texts of nearly all religions in certain places have terrible things to say about the use of violence, the treatment of enemies and apostates. All religions are used to justify violence as well as peace. The Old Testament is filled with warfare, vengeance, and brutal punishments along with inspiring poetry and high moral vision. The famous Pakistani Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman stressed that you cannot look just at the text, you must look at the *context* of passages in the Qur'an or the Hadith in order to grasp the true meaning.

This question of whether ISIS is truly Islamic is not just academic but has significant consequences. The question is also highly politicized, depending upon the *intent or agenda* lying behind the response. Some Islamophobic groups and xenophobes in the West with their own political agendas insist on ISIS' Islamic nature. They wish to project a vision of Islam that is so violent and primitive that it has no place in the modern world and cannot be negotiated with. They strongly argue that Islam itself represents a regression, a threat to the civilized world in which ISIS is exhibit number one in their search for evidence to promote their views.

Progressives, on the other hand, who seek reconciliation with Islam and the Muslim world in general, respond (rightfully in my view) that ISIS is not truly representative of Islam, even if it draws from specific texts here and there for justification. They argue that ISIS strongly contradicts the spirit of the Faith. They seek inclusion, dialog, reconciliation, and cooperation between Muslim communities and the West. They argue that the grounds for finding common cause between religions clearly exist and must be the focus of attention—not the differences. ISIS should therefore not be taken as essentially Islamic in character. A search for *differences* between cultures deliberately leads to conflict. A search for commonality leads to reconciliation.

THE APPEAL OF ISIS

How could a movement that is so harsh, violent, narrow, and uncompromising win any kind of support from outside?

We have already noted a number of novel factors about ISIS that have drawn attention to it. The use of symbolic terms, like the “Islamic State” or the Caliphate, possess historical and cultural power; these terms suggest a dynamic new look in Muslim politics at a time when the region is dominated by sclerotic, tired, corrupt, and ineffective regimes. For disillusioned and unemployed youth who feel they have nothing to live for, ISIS offers excitement, a modern cause, positive action, a riposte to the West that has been oppressing them. It offers a vehicle of action to those Sunnis who feel oppressed under the minority regime of Bashar al-Asad—although Asad has actually always been a champion of many Sunni causes like Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause. ISIS dramatically rejects the Western-imposed borders of the imperial Sykes-Picot agreement and proclaims the advent of an expanding Islamic state unhindered by the borders of the old imperial order. It is willing to take on the West, stand up to Western power, even export its own asymmetric power and strike back at the West. It suggests the foundations of a new cultural and moral power, based on the precepts of Islam, the region’s religious and cultural heritage. True, it is violent, but such movements always rationalize early violence as a necessary stage of destruction in order to give birth to something new, creative and constructive. Herein lies the appeal of ISIS to some—admittedly narrow—elements of the Muslim population.

INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE ISIS CONFLICT

As we noted, ISIS was born out of the cataclysms in Iraq, starting with the resistance movement against the US occupation in 2003. This is only one of the many international forces that now surround ISIS. Indeed, it has become the focus of many growing proxy wars in the region that have placed it at the center of broader international struggle.

The US, now a key player in the struggle, has been consistently ambivalent about how to respond to the ISIS challenge, particularly since it did not wish

to become involved in another Middle Eastern ground war. There had been many gruesome killings and executions in Iraq and Syria after the founding of the Islamic State, overwhelmingly involving Muslim victims. Multiple events gradually pushed Washington and other Western powers into the conflict, though. Various ISIS outrages had captured the attention of the Western media, including wholesale slaughter of minorities in the Middle East, the introduction of sexual slavery, and the destruction of cultural heritage monuments. It was ISIS terrorist operations in the West, however, that tipped the Western policy balance. In 2014 various operations, apparently carried out by “lone wolf” actors inspired by ISIS, took place in several countries including France, the US, Canada, and Australia. In 2015 the scale of such operations greatly increased, particularly in France and Belgium, but also against other states such as Russia, Turkey, Tunisia, and Lebanon.

