ISIS: A Short History: The terrorist group's evolution from fervid fantasy to death cult

Bobby Ghosh Aug 14 2014, The Atlantic

The Sunni militants who now threaten to take over Iraq seemed to spring from nowhere when they stormed Mosul in early June. But the group that recently renamed itself simply “the Islamic State” has existed under various names and in various shapes since the early 1990s. And its story is the story of how modern terrorism has evolved, from a political and religious ideal into a death cult.

The group began more than two decades ago as a fervid fantasy in the mind of a Jordanian named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. A onetime street thug, he arrived in Afghanistan as a mujahideen wannabe in 1989, too late to fight the Soviet Union. He went back home to Jordan, and remained a fringe figure in the international violent “jihad” for much of the following decade. He returned to Afghanistan to set up a training camp for terrorists, and met Osama bin Laden in 1999, but chose not to join al-Qaeda.

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 forced Zarqawi to flee to Iraq. There his presence went largely unnoticed until the Bush administration used it as evidence that al-Qaeda was in cahoots with Saddam Hussein. In reality, though, Zarqawi was a free agent, looking to create his own terror organization. Shortly after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, he set up the forerunner to today’s Islamic State: Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (the Party of Monotheism and Jihad), which was made up mostly of non-Iraqis.

Although Zarqawi’s rhetoric was similar to bin Laden’s, his targets were quite different. From the start, Zarqawi directed his malevolence at fellow Muslims, especially Iraq’s majority Shiite population. Bin Laden and al-Qaeda regarded the Shiites as heretics, but rarely targeted them for slaughter.

Zarqawi’s intentions were underlined with the bombing of the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf, the holiest place of Shiite worship in Iraq. I was at the shrine when it happened, and remember many survivors asking, “Why us? Why, when there are so many Americans around, bomb us?”

One reason: sheer convenience. The Shiites were easier targets because they didn’t yet have the ability to fight back. But there was also a political calculation. After Saddam was toppled, Shiite politicians replaced the Sunnis who had long dominated power structures in Iraq. Zarqawi was counting on Sunni resentment against the Shiites to build alliances and find safe haven for his group. It worked: Zarqawi sent dozens of suicide bombers to blow themselves up in mosques, schools, cafes, and markets, usually in predominantly Shiite neighborhoods or towns.

By 2004, Zarqawi’s campaign of suicide bombings across Iraq had made him a superstar of the international jihadi movement, and won the endorsement of bin Laden himself. Zarqawi now
joined his group to bin Laden, rebranding it al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI. (It is also sometimes called al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, but don’t confuse that with AQIM, which refers to the Algerian franchise, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb.)

Soon, however, Zarqawi’s targeting of civilians created misgivings among the core al-Qaeda leadership. In 2005, bin Laden’s right-hand man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, wrote a letter chiding the Jordanian for his tactics. Zarqawi paid it no heed. Last year Zawahiri likewise took ISIS’s new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to task for his excessive ferocity and was again ignored.

By the spring of 2006, Zarqawi was beginning to see himself as something more than an ēmir or insurgent commander: He aspired to spiritual leadership as well. (His successor as ēmir, Baghdadi, would make the same transformation, appointing himself ēcaliph after taking Mosul.) No longer content merely with alliances, he began to insist that his Iraqi Sunni hosts submit to his harsh interpretation of sharia law—veils for women, beheadings for criminals, the whole nine yards. Those who resisted, even prominent figures in the community, were executed.

But Zarqawi’s ambitions were cut short in June, 2006, when the U.S. Air Force dropped a pair of 500-pound bombs on his hideout, 20 miles north of Baghdad.

His death came just as the tide was turning against AQI. Many Sunni tribes, chafing at Zarqawi’s sharia rules, had begun to fight back. The U.S. military, led by General David Petraeus, capitalized on this to finance and support an insurgency-within-an-insurgency, known as the ēAwakening.ēTribesmen willing to fight AQI, even if they had previously fought the Americans, were designated ēSons of Iraq,ē to underscore the fact that most of AQI’s commanders were foreigners, like Zarqawi himself. These Iraqi Sunnis believed that joining forces with the U.S. would give them immunity from prosecution from previous crimes, lucrative government contracts to rebuild devastated Sunni areas, and a share of political power in Baghdad.

