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How revolutionary are Jihadist Insurgencies?

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How revolutionary are Jihadist Insurgencies?

Radical jihadist movements have gripped international attention over the last two decades or more. To a large degree they represent what Hegghammer has termed "militant sunni activism" in contrast to wider patterns of islamic activism that might incorporate radical shi'ite revolutionary ideology of the sort that underpinned the Iranian revolution of 1979 as well as broader islamic political engagement that might lead to participation in pluralist electoral politics.

¹ Many of the more recent examples of these radical jihadist movements such as Islamic State (IS), the Al-Nusra Front in Syria, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) as well as Boko Haram in West Africa have involved violent insurgent guerrilla warfare with a range of battlefield strategies and tactics, though for the last year it has been the rise of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, under its mysterious self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which has gripped international media attention.

The amazingly swift rise of Islamic State has been accompanied by the release of gruesome videos of public beheadings and crucifixions, the mass kidnapping and rape of women and the wanton destruction of priceless archaeological sites. This publicity has certainly shocked international opinion while at the same time secured increased support amongst many younger Muslim men and women throughout both the Islamic world and the west who have admired its

unrestrained commitment to armed struggle and strict implementation of sharia law. There are features here of a revolutionary process that still remains to be worked out but which could have profound implications in the future stability and functioning of the international system.

In this paper I shall be focusing mainly on events in Iraq and Syria, though given a fluid situation of interlocking civil wars and sectarian conflict in both states it is fallacious to make too bold a set of predictions for the future. Islamic State certainly has some intriguing features: it appears to compound the historical evidence that relatively few guerrilla movements can secure on their own the full power and control of the state given that they normally do so in a cross class national coalition, with only Cuba after 1959 being the apparent exception to this rule.² In this regard, recent events in Iraq and Syria have showed that it is possible for a modern guerrilla movement such as IS to create at least the basic structures of a new state *de novo*, acting effectively as the nodal point for a revolutionary movement. This movement seeks the overthrow of order of states established in the Middle East after the First World War and exemplified by rolling up the border between Iraq and Syria laid out in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. In the longer term, it challenges the entire Westphalian order of sovereign states by creating its own distinct *khilafah* or Islamic political system. Under this all Muslims become members of one community or *ummah* and pledge allegiance to a caliphate governed by sharia law, restored after its abolition in

1924 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.³ This might be viewed at one level as a guerrilla insurgency containing millenarian “end of days” features though closer attention to the movement’s emergence and leadership suggest that this is not simply a body run by mere lunatics but by hard-nosed figures with considerable political and military acumen.⁴

The rapid emergence of IS means that many long-standing assumptions about the jihadism as well as the politics of the Middle East will need substantial revision. Long treated as an exotic revolutionary ideology, jihadism has come into renewed focus given the extraordinary success of Islamic State in capturing large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria since the middle of 2014. What was formerly treated as just another example of a regional jihadist terrorist movement competing with other rival movements in the region for support amongst Sunni Muslims has now emerged into a far more serious player given that it has displayed many of the basic features of statehood, certainly those centred

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on what Rana Khalaf has termed the “governance model” of effectiveness, security and legitimacy. This claim to statehood has a major fallout in considerable parts of the Islamic world if not in international law.⁵ A strong de facto if not de iure statehood also makes any strategy of destroying IS very difficult since any military

coalition seeking to do this would be pursuing goals similar to the doctrine of “unconditional surrender” announced by the Allies in Casablanca in January 1943 leading to the complete destruction of Nazi Germany.

Islamic State, moreover, is just one recent manifestation of a tradition of jihadism that has waxed and waned in the Middle East. The movement is quite complex in the way it presents itself to the world; as Fromson and Simon have suggested, it has four primary ways of revealing itself: as a “guerrilla army”, a “revanchist political movement”, a “millenarian Islamist cult” and an “administrator of territory”. Despite this multi-faceted nature IS embodies many of the features of mainstream or “classical” jihadist thought including a narrative of righteous war against apostates to regain Muslim honour by securing a territorial caliphate destroyed by Kemal Ataturk’s regime in Turkey in 1924.⁶ To this extent it can be seen as departing from the alternative “globalist” jihadist ideology that was long espoused by Al Qaeda from its headquarters in Afghanistan and Pakistan and anchored more in the idea of waging guerrilla warfare in certain defined territorial zones.⁷

Seen in this manner, many features of Jihadism seem backward-looking and reactionary in the sense that jihadist fighters appear to want to revive a lost medieval world with suitably brutal codes of punishment: latter day examples, perhaps, of counter enlightenment “prophets of despair” who turned back to a chimerical past of apparent medieval order in a world of disorder brought on by war and

military intervention.⁸ However, it is important to understand the historical meaning of the claimed restoration of the caliphate which has broadly defined the contours of Islamic history and established links with earlier phases of Islamic history stretching back to the Umayyad Caliphate of 661-750 and the Abbasid Caliphate that succeeded it. The Abbasids particularly ushered in a “golden age” of Islamic history and culture, while caliphates of some kind or another continued more or continuously until the final abolition of 1924 which is seen as a product of the violent intrusion of western imperialism into the Middle East.⁹ Espousing this view of history thus strengthens the political legitimacy of IS, especially when it is combined with an anti-imperialist rhetoric, though it will be interesting to see how these claims for a largely Arab caliphate will look upon jihadist adherents in West Africa or Indonesia and the Philippines.