Despite these operations and outrages, Washington remained ambivalent about what course to follow. ISIS, after all, had also been fighting to overthrow the Asad regime, a US goal as well. So for many months Washington was undecided on policy; this situation changed only when it grew clear that radical jihadi forces in Syria unfortunately represented more effective fighting forces against the Asad regime than did the so-called moderates or “moderate jihadis.” The very battlefield effectiveness of ISIS therefore raised the inescapable question about what the character of any successor to the Asad regime might be. Gradually President Obama came to the conclusion that however much Washington hated Asad, any successor regime would quite likely be more radical, destabilizing, and anti-Western than Asad himself; indeed ISIS could help implant a radical jihadi government in power in Damascus.

Yet there is a longer history to US opposition to Asad; it did not begin in 2011 with the anti-Asad uprisings. Washington has always disliked both Bashar al-Asad, along with his father Hafiz before him, and has consistently sought to weaken them politically through various means, including covert operations and cooperation with Israel going back nearly fifty years. The Asads were perceived as a force representing Arab nationalism, resistance against Western power in the region, anti-imperialism, anti-Westernism, support for the Palestinian cause, and hostility toward Israel's expanding power. (Ironically, both father and son were also committed secularists.) Syria had con-

sistently been a key Russian client during the Cold War. Thus the Arab Spring uprisings were seen by many in Washington, especially neo-conservative ideologists, as a chance to complete unfinished business. Washington had as a result found itself drawn into supporting certain so-called moderate anti-Asad forces (some were indeed politically moderate but militarily ineffective).

The entry of Russian air and ground forces into Syria in September 2015 changed the game markedly—an event over which Washington agonized. Washington policy circles have been largely dominated by those who perceive any Russian gain in the region as an automatic American loss and strongly oppose any Russian role there. Others, though, including some even in the Pentagon, believe that Moscow and Washington share many common goals, including the elimination of ISIS and jihadi terrorism. President Putin, determined to prevent the fall of Damascus to jihadi forces, declared that all jihadi forces are part of the greater problem—and that they threaten even Russia itself in its own large Muslim areas. Moscow therefore began to attack all jihadi forces, even those supposedly moderate fighting forces supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the US. US-Russian rivalry in Syria remains an underlying factor in events, although both states have worked to cooperate as much as possible to bring about an end to the conflict.

Other geopolitical ambitions also infect the ISIS struggle. Turkish president Erdoğan, once a close mentor to Asad, grew angered by 2012 at Asad's failure to heed Turkish advice towards moderation in Asad's brutal (and unwise) handling of the Syrian civilian opposition. Erdoğan also was sympathetic to the possibility of a Muslim Brotherhood government coming to power in Damascus, but this remained a retreating dream as more radical Islamist forces took the lead in the anti-Asad struggle, displacing the Brotherhood and other more moderate Islamist forces. Since then Erdoğan had grown obsessed with the overthrow of Asad and went all out to support anti-Asad forces, including even quietly permitting weapons and Western jihadi fighters to flow through Turkey to ISIS and to allow oil from ISIS territory to enter Turkish territory. But several major terrorist incidents against Turkey by ISIS, as well as unrelenting pressure from the US, ultimately caused Ankara to reconsider this policy. Indeed, Erdoğan's strong anti-Asad policies brought it into confrontation not just with the US but with Iran, Iraq, and Russia as well, largely destroying Ankara's theretofore successful "good neighbor pol-

icy.” These policies also drove Erdoğan into an unwise (and probably transient) alliance with Saudi Arabia to bring down the Asad regime at any cost.

Saudi Arabia, too, in its efforts against Asad, has quietly supported radical jihadis linked to al-Qa’ida, despite the fact that both al-Qa’ida and ISIS perceive the Kingdom as their sworn enemy. Saudi Arabia is more driven by its obsessive desire to checkmate Iran on any and every issue and hence devotes more attention to overthrowing Asad (as a significant Iranian ally) rather than to the destruction of ISIS itself.

Iran in turn is determined to keep Asad in power in order to prevent anti-Iranian Sunni jihadis from taking power in Damascus, and to block Riyadh’s efforts to create a Sunni coalition against Iran’s position in the region—a sworn Saudi goal. Iraq with its Shi’ite-dominated government (since the fall of Saddam Hussein) is similarly determined to prevent Saudi-backed radical jihadis from overthrowing a friendly regime in Syria.