Petraeus’s ēAwakeningē campaign was accompanied by a surge of U.S. troops, and it worked up to a point. Demoralized by the loss of Zarqawi, AQI’s foreign cadres melted away. But Petraeus’s plan was designed mainly to reduce the violence and allow the U.S. to leave Iraq, not to repair the Shiite-Sunni rift that Zarqawi had opened up. American politicians and military commanders talked of creating a space for political dialogue between the two groups, but the effort to enable that dialogue was, at best, desultory. It was left to Iraq’s elected government, led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, to make a lasting peace.

As the U.S. discovered, Maliki and his Shiite-led governing coalition were more interested in recrimination than reconciliation. The Sons of Iraq were denied salaries they had been promised. Tribal leaders never got those government contracts. In Baghdad, Sunni politicians were ignored, often humiliated, sometimes prosecuted. The most senior of them, Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, fled the country after being charged with terrorism; he was eventually sentenced to death in absentia.
Meanwhile, Maliki filled the ranks of Iraqi police and military with Shiites, some of them partisans from militias that had previously killed Sunnis. Sunni resentment now bubbled up again, setting the stage for AQI’s return.

**ISI/ISIS: First Iraq, then Syria**

By 2011, when the U.S. troop withdrawal was complete, AQI was being run by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and had morphed from a largely foreign to a largely Iraqi operation. Baghdadi himself, as his name suggests, is local. The absence of foreigners made it easier for the Sons of Iraq and their kin to ignore previous resentments against the group. There was also another rebranding: AQI was now better known as the Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI.

Baghdadi took Zarqawi’s tactics and supercharged them. The Shiites were still his main targets, but now he sent suicide bombers to attack police and military offices, checkpoints, and recruiting stations. (Civilian targets remained fair game.) ISI ranks were swelled by former Sons of Iraq, many of whom had previously been commanders and soldiers in Saddam’s military. This gave Baghdadi’s fighters the air of an army, rather than a rag-tag militant outfit.

With thousands of armed men now at his disposal, Baghdadi opened a second front against the Shiites in Syria, where there was a largely secular uprising against President Bashar al-Assad. What mattered to Baghdadi and his propagandists was that Assad and many of his senior military commanders were Alawites, members of a Shiite sub-sect. Battle-hardened from Iraq, ISI was a much more potent fighting force than most of the secular groups, and fought Assad’s forces to a standstill in many areas. Soon, Baghdadi renamed his group the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), reflecting his greater ambitions. His black flags, emblazoned with the Arabic words for “There is no god but god” and the reproduction of what many believe to be the Prophet Mohammed’s seal, became ubiquitous.

**IS: The final battle?**

Just as Zarqawi had in Iraq, Baghdadi overplayed his hand in Syria. He began to impose harsh strictures on Syrian towns and villages under ISIS control, especially in the province of Raqqa. In early 2014, Assad’s forces had regrouped and begun to strike back; in May, they retook the city of Homs, which had been the symbolic heart of the uprising. It was a blow for the rebels.

But Baghdadi was planning a much bigger, bolder strike in his home country. The taking of Mosul the following month marked a new phase in ISIS’s evolution: It was now able and willing to seize and control territory, not simply send suicide bombers to their death. Baghdadi used the occasion to promote himself to caliph and renamed the group the Islamic State, in a nod to its now even bigger ambition of ruling the entire region from the Mediterranean to the Gulf.

He also broadened his list of targets. Although ISIS had encountered minority religious and ethnic groups like Christians and Kurds in Syria, there seems to have been no central directive about what to do with them: Fighters were free to exercise their discretion. But in Mosul, the word came down from the caliph: Non-believers must either pay a special tax, leave, convert, or face death. The last two options were preferred. The city’s ancient Christian community was
the first to be targeted, and thousands fled. Then, as the Islamic State widened its operations, smaller groups found themselves in the firing line.