The revolutionary model of IS recalls some of the features of Leninist vanguard parties from the first half of the twentieth century, in this case with revolutionary jihadist elites seeking to develop movements globally with the eventual aim of overthrowing western “imperial” states and their “apostate” Middle Eastern allies. The challenge presented by this version of jihadism replicates some aspects of earlier ideological conflict following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917. The regime of Lenin and Trotsky in Moscow professed little interest in its early years in any serious accommodation with the surrounding powers and the Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs

Trotsky went as far as declaring in 1917 “there exists for us only one unwritten but sacred treaty, the treaty of the international solidarity of the proletariat.”¹⁰ This did not prevent the Bolshevik state signing a peace accord with Germany at the Treaty of Brest Litovsk in March 1918 ceding vast tracts of territory to save the revolutionary state; however, the Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs continued to act as a revolutionary state seeking the ultimate overthrow the norms of the existing states system. The state avoided being defeated militarily and progressively accommodated to the norms of the international system. By 1930, the Commissariat had evolved into an institution that was patterned on similar grounds to its Tsarist predecessor while the project for overthrowing the global state system was put on hold as the practitioners of Soviet diplomacy found little to guide them in the workings of Marx and Engels. In effect the Soviet state established what Armstrong terms a “dual identity” in the form of diplomatic respectability, on the one hand, while keeping, on the other hand, the state’s Marxist Leninist revolutionary goals in reserve, for use whenever possible. Despite the abolition of the Comintern in 1943, this situation continued until the Gorbachev era of the mid to late 1980s when the Soviet state’s revolutionary goals became finally abandoned.¹¹

The failure of the Bolshevik revolutionary regime to prosecute its global goals has often served as a model through which to judge other trans-national or global revolutionary movements: in a study on the evolution of modern war published in 2001, for instance, Paul Hirst

argued that the “have not” powers would continue to be hindered by the absence of any unifying ideology to challenge the dominant powers of the international system.¹² It is, of course, still early days by which to evaluate the achievements of the current wave of revolutionary jihadists and Islamic State. Unlike the future-orientated utopian ideology of Marxism-Leninism that looked towards the eventual creation of a global workers state, many of the strands of jihadist ideological thought, for all their dependency upon cyberspace for disseminating propaganda and recruiting new followers, are largely backward looking in the sense of seeking to a past golden age of an Islamic state governed by a caliph. Moreover, unlike the earlier Soviet revolutionary model, contemporary jihadist movements have so far failed to evolve beyond the stage of insurgent warfare, though Islamic State has been attempting to build a state with captured advanced weaponry that shows signs of being capable of fighting a more sophisticated form of hybrid war.

Interestingly, splits reminiscent of the international communist movement in the late 1920s and 1930s between Trotskyite revolutionary internationalists and Stalinist exponents of “socialism in one country” have already emerged within global jihadism. A bitter struggle has ensued between an Al Qaeda-oriented strategy based on global terrorism and a territorially-focused strategy of IS following the creation on 1 July 2014 of a caliphate with its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the first caliph. Since then what might be termed the “quasi state” of IS has issued its own currency and flag and created a

police force in the areas under its control, which amount, at the time of writing, to a land area of some 200,000 sq. km – only 40,000 sq. km smaller than the United Kingdom. Within its boundaries are some 6 million people in a state that might, in some ways, be likened to the original Soviet workers state struggling to survive in the civil war of the early 1920s.¹³

This paper will address these issues in four sections: the first section argues that religion needs to be understood more fully in the historiography of insurgent warfare; the second section looks at the widespread failure of doctrines of national liberation in the Middle East; the third section examines the circumstances surrounding the emergence of Islamic State; while the last section will discuss how far a strategy of containment can be devised to contain the new strategic threat posed by Islamic State.

Religion and guerrilla insurgencies:

The centrality of religious ideology in many contemporary Jihadist insurgent movements suggests that far more attention needs to be paid to the role of religion in the historical understanding of guerrilla insurgencies and the establishment of movements that Metz has termed “spiritual insurgencies.”¹⁴ Given that a guerrilla insurgency requires the mobilisation of various groups of people not normally linked to formal army or military structure it would not be surprising to find some role for religion. The study of guerrilla insurgencies since the nineteenth century suggests that religion was frequently an

important mobilising force, though one still rather poorly understood: among the conservative Spanish peasants, for instance, drawn into the original guerrilla resistance to the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1808 as well as the devoutly Calvinist Boer farmers fighting, in some cases to the bitter end, the invading British imperial army on the platteland of South Africa between 1900-1902.

Religion, after all, traditionally formed the key symbols of local and community identities in rural societies. Any insurgent leadership moving into a rural area would be ill-advised to ignore the religious beliefs of the peasant and farming communities living there while in urban areas local religious centres such as mosque, churches, temples and shrines serve as major points of community identity as well as locations for the storage of weapons and propaganda and the recruitment of new members of underground insurgent cells. Likewise, the language used by religious communities and groups of believers can be adapted for the formation of ideologies of revolutionary insurgency in situation of crisis and political repression: this is a dimension that has been frequently overlooked by analysts who have preferred to focus on the frequently self-justifying writings of the leaders of various insurgencies such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh or Che Guevara. Religion, it can be argued, has often formed one of the central components of a centre of gravity (COG) of a guerrilla movement and one that in turn will help define the critical capabilities essential for the COG to function. This is an observation that some political anthropologists have been making for

years; as far back as 1970, for instance, the French anthropologist Georges Balandier pointed out that “religious conflicts are a clear expression of political struggle – which they provide with a language and means of action – in situations caused by the weakness of central power.”¹⁵

It is surprising how many analysts have neglected this religious dimension of insurgency, preferring to emphasise the apparently more compelling appeals of nationalism, socialism and Marxism. General surveys of guerrilla insurgencies by Walter Lacquer, John Ellis, Max Boot, Ian Beckett and Douglas Porch generally underplay the role of religion in insurgencies.¹⁶ This general indifference to religion is partly due to the way many guerrilla insurgencies became harnessed to Marxist movements of “national liberation” in the years after 1945. The three decades from 1945-1975 might be said to form a sort of procrustean bed for much subsequent analysis acting as an historical yardstick through which to understand how most guerrilla insurgencies operate in the modern world.