Finally, the turmoil in Syria has produced massive human dislocation and a refugee flow out of the country that has spilled over heavily into Europe. Apart from the mainly Muslim victims from the ISIS regime in the Middle East, the “collateral damage” of the Syrian war in Europe has been extremely serious. It has created huge policy quarrels; damaged EU governing procedures and border protocols; sparked anti-Muslim and anti-refugee emotions and backlash; and helped revitalize right-wing, xenophobic, and neo-fascist movements across the EU. This structural damage to Europe may be the single most dangerous effect of ISIS over the longer term. And whereas most Western military intervention in the Middle East in recent decades has been unadvised and counterproductive, the damage now to Europe itself provides some of the most compelling argumentation in favor of Western military operations to help bring about an early end to ISIS as an “Islamic State”—that is, as a geographical entity.

PROSPECTS FOR ISIS

As of November 2016, it seems that the future of ISIS faces severe constraints. It has lost major territorial holdings, especially in areas near the Turkish border, and the loss of the major cities of Fallujah with Mosul, Iraq’s sec-

ond largest city, on the brink of collapse. It is likely it will cease to exist as a “state” within one year. The reasons are many. It has never truly been a “real” state. It has no recognized permanent borders. It has gained no diplomatic recognition from any other state, nor does it practice anything resembling “foreign relations” with other states, only with other jihadi groups. It does seem to have developed a few working arrangements with some regional states—if only unspoken and certainly unpublicized—such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, with which it shares common anti-Asad ambitions.

ISIS is increasingly isolated. The flow of outsiders in support of the “Islamic State” seems to be diminishing, as its true character is becoming better known. Its economy is dwindling as its lines of communication with the world beyond become increasingly circumscribed, thereby damaging that economy. The economy itself is primarily based on temporary plunder of resources, extortion, and taxation, in addition to covert shipment of oil outside the country—an avenue that is increasingly cut off. It also receives some funding from private citizens in the Gulf. Western bomb attacks against ISIS troops, headquarters, infrastructure, logistical centers, and economic installations have further damaged it. Citizens who live within it find life increasingly harsh and dangerous and many seek to flee. ISIS laws and strictures are harsh to its population.

Regional states and forces are now arrayed against it, including Iraq and Syria, Iran, and Hizballah’s forces in Lebanon. External western forces such as the US, Canada, and several European states are active in the military campaign. The subsequent addition of Russian forces to the anti-ISIS coalition has particularly turned the tide as ISIS loses key cities and centers. Its militias seek to migrate to new locations, such as Libya or Afghanistan. Its days are clearly numbered, although ultimately it will require ground troops—almost certainly non-Western ones—to eliminate the last of its strongholds, especially its major prize, Mosul.

ISIS AND THE FUTURE

The ISIS phenomenon may represent a significant turning point in the history of jihadi Islam. It seems hard to imagine that a yet more radical Islamic movement could come into being, at least in terms of harshly interpreting

the more extreme precepts and interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith on the ground and in society. That is not to say that there cannot be anything more violent or destructive. It is always possible that some apocalyptic group might gain control of nuclear materials and could create a dirty bomb that would spread radioactive material over a limited space. These kinds of activities, however, lie more in the realm of the criminal rather than the political. Countering such groups and operations requires the same kind of police work as surveilling and spotting of any criminal organization.

More important, though, is the impact of the ISIS phenomenon on Muslims themselves. They are the first victims of ISIS and other acts of terrorism in the name of Islam—in two respects. First, they are overwhelmingly the primary victims of terrorism in terms of numbers in the Middle East itself—both Sunnis and Shi'a. Second, when such terrorist events take place, especially in the West, it is the Muslim community that pays the price of greater suspicion, discrimination, and surveillance. Thus Muslim communities themselves are increasingly compelled to police their own communities, if they feel that an individual or individuals betray signs of attraction to radical jihadism or terrorist operations that threaten the welfare of the community as a whole.

Put another way, are there “natural limits” to the violence and extremism that the expression of jihadi Islam can achieve? As of now it would seem unlikely that newer, even more radical interpretations of Islam could emerge, or that yet more radical jihadi organizations would appear on the ground, especially in the West. It is unlikely that any such organizations would exert a broad force of attraction upon the greater Muslim community, whatever the justification.

