

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

War-torn Iraq and Syria: Rise of militant Islam post Arab Spring

By the turn of the twenty-first century, people held aspirations that the 3rd millennium would usher in a new era of global stability, peace and prosperity—a far cry from the previous century. The United Nations had emerged from the ashes of two devastating wars in 1945; the iron curtain had fallen in 1989; the apartheid regime in South Africa ended in 1994; Europe cemented member states under a monetary union in 1999; the civil war in the former Yugoslavia drew to a close; the developed world experienced economic booms; warfare was almost non-existent. Everything seemed fine until this tranquillity got interrupted by the events of 9/11, which culminated into the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by coalition troops. With the Taliban and the Ba'ath regimes disposed of, and the missions deemed a success, nobody in the political hierarchies of the western world foresaw the ramifications of these actions. The vacuum which was left behind from the void of the previous tyrannical authorities, coupled with coalition troops disengaging from Iraq, became filled with pan-Arab insurgency. Some fought against British and American troops, and some fought each other for supremacy over which faction and branch of Islam, Sunni or Shia, would triumph and rule. The results of failed policy implementation, and the lack of comprehension vis-à-vis the sensitive dimensions pertaining to the Middle Eastern mindset and tribal norms, have rendered a dangerous region ever more fragmented and unstable than in previous times before. A monster has been unleashed which threatens not only to engulf the Middle East, but also to spread its tentacles as far out as the Far East, Africa and Europe, and instate a caliphate wherein the most extreme Islamic ideals of sharia would become law. Call it IS, ISIS, ISIL, or by its Arabic acronym of Da'iish, the general consensus is to call it the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

A terror group known in Arabic as "*ad-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fī 'l 'Irāq wa ash-Shām*", (الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام) leading to the acronym Da'iish, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) traces its roots back to 2002, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—a Jordanian who was to gain notoriety in the Iraqi insurgency from 2003-6—founded a jihadi organization called Tawhid wal-Jihad in the north of Iraq. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi's organization grew more active affiliating itself to al-Qaeda in 2004, becoming al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Iraq descended into chaos between 2003-7 when sectarian violence was rampant. In addition to coalition troops and preachers of faiths other than Islam, Shia Muslims were no lesser targets for AQI. Al-Zarqawi was a follower of Sunni Islam who perceived Shia Muslims to be apostates, or 'kafirs', and as such, who shouldn't be spared death. The Iraqi city of Najaf is the third holiest city in Shia Islam, after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. There have been several acts of terrorism there attributed to AQI. In August of 2003, the Imam Ali Mosque was hit in a blast which killed 95 people and injured several hundreds. In February of 2006, a blast hit the al-Askari Mosque, one of the most sacred shrines in Shia Islam.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's reign of terror lasted until he was killed, on 7 June, 2006, in a targeted killing by the United States Air Force. AQI was disbanded that same year. The terror group was subsequently revamped on 15 October, 2006 as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) under the leadership of Abu Ayyub al-Masri; a makeover signaling a split from al-Qaeda. Abu Ayyub al-Masri died in 2010 in a joint American-Iraqi operation.

AQI did not metamorphose into ISI all by itself, nor was ISI strictly beholden as such to al-Qaeda. While it began as a purely Iraqi entity, its proclamation was announced by a "council" of eight Sunni jihadi groups. The Islamic State has since its conception entertained a grand vision of limitless territorial expansion. In its founding statement, its anonymous spokesman claimed to draw inspiration from the original Islamic State (ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya) founded in 622 A.D. by the Muslim Prophet Muhammad.

Next in line to succeed Abu Ayyub al-Masri was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, doing so on 16 May, 2010. Al-Baghdadi had reportedly been arrested by United States Forces-Iraq on 2 February, 2004, near Fallujah, and then detained at Camp Bucca detention centre as a civilian internee, up until December 2004, when he was recommended for release by a Combined Review and Release Board. He was allegedly released in December of 2004 as a "low level prisoner". The U.S. State Department is now offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to his capture or death.