The western left also tended to see many modern guerrilla insurgencies as largely secular in orientation; they more or less accepted at face value the language of the insurgents themselves in their desire to secure a revolutionary transformation of their societies to remove the power not only of traditional landlords and capitalists but of organised religion.¹⁷ For the “new left” in Europe and the United States it was the example of the Castroite revolution in Cuba as much as any which really fostered a myth of guerrilla war in the

late 1960s and 1970s – linked as this was for a period to the celebrity-like image of Che Guevara. While the revolutions in China and Vietnam were never so well understood, it was the western-oriented society of Cuba, still burdened by the remnants of an exploited peasantry that appeared to offer the best example for guerrilla warfare leading to wider social revolution. It was Cuba that especially helped to sustain the “guerrilla myth” of the western new left until it was overtaken by the harsh crackdown by a series of military regimes in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁸

The western debate over insurgencies thus became largely pivoted around the concept of “national liberation” without a deeper investigation into the cultural meaning of this term. As Michael Walzer suggests, there is a paradox at the heart of the term “national liberation” which offers the prospect of liberation not only from external oppressors but also from the internal effects of this oppression. It is not a term that can be used with any great analytical precision given that it is, in essence, nothing more than a

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“revolutionary slogan designed to conceal sordid truths.”¹⁹ To be really effective what started out as a revolutionary slogan for mass mobilisation needed to be transformed into a longer-term project of cultural, social and

economic modernisation. Examining three studies of Israel, India and

Algeria, Walzer points out how national liberation often translated into modernisation projects devised and imposed by political elites on peoples believed to be backward, superstitious and reluctant to accept change.²⁰ Of the three examples discovered Algeria is clearly the most relevant for discussions relating to the Islamic world, especially as the country's independence from France came after a bitter seven year guerrilla war waged by the FLN for the "national liberation" of the country from French colonialism. Even this did not prevent the emergence of what Walzer terms a "religious counterrevolution" that was only defeated by the Algerian army in a brutal terror war between 1991 and 2002 against the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and the Armed Islamic Group (AIG).

Walzer's basic thesis can be tested on a wider field throughout the Middle East, especially the suggestion that the elites engaged in the liberationist project were for the most part culturally shallow and continually dependent on comparative examples. Unlike the more utopian Marxist project for universal proletarian emancipation, national liberation was always going to be partial and, as Walzer has argued, a "reiterative process" in the sense that "each collective self must liberate itself; each nation must liberate itself"²¹: a pattern which might appear both insular and parochial in the modern world order and unlikely to have much appeal to a younger generation connected to a much wider set of linkages and identities in global cyberspace.

The other side of the coin to a failing "national liberation" narrative is the growing focus in many recent studies of the Middle East on

religiously-inspired “sectarianism.” This is a concept that departs to some degree from earlier categories favoured by social scientists in the 1970s to 1990s based on class, nationalism and ethnicity. While by no means completely displacing these earlier categories, the concept of sectarianism marks a much stronger awareness of the importance of religious language and symbols in group identities and political mobilisation: it accords with the more subjective approach inspired by post-modernist trends in political sociology since the late 1990s

As a term, “sectarian” stretches back to the politics of mid seventeenth century England and the breakdown of central government in the civil war between royalists and parliamentarians. Revolutionary religious sects appeared in the course of the 1650s at a time of the collapse of religious hierarchies when, in some cases, millenarian expectations were raised for the destruction of any sort of state church and the fall of the papal authority of “Antichrist”. A battle ensued for the control of the state, exemplified in a question posed by Vavasor Powell: would the Lord “have Oliver Cromwell or Jesus Christ to rule over us.” In the event it was Cromwell and conservatives and radicals came to accept some common ground leading to the restoration of Charles II in 1660, with the radicals more or less abandoning the search, in this world at least, for the Antichrist enemy. ²²

Despite a fairly rich historical background, the re-emergence of the concept of sectarianism in recent political sociology has been of a

rather top-down nature, with a main being focus on the way that political elites and “political entrepreneurs” have mobilised sectarian religious symbols in the build-up of power-bases. Used in this way “sectarianism”, as a term, is open-ended and begs a series of further questions: just when, for instance, does a “sectarian” political movement become so and when does it cease to manifest any clearly “sectarian” features? Did both Sinn Fein and the DUP in Northern Ireland, for example, cease to be “sectarian” organisations following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement or the later agreement on power sharing in Belfast in 2007? Or did they remain sectarian but of a less overt and aggressive kind?