The failure of ISIS—its own disastrous mistakes and extremism, coupled with a growing array of Muslim and non-Muslim powers against it—will represent an important milestone. It will never again be easy for a successor group to come up once again with the idea of a Caliphate, or a borderless Islamic state, or harsh imposition of Shari'a law, that would lend it sudden, new appeal. The novelty of the ISIS experience cannot be indefinitely repeated, and the Muslim world will inevitably grow more cynical and experienced with the outcomes of such apocalyptic experiments. It is doubtful

that the ISIS experience can ever be quite duplicated with the same degree of attraction and spectacular character elsewhere as it is today on Iraqi-Syrian soil. Violent jihadism has perhaps reached its apogee of appeal in Muslim public perception. Once the ideological appeal is diminished, it becomes more of a criminal problem.

This is not to say that terrorism itself has now reached its natural limits and will subsequently diminish. It will not—particularly in the Middle East, where radical and violent conditions have never been at such a consistently high level. Ongoing wars, civil struggles, sectarian clashes, chaos, anarchy, breakdown of the economic and social structures—all are at an all-time high in modern history. The key to beginning to eliminate extremism lies in the restoration of some degree of social and political order, well-regulated society, and the existence of trusted, effective authority. Such a state will not come about until all external intervention comes to an end, particularly from the West. That is the indispensable beginning for the restoration of some degree of *calm*. Nor will calm come right away with the departure of Western boots on the ground; that is only the prerequisite. Anger and frustration will take time to subside. Furthermore, local warfare is likely to continue in many parts of the Muslim world—as of course elsewhere in the world as well. Such local conflict may be highly disruptive. Overtones of East-West conflict or the suggestion of a “civilizational war” against Islam may start to ring more hollow. Time is required for some degree of political and social peace to return. Still, the first step requires an end to the West’s incessant role in intervention.

ISIS itself will likely metastasize to other areas of the Muslim world as well. It already has in its small presence in Afghanistan, where it is in direct competition and conflict with the Taliban—an entirely different order of fundamentalist movement. The Taliban are about Afghan politics, along with the struggle of Pashtun nationalists to regain power in the country. It is a “traditional” form of political struggle, even if it assumes some degree of Islamic rhetoric to justify its essentially nationalistic campaign. ISIS has also established a few bridgeheads in Libya, although they remain under local siege.

In the end, *local* radical jihadi movements are far more likely to succeed or prosper than transnational ones that are not in touch with the local politi-

cal aspirations of the broader public. In these respects, for instance, ISIS in Libya faces the rivalry of other established local movements who know the turf and have a stake in the deep-rooted politics of the region. ISIS cannot easily compete with such groups over the longer term. Similarly, while Boko Haram in Africa now claims loyalty to ISIS, the dynamic of Boko Haram is entirely different and is limited to a specific part of Africa where a complex of negative conditions are local and ripe for such violence.

In effect, these issues raise the broader and more fundamental question of whether it is ever possible to eliminate political violence and terrorism from the world. The answer is, of course, no. Sadly, political violence seems part of the human condition. Yet that does not mean that the world cannot achieve some degree of reduction of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, as long as there are major political and social grievances anywhere, people will invariably seek and find *vehicles through which to express them*.

We can recall the history of socialism, a widely popular political, social, and economic ideology for over a century. Yet that ideal was carried to an extreme with concepts of Marxism, then Leninism, and then Stalinism, in a state-run movement of political violence that ended up murdering some 20 million people in the name of applied communism and the elimination of whole social classes. The ideal reached yet newer levels of extremism, violence, and death under the communism of China's Mao Zedong, resulting in probably 40 million deaths through various regime-induced causes over the years. The apocalyptic, blind, and fanatic brutality of Pol Pot in Cambodia, too, saw the ultimate in mass genocide of a nearly psychotic form of "communism."

In short, any religion or ideology can be driven to extremes of violence and killing. In the Middle East it is hardly surprising that Islamic ideas should create the foundation for political movements with a "native ring" to them in many different forms. Right now, in ISIS, it happens to reach its most extreme form. Yet it still reflects to a great degree the particular political, geopolitical, economic, social, religious, and environmental conditions of today's Middle East that remain highly negative. Those conditions can and will eventually change. Extremism will then begin to find less fertile soil.