Al-Baghdadi announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant on 8 April, 2013 after ISI expanded its operations in Syria, allying itself with a Sunni terror group called Jabhat al-Nusra. Henceforth, ISI became ISIL (other acronyms possible). On 29 June, 2014, ISIL announced the establishment of a worldwide caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed as caliph. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant took on a new guise as the Islamic State (IS); a significant announcement insofar that it demonstrated to what extent IS viewed its rule as the legitimate Islamic government chosen by divine right over all others—a position not shared by mainstream Muslims. The official flag of the Islamic State entity has the words inscribed in Arabic:

THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD

**ALLAH
PROPHET
MUHAMMAD**



The Islamic State has progressively built a militia army, initially by raiding Iraqi arms depots and seizing weapons and ammunitions. It has gone from having light weapons, assault rifles, hand grenades, to having army grade equipment like landmines, rocket-propelled grenades, jeeps, armoured personnel carriers, battle tanks, et cetera, most of which was supplied to the Iraqi military by the United States. IS has gradually gained ground and control over large swathes of land by mercilessly killing people, planting roadside bombs, targeting vehicles at random in car chases, deploying firing squads in drive-by shootings, terrorizing Iraqi servicemen and women in the military along with their relatives by making these their express target, indiscriminately firing on civilian people in urban and suburban places, using video streaming websites on the internet to disseminate their terror activity and cause maximum impact. Other ways in which IS have attained arms and ammunitions is via airdrops. Pentagon spokesman Colonel Steven Warren told reporters on 22 October, 2014 that one out of 28 bundles missed its target and had to be destroyed in an air strike and that another was unaccounted for and may have inadvertently been dropped to IS instead of Kurdish resistance fighters: *“a second bundle also went astray and probably fell into enemy hands”*.

Colonel Steven Warren was referring to airdrops by the United States over the Syrian border town of Kobane that were destined for Kurdish PKK and PYG forces, where at least one wooden crate laden with grenades and rockets had reached IS after drifting off course. Since expanding its operations into Syria, IS has seized military hardware from its fights against the Syrian army. IS generates most of its funding from taxation and petroleum exports, which were attained through raids on refineries and oil wells. More than just a mere militia army, the Islamic State is a theocratic government with quasi-statehood characteristics and a self-financing economy.

For ideological young Muslims living in the rest of the world envisioning a caliphate, the lure of the mujahideen to wage jihad has seen thousands of salafist foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria to join ranks with IS. Some fighters returned to their native homelands, in such countries as France and Tunisia, which have seen a surge in terror attacks since much of 2014 onwards. On a global level, the younger generation of the jihadist community is becoming increasingly supportive of IS, largely out of fealty to its slick and proven capacity for attaining rapid results through brutality.

The borders of Iraq and Syria may eventually need to be redrawn to reflect the reality on the ground. The inhabitants of these failing countries are not likely to see peace in their time. IS is perpetrating an insufferable genocide against the Yazidi Christians in northern Iraq, as well as other minorities. Women are being raped. Children are being sold into sex slavery. People are tortured, forcefully converted or shot. Anyone spared is subordinated into dhimmitude (a state of second-class citizenry obligating dhimmis to pay the jizya tax). Families have been decimated, robbed of their possessions, been abducted, faced expulsion. Places of worship, cemeteries and archeological sites have been desecrated and obliterated. Any Iraqi person found to have collaborated with the American-led processes post Saddam Hussein, either in a military or an administrative capacity, is hunted down and killed along with the entire family. Basic human rights are eroded. Justice is non-existent, with secular courts becoming Islamic sharia courts. Countless people have fled their homes, become refugees and ethnically cleansed.

Since the Arab Spring erupted in 2011 in Tunisia, triggered by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest of police corruption and ill treatment, there had been hopes that the revolutions throughout much of the Maghreb and the Middle East would have positive reverberations and spread democracy to what had been authoritarian regimes. Once the picture unfolded that the fighters perceived as liberators were fundamentalist Islamists beholden to extremist tenets, the Arab Spring turned into an "Arab Winter". The culmination thereof is: Boko Haram in Nigeria; the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters in the Philippines; Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines; Jemaah Islamiyah in south-east Asia; Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Gaza strip; Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid in Indonesia; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. This list is not exhaustive, but all the above quoted have pledged support to the Islamic State.

A broad coalition by the international community will be required to pull its resources together [diplomatic, economic, military] and defeat fundamentalist Islam. IS fighters are determined to revive the Islamic caliphate since it was last established in 622 A.D. by the Muslim prophet. To put things into context in esoteric terms, what is at stake is a struggle of ummah vs. wattan vying for the qaum (worldwide community of Islam vs. the territoriality of Islam vying for the nation of Islam) which we can interpret as Muslim zealots in opposition to present-day Muslim states vying for integrality.