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Seen in these terms, “sectarianism” is a rather difficult concept to pin down, given the way it is anchored in subjective and often “irrational” attachments

to group identity. In this regard, Fanar Haddad has provided a useful guide to understanding sectarianism in the Iraqi context by categorising it into three basic forms of “active”, “passive” and “banal” sectarianism. “Active” sectarianism is precisely the sectarianism emphasised by many political science analysts where it is open to manipulation by key political leaders for the purpose of group mobilisation to secure a power base, often in periods of rising

political and military conflict; “passive” sectarianism, on the other hand, is less overt and defines groups where political and religious symbolism is expressed less forthrightly and often in coded language. Taken to extremes it might even become an “apologetic” sectarianism where someone fits in with the wider group attachment to religious or political symbols – frequently under pressure from the central state - but without any genuine commitment; finally, “banal” sectarianism follows the example of “banal” nationalism where it is often there as only a vague group marker like a national flag on top of a town hall or police station, but not necessarily symbolising anything very political.²³

These three categories do provide some insight into the way sectarian attachments can be seen to work in many Middle Eastern societies such as Iraq. They suggest that religious communities were organised at the very least around “passive” if not “active” sectarianism. This meant that, even under a consociational power sharing agreements encouraging political elites to seek support outside their own narrow “sectarian” power bases, western liberal democracy would have always been a difficult project to have established once the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein was removed. For this to have been properly understood before the invasion of 2003 would have required far greater attention to the attitudes and values of communities in the Iraqi society at the grass roots – broadly “low” culture rather than the “high” culture of the political elite. This was a highly problematical task given that the whole issue sectarianism was politically taboo in

Iraq for most of the twentieth century.²⁴ It is thus the emergence of sectarian politics in the wake of the failure of the national liberation project under the Baathist regime in Iraq that we now to focus on and this will be the focus of the next section.

Iraq and the failure of national liberation:

Walzer's reflections on national liberation have an especial relevance in the case of the strongman regimes established in the Middle East in the decades after World War Two. The Baathist regimes of Syria and Iraq were largely built up under the guiding hand of the Soviet Union in the context of super power divisions of the Middle East into rival spheres of influence. Both regimes borrowed from the Soviet model of a highly state-controlled economy and an authoritarian centralised dictatorship ruled through a single party, though one that drew more on the symbols and language of Arab nationalism than Soviet communism.

The Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein proved especially resolute in its prosecution of secularising policies. The Baathist era in Iraq was one of belated state building in a desperate effort to overcome the basic weaknesses of a state built on the cheap by the British under the League of Nations Mandate from 1919 to 1934, when rural tribal authorities were given considerable powers and privileges over communities in the cities.²⁵ Saddam's regime, though, ran up against strong opposition from the Shi'ite communities in the southern part of the country, where many communities had only converted to

shi'ism in the nineteenth century as they underwent a transition from itinerant nomadism into settled pastoral farming. Shi'ite holy places such as those at Najaf and Karbala acted as vital points of identification among these new communities of pastoralists. Social order was provided in turn by a powerful and influential clerical hierarchy. Opposition to the Baathist regime in Baghdad was expressed in a polyglot political ideology by the main Shi'ite party Dawa, containing a mixture of Marxism and religious messianism. Its two most prominent clerical leaders, Baqir and Sadiq al-Sadr were eventually assassinated by Saddam's police in 1980 – though Sadiq's son, Moktada, would go on to lead the Shiite revolt against the US led occupation after 2003 and Dawa would also become the party backing Nuri al Maliki. ²⁶

As the Shi'ites of the South of Iraq veered towards a form of revolutionary jihadism partly modelled on revolutionary Iran, another jihadist model emerged among the Sunni population in the wake of the collapse of the Baathist regime in 2003. Deprived of their top-dog status which they had enjoyed more or less continually from the time of the creation of the state by Britain in the early 1920s the Sunnis became open to the appeals of what Dodge has termed “ethnic and sectarian entrepreneurs” in a situation of rapidly escalating sectarian conflict. ²⁷ Sunni Jihadism had not been seen as necessary under the Baathists as most Sunni communities enjoyed fairly close channels of access to central political power. This became dramatically removed with the disastrous de-Baathification policy pursued under

Paul Bremer after May 2003 whereby all former Baathist civil servants lost their jobs and some 400,000 former members of the Iraq army were laid off.

Over the following years the idea of anti-governmental jihadism and a holy war against unbelievers which had been championed by figures such as Sayyid Qutb in Egypt (executed by Nasser in 1966) and Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi in 1920s British India suddenly came into prominence. Both saw violent Jihad and martyrdom as necessary in a holy war against unbelievers and for the creation of an Islamic state founded on sharia law. Both thinkers had helped indirectly inspired the radical shi'ism that would emerge before the revolution in 1979 that overthrew the regime of the Shah, though this became obfuscated by the emergence in the 1980s of the theocratic doctrine espoused by Ayatollah Khomeini of the *velayat-i-faqih* (or supreme law giver) ²⁸

The 1980s, in fact, remained a largely unsuccessful decade for sunni jihadis compared to their shi'ite counterparts in Iran. The shi'ites had mounted a successful revolution against the Shah on the basis of an alliance between university students, the clergy and the bazaaris. By contrast the sunni jihadis remained at odds with the *ulema* for most of the 1980s and it was not surprising that the decade was largely a story of failure: starting with the suppression of the Hegira uprising in the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979 by Saudi security forces; the suppression of the AL Jihad movement in Egypt in the aftermath of the assassination of Anwar Sadat in October 1981; and the violent

suppression of the Moslem Brotherhood revolt in Hama in Syria in 1982. ²⁹It would not be until the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the middle 1990s that sunni jihadism really started in earnest.

Sunni jihadism led to a revival of the idea of restoring the caliphate decades after its abolition in 1924. This had long been a dormant idea in Arab politics: in the period before World War Two it had failed to lead to any serious political movement given that the Sharif Husayn in Mecca remained an important ally of British interests in the Middle East. The rise of Arab nationalism after World War Two also ensured that demands for a caliphate generally remained peripheral to political debate as many Arab nationalist intellectuals became attracted to more secular ideas of Pan Arabism, especially following the creation by Nasser of a United Arab Republic in Egypt in 1958. Although this failed to lead to any wider Pan Arab unification, beyond a short-lived unification with Syria, it did become later in the Muslim World League (WML), formed in Mecca in 1962, as well as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), formed in 1969 with a permanent secretariat in Jedda. ³⁰

The re-emergence of the caliphate idea really started with the growing crisis of the Arab nation state in the course of the 1980s, as the Iraqi regime became embroiled in a long and destructive war with Iran and many jihadi fighters from the Middle East were drawn into the struggle against the Soviet armies occupying Afghanistan. It was here that Osama Bin Laden defined the message globally with the

formation in 1998 of the *World Islamic Front against Jews and Crusaders*. The attacks on western interests over the next few years by Al Qaeda such as the embassy bombings in East Africa in 1998 and the attack on the *USS Cole* in Yemen in October 2000 have usually been seen as examples of global terrorism rather than insurgency, though in Afghanistan Al Qaeda became linked closely to the Taliban as it attempted to establish after 1995 a ramshackle state centred on Kabul. The Al Qaeda leadership preferred to see the whole world as a battle field which they could attack more or less randomly and in places and times of their own choosing. They failed to develop any sort of Maoist-type strategy of protracted guerrilla war and preferred to rely more on selective spectacular terrorist strikes against western targets.³¹ But the political-religious ideology of AQ did attack American imperialism for the violence against Muslims as well the poverty and social injustice they were felt to experience.

By contrast, the ideology of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) as well as later the Islamic State evolved in a rather more conservative direction of declaring their opponents' beliefs to be *takfir* and thus heretical. This became the ideological base for a project of state building that involved moving away from the AQ strategy of seeking a broad base of legitimacy for global jihad towards a narrower goal of conquering land as the basis for a new caliphate.³² The ideological tendency was reinforced by wider events in the Middle East and North Africa that accompanied the "Arab Spring" from the end of 2010, starting with the mass demonstrations in Tunisia that led to the overthrow of the

Ben Ali dictatorship in Tunis. The demonstrations were copied around the Arab world and provided the spark for the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War the following year in Damascus.

What started out as an “Arab Spring” soon turned into widespread political disillusionment and an “Arab Winter” with the apparent failure of civil society in the Arab world to overthrow repressive regimes. The demonstrations and eventual overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 led to the country eventually falling part as rival militias battled for power, while in Syria the civil war intensified as the increasingly sectarian Assad regime resisted all efforts at any form of non-violent political transformation and transfer of power to

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the Sunni majority. In the case of Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in 2012 under Mohammed Morsi on a platform of building a new “civil state” based on democratic institutions but one firmly based on Islamic values. The government was largely

concerned with its own domestic issues and had no agenda to widen its influence outside its borders: however, its incompetent management of the government contributed to its overthrow the following year in a military coup.³³

These wider political sectarian patterns in the Islamic world also reinforced the increasingly sectarian trend of Iraqi politics in the

years after 2006 as the Maliki regime increasingly consolidated its sectarian power base in Baghdad under the auspices of the US military.

The Rise of Islamic State

Given the patterns outlined in the previous section it is possible to see how Iraq after 2003 became the nursery for an increasingly militant form of jihadism that was forged in the context of an increasingly bitter sectarian civil war. Unlike the largely rural insurgency of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the jihadist movements in Iraq were largely urban in orientation and fuelled by the immense caches of weapons left behind by the regime of Saddam Hussein. One key political entrepreneur in forging an increasingly sectarian Sunni insurgency in Iraq was the Jordanian gangster Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who had fled initially to Afghanistan his release from prison in Jordan in 1999. Zarqawi then joined Al Qaeda and was posted to head the movement's operation in Herat in the east, bordering Kurdistan and Iran. He was reputedly financed by AQ with the relatively small sum of \$35000, though he was able to use some of Jordanian jihadists, linked to a movement known as Asbat al-Ansar (League of Partisans), as emissaries to set up new camps over the border in Iraqi Kurdistan. He also recruited a new cadre of jihadi fighters who were too young to have fought against the Soviet in Afghanistan and were more open to being moulded to his particular brand of jihadist ideology.

³⁴Zarqawi eventually fled into Iraq following the collapse of the Taliban regime in Kabul in late 2001.

At this stage Zarqawi was less in charge of any coherent movement than a loose series of cells largely guided by an anti-imperialist ideology that Napoleoni has termed “Al Qaedaism.” ³⁵ Zarqawi was fortunate in being able to take advantage of a range of underground cell contacts stretching into Iraq as well overseas into Europe; he became perhaps even more fortunate after he became exposed to global attention for the first time in the speech of Colin Powell to the UN in early 2003 justifying military intervention into Iraq. Now he was officially on the list of international top terrorists, though his activities started to move away from attacks on the secular Kurd PUK movement towards mobilising a jihadist insurrection among the communities of the Sunni Triangle once the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein was finally toppled and the Iraq army disbanded.

Zarqawi was remarkably open about the sectarian strategy to be pursued by AQI. In a letter to Osama Bin Ladin in February 2004 he outlined what he saw as the main difficulties facing a Sunni insurgency. The ulema and the sheiks represented nothing less than an obstacle to a strategy of mobilising the mass of the sunni population behind a Maoist-style sectarian insurgency: indeed “their part of religion” he contemptuously dismissed as “an anniversary in which they sing and dance to the dancing of a camel driver, with a fatty banquet at the end.” Zarqawi’s main hope lay in the mujahidin, whom he saw as the “the good sap of the country” and “the

quintessence of the sunni.” There was a strategic problem confronting any insurgency given that there was no sunni heartland easy to defend in a country where there were no mountainous or forested regions (at least in predominantly sunni areas). Overcoming this absence of strategic depth lay in identifying the key enemy which Zarqawi identified as the Americans, the Kurds, the soldiers, police and agents of the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Shi’as. It was the shi’as who were the main enemy, not only because they were “depraved infidels” but because they were the key to the transformation of the sunni population from what might be termed “passive” into “active” sectarianism:

If we succeed in dragging them (the shi’as) into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger and annihilating death at the hands of these sabaeans (a people inhabiting Yemen cited in the Koran as pagan worshippers of the son – PR)³⁶

In December 2004 Zarqawi became recognised by Bin Laden as the head of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), reflecting perhaps his emergence as a relatively successful military commander as opposed to being an organiser of terrorist cells. Doctrinal rifts with the parent organisation in Afghanistan, however, became increasingly evident as Zarqawi formed his own armed following known as *al Tawid al Yihad*. His main strategy remained largely a terrorist one of car bombings and murder of hostages both to undermine the credibility

of the coalition government in Baghdad as well as foment sectarian hostilities between Sunnis and Shi'as and prevent a non-sectarian national resistance emerging.³⁷ Indeed, Zarqawi saw that the only way to stop a Shi'a dominated government establishing itself was through civil war. The takeover of the city of Falluja West of Baghdad during 2004 enabled this strategy to be put to the test. It also drew in the AL Qaeda leadership even further behind Zarqawi's sectarian strategy since they could provide a mantle of legitimacy that could not be so readily found among the mainstream Sunni ulemas in Iraq. But the protracted siege of the city led to a progressive widening of the Sunni-Shi'a chasm as initial Shi'a support for the resistance in April 2004 became transformed into support for the US attack on the city by November the same year.³⁸

Zarqawi's sectarian strategy needs to be seen in the context of a failing state that proved unable to deliver basic services as well as one that was seen by many Sunnis as falling increasingly under the control of a Shi'ite-dominated coalition that was put in place by the . As the state's authority collapsed so the geographical borders of the state appeared increasingly permeable as vital decision making appeared to come less from Baghdad than from Tehran, Amman and Damascus.³⁹ Between 2003 and 2006, when he was killed by a US bomb, Zarqawi was a key entrepreneur in creating a strategy for Iraqi Sunnis geared towards establishing a separate state ruled by a caliph, though in practice AQI did not amount to more than 10% of the total numbers of people involved in the Iraq insurgency.⁴⁰The

movement's sectarian strategy did not sit easily with the more globally-inclined strategy of the AL Qaeda leadership. Ayman al Zawahiri launched had already launched a forthright attack on the idea that a "Muslim state" could be "launched as a regional struggle" given the likely opposition of the "Crusader Alliance" of the US and Israel to any such venture. "...to adjust ourselves to this new reality," he wrote "we must prepare ourselves for a battle that is not confined to a single region, one that includes the apostate domestic enemy and the Jewish-Crusade external enemy."⁴¹

AQI had superior funding as well as good media and propaganda skills compared to its sunni rivals, though its escalating attacks on shi'ites in Iraq, including some of their most revered holy sites, made him an increasing obstacle to the Al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan who saw Iraq as only one of a number of battle fronts including Saudi Arabia and were angered by the way that Zarqawi's strategy led to rising tensions with Iran, who even handed over some captured Al Qaeda operatives to Saudi Arabia and Egypt.⁴² Zarqawi had the upper hand with the Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan though this hardly strengthened the movement's wider reputation given its failure to prosecute any sort of protracted insurgent war in Afghanistan. Along with the strategy of global terrorism, AQ had trained at least a 1000 or more guerrilla fighters, many of Saudi origin, whom it thought would be a good match for any American-led invasion and replicate some of the mujahidin warfare against the Russians in the 1980s However this proved not to be the case in late 2001 as Northern

Alliance forces supported by just 110 CIA officers and 350 Special Forces succeeded in dislodging the Taliban from Kabul and chasing AQ out of Afghanistan complete after Operation Anaconda in March 2002.⁴³

It remained broadly the case that both Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and AQI under Zarqawi looked towards the establishment of a caliphate as the one true state. But they had significantly different approaches towards achieving this and the AQ leadership was more than relieved when Zarqawi was finally killed in 2006.⁴⁴ His removal did not really solve anything in Iraq, though on a wider plane the rifts between Al Qaeda and Iran were partially resolved when the Iranians released several AQ detainees, including Bin Laden's daughter, Iman bin Ladin, in 2010.⁴⁵ Al Qaeda continued to view Iraq as a relative diversion from the apparently more central conflict in Afghanistan between the Taliban and the Kabul regime of Hamid Karsai and it would require an increasingly radical jihadist Sunni insurgency in Iraq to challenge this dominant view.

This came as the escalating sectarian conflict in Iraq reached civil war proportions by the latter part of 2006, prompting a change of course by the US in the direction of a troop surge and a strategy of counterinsurgency under General Petraeus starting in early 2007. Though in many ways a return to a more old fashioned form of imperial expeditionary warfare, the surge had the effect of calming the situation down between 2007 and 2010, especially as it enabled the winning back of support from some of the sunni tribes in the form

of the “Anbar Awakening”. The problem was that the strategy remained incongruent with wider developments at the level of the Iraqi state; no matter how much the US sought to enforce a legal framework through the Baghdad Security Plan (known in Arabic as the *Fard al-Qanoon* or “enforcing the law”) its credibility continued to be undermined by the resistance from the Iraqi state to the release of funding to support the development of the infrastructure in sunni communities. Dodge reports that in some instances US colonels took sunni representatives into the Green Zone in Baghdad to lobby for funding, only to be rebuffed.⁴⁶

The problem was one that the US was only too familiar with from the earlier experience in South Vietnam with the Diem regime: here, once more, was a narrowly-based regime in Baghdad that was fatally flawed from the very moment of its inception, given the way that it had been conjured into existence by what Dodge has termed an “exclusive elite bargain”, largely under the auspices of exile Iraqi political leaders who had few if any connections to politics at the local level. The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) that was formed in 2003 after the initial invasion became the vehicle for these groups to seize control of the Iraqi state and drive through the elections in January 2005 that contained widely differing levels of turnout – from 61-71% in southern sh’ia districts to only 2% in Anbar province where 95% of the population was sunni.⁴⁷ Following this a new constitution was drafted by a drafting committee that was not even

representative of the new assembly, though this in turn provided the basis for the ascendancy of Nuri al Maliki as prime minister in 2006.

Maliki was actually only the deputy leader of the shi'a Islamist Dawa party, though he also had the advantage of links with the shi'a militias. Once in power he was able to use the Office of the Prime Minister to establish an effective shadow state based on a strong grip on the army, the security services and special forces. Controlling these bodies gave at least the appearance that the state under Dawa was less under the influence of the shi'a militias than those of his rivals such as the Sadrist followers of Muqtada al Sada and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).⁴⁸ This also enabled him to rule in an increasingly extra-constitutional manner, especially through the Office of the Commander in Chief where he proceeded to do long-term damage to the chain of command in the new Iraqi Security Forces by imposing his own political appointees as senior army chiefs.

These trends within the Iraqi state tended to escape widespread notice in the period 2006-8 as the US military secured a series of victories against AQI in the "Anbar Awakening." With this success some analysts have suggested that there was one last window of opportunity for Maliki with the departure of US troops from Iraq in 2011. He could then have begun a process of integration of the Awakening members into the Iraq national military and so secured a course towards a more secular type of state with Maliki, perhaps, as a new Saddam type of strong man.⁴⁹ However, given what we have

seen this was highly unlikely and the reverse soon happened when Maliki arrested the body guards of the sunni finance minister Rafi al-Issawi in December 2012 in a move aimed at marginalising potential political rivals. The arrests led to widespread protests across the sunni heartland including Anbar, Ninewa and Kirkup and the sunni neighbourhoods in Baghdad. This was then followed by the ISF attacking a sunni protest camp at Hawija killing twenty protesters. More violent protests followed and the country descended again into sectarian conflict.

The sunni resistance at this stage contained a number of different organisations including the 1920 Brigades, the Islamic Army of Iraq, Jaysh al-Mujahadin, Ansar al Islam as well as the Baathist General Military Council of the Iraqi Revolutionaries. However, AQI soon rebranded itself in April 2013 as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham both to gain control of the revived sunni militarism as well as link it to its cross border activities in Syria. By the end of the year it was able to demonstrate its apparent military competence by killing 23 senior ISF officers in the Horan Valley. But far more important than this in symbolic terms was Maliki's decision to pull his forces out of Falluja on January 1 2014 allowing the ISIS to secure the city that had been at of the heart original sectarian conflict stretching back to 2004. ⁵⁰The stage was now effectively set for IS as it would eventually become known to seize the initiative in the sunni resistance and direct it into the completely new agenda of a radical anti-imperialist caliphate.

Can the Jihadist revolution be contained?

So far Islamic State has confirmed the general assumption held by many analysts of guerrilla war, especially when waged in cities rather than rural terrains, that the chief objective is not so much outright victory over its enemies than the ability not to lose.⁵¹ IS has managed over the last year to establish itself as a major player in Iraq and Syria as well as establishing a large array of supporting organisations world-wide: indeed, it is estimated that it has at least 32 partner organisations and has recruited between 20-30,000 foreign fighters, though many of these have minimal military skills or training.⁵² It appears that, unless it is at least contained both militarily and politically, the movement will continue to expand and threaten major instability in the whole Middle East region with the prospect of escalating military conflict that could eventually draw in Israel.

Some analysts have suggested that the caliphate has already lost up to 75% of its former finances and the movement will find it increasingly hard to function as a serious state once it is unable to obtain the constant supplies of new revenue [...]

There are certainly some contradictions in IS strategy that might increasingly undermine the organisation with the passage of time. The objective of conquering and controlling territory forces what had hitherto been a guerrilla insurgency into positional warfare with IS in some instances building defensive trench fortifications reminiscent of World War One. On the other hand, though, IS has attempted where

possible to overcome this by maintaining an element of surprise and rapid manoeuvre warfare on a number of separate fronts: it has clearly been helped here by its use of trained senior officers of the former Iraq army. The large numbers of willing new recruits also helps it overcome a high rate of battlefield casualties but, once again, this might become increasingly difficult if restrictions are successfully enforced on movement into areas under its control. It is also hard to see how IS can continually replenish much of the weaponry it has captured and many of these assets will doubtless degrade if no spare parts to service them can be obtained. Some analysts have suggested that the caliphate has already lost up to 75% of its former finances and the movement will find it increasingly hard to function as a serious state once it is unable to obtain the constant supplies of new revenue: it may indeed be forced to extort more and more resources from the population under its control, so possibly undermining its popular base among sunnis.⁵³

This is not, therefore, a weakly-led movement simply reacting to external events: its considerable military gains in the middle of 2014 appear to have been well planned. The collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) came in the wake of a long “soldiers harvest” campaign involving attacks on check points, assassinations of soldiers off duty as well as the destruction of soldiers’ homes. The campaign was concentrated in Mosul and Ninawa, the main targets of the advance in June 2014.⁵⁴ The movement has also been remarkably successful in maintaining its momentum by opening up new surprise attacks

even when it has been thrown back on other fronts. This was seen recently, for instance, when a small IS force of some 200 well-trained militants took the city of Ramadi after earlier losing Tikrit following a protracted assault by the ISF with its Shi'a militia allies. The attack on Ramadi was aided by the use of massive suicide bomb attacks which had the effect of demoralising the poorly-led ISF forces numbering some 2000 against a highly motivated IS enemy of only 200. The capture of the town proved highly symbolic for it was here that the local leaders were especially important in mobilising the support of the Sunni tribes behind the "Anbar Awakening" against the AQI in 2006-7.⁵⁵

Clearly an apocalyptic jihadi ideology acts as a major force multiplier for a military formation able flexibly to adopt a range of battlefield tactics. This is a movement that has an army that has gained extensive battlefield experience across a variety of regions: some of the jihadist volunteers fighting for it, for instance, come from older conflicts in Chechnya. The more IS wins on the ground the more it will be able to garner further support internationally including jihadi volunteers as well as the affiliation of more band-wagoning Islamic movements. Forming a coherent strategy to at least contain, if not roll back such an organisation will not be easy.

The Obama administration has so far adopted a policy of containment, though this might be more accurately called "containment-lite" since it has been pivoted around the central premise that there should be no more "boots on the ground." This

containment policy has amounted to a range of measures that include the selective bombing of IS targets, efforts to limit the external financing of the IS regime as well as the flow of jihadi fighters, the building up and training of the ISF in Iraq and a broader effort to try and delegitimize the IS ideological “brand”. It has also adopted some surprise attacks by special forces to assassinate middle level IS cadres, on lines similar to those developed by the Israelis. However, none of these measure have, so far, been especially successful and IS has continued to expand its domain of influence both in the Middle East region and beyond.⁵⁶

True containment stretching back to the formulation of the original containment policy in the late 1940s by the Truman administration never precluded military engagement – indeed the policy led to the eventual creation of NATO in 1949. Replicating such a strategy in the Middle East in the context of severe state crisis in both Syria and Iraq will be politically risky, though it is possible to see such a strategy eventually emerging in a more coherent form in the medium to longer term.

The IS threat to regional stability will be increasingly heightened if this quasi-state manages to capture a major capital such as Baghdad or Damascus. While either city might fall Damascus must look the more likely in the context of a general western reluctance to aid the Assad regime, though the fall-out from the black IS flag flying over the centre of this city would be profound. The symbolism would resonate throughout the Arab world generating increasing panic

among many Arab states. It might be, at this point, that a more coherent containment policy could at last start to be applied in the region. The two most obvious states immediately at risk of major incursions from IS forces would be Jordan and Saudi Arabia – the case of Jordan raises the inevitable question of any likely Israeli response since it is hard to imagine that any government in Jerusalem could accept the collapse of its neighbour and the prospect of direct IS incursions into Israeli territory, with the concomitant prospect of a revolutionary mobilisation of the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank.

The major western powers may then be faced with a situation roughly akin to the Gulf War One when a missile defence system was installed in Israel to prevent a direct Israeli military response to the rocket attacks from Iraq that would threaten the cohesion of the alliance forged by the Bush administration to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Any similar direct Israeli responses against IS would also undermine the alliance against IS and confirm for IS propaganda the apparent alliance between Zionism and the “apostate” states in the Middle East.

A direct western military presence then is probably going to be inevitable to protect the Jordanian regime from IS attacks: assets may also need to be placed in the south western part of Syria in support of Syrian forces supported and trained by the west, though these are at present almost non-existent given the virtual collapse of the Free Syrian Army. Likewise it may be necessary to send back a corps size

force into Iraq in order to stabilise the situation in Baghdad and enable the ISF to have some breathing space given that any programme of recruitment and training that could take several years. Making a case for this sort of western re-insertion is unpopular in the current isolationist climate in Washington, London and other capitals and it may be that the march of military events will dictate in the end the pattern of western response.

Certainly any roll back of IS forces is going to be difficult short of a major military coalition being put into place at ground level. One far more immediate strategic concern is the restoration of some level of legitimacy of the Iraqi state. Here its reliance upon shi'a militias is likely to prove self-defeating in the longer term. While the shi'a may be able to regain control of some military positions their clear support for the government in Baghdad appears to confirm only too clearly the sectarian regime that was constructed by Maliki in the years after 2006. As Geraint Hughes has recently pointed out, using militias frequently enhance rather than reduce ethnic or sectarian conflict as well as intensifying the level of military brutality as the war takes on a sectarian overtone.⁵⁷ Militias might still be used as auxiliaries by a state, especially in the areas from which they are recruited, but on the whole it is bad strategy to rely on them as substitutes for a proper national army.

Seen in this light, it is probably going to become inevitable that, at some future point, within the next few years there will be a future western re-engagement in the Middle East to prevent IS developing

to the point where it threatens regional war, huge military escalation to possible nuclear levels and a massive shock to the global economy. IT will thus be essential to start thinking through a coherent strategy by which this re-engagement can be most successfully prosecuted. If left unchecked, Islamic State threatens to expand into a massive regional theocracy that will increasingly take on totalitarian proportions unless it is contained or checked. It would be especially foolhardy to base any policy towards the region on the simple assumption that the movement will collapse from its own internal contradictions, though these may become more evident in time as IS seeks to embed itself further in the Middle East region.

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