By now, IS and Baghdadi were dominating headlines around the world in ways Abu Musab al-Zarqawi could hardly have imagined. And people everywhere were asking: Where did these hellhounds come from?

**Are American-led air strikes creating a Sunni backlash?**

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WHEN America extended the war against the jihadists of Islamic State (IS) to Syria on September 22nd, it seemed to have a strategy: maximise Sunni support to isolate and ultimately defeat the extremists. America would not co-operate with the regime of Bashar Assad. Instead it would build up moderate rebels to the point where, with American help, they could take on both IS and, eventually, Mr Assad’s forces. Five Sunni Arab states joined the air campaign in Syria, where Western friends declined to go. Across the border in Iraq, a new prime minister was installed with the promise to work harder to win over disgruntled Sunnis.

The first fortnight of operations has proven messy, however. Though IS has been pushed back in some areas, it is still making advances in others. It has crept towards Baghdad, causing jitters in the city, and this week was close to winning the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Ain al-Arab (known to Kurds as Kobane) on the Turkish border. More worrying for America, hardly anyone in Syria is cheering. Some complain that, instead of bombing Mr Assad, America is attacking his enemies; others claim that it is hitting civilians rather than IS; still others spread the idea that the whole business is a war against Islam. Almost all the rebels—including groups such as Harakat Hazm that receive anti-tank weapons from America and its allies—have criticised America. This raises a troubling question: is America causing a backlash among the very people it needs to win over?

One cause of Syrian disquiet is that, as well as bombing IS, America also targeted Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the strongest groups fighting the Assad regime. America says it only bombed a faction, dubbed the "Khorasan group," claiming it was planning imminent attacks on the West. Jabhat al-Nusra, is affiliated to al-Qaeda but is nevertheless accepted by more moderate groups for its fighting prowess. IS, by contrast, initially fought rebels and Kurds to carve out territory for its "caliphate."

The danger is that, out of jihadist solidarity, Jabhat al-Nusra may now join forces with IS to confront the common American enemy. The two fell out in 2013. But since the air strikes they are said to have declared a truce. Both are trying to rally fighters and civilians to their cause and against America and its allies by portraying the bombing as a war against Islam. Their international reach is probably limited, but their call for revenge may inspire others. On
September 24th Jund al-Khilafah, an Algerian jihadist offshoot that has pledged allegiance to IS, kidnapped and beheaded a 55-year-old French tourist.

There is a second, perhaps more corrosive impact on Syria as a whole. Many note that Mr Assad’s regime has killed many more people than IS, yet Syrian forces have not been touched by American bombs. “Assad kills tens of Syrians every day,” says a father of four from Aleppo province, pulling out his smartphone to show a picture of a dusty, bloody, dead child pulled from the rubble after a regime airstrike. “America spent three years rejecting our calls for weapons and a no-fly zone, but now won’t help us directly.” Syrians, he says, want help to fight on their own, rather than to rely on foreigners’ air strikes.

Mainstream rebels complain that America has not co-ordinated its attacks with them. No bombs hit IS in eastern Aleppo, where its fighters threaten the rebel-held town of Marea, notes Hussam
al-Marie, a spokesperson for moderate fighters. And the American plan to train at least 5,000 Syrian rebels has yet to get under way. No group has yet been asked to nominate personnel for training. “When we ask about this, we get more promises,” says a rebel who deals with the Americans. “We have heard a lot of them before.”

America stands accused of compounding the agony of Syria’s civilians. Although its bombs are precision-guided, it faces allegations that its strikes have killed non-combatants. It has acknowledged that its rules to avoid civilian casualties are looser in Syria than those for drone strikes elsewhere. A grain silo was reported hit in the town of Manbij where, military officials say, IS had a logistics hub. The bombing of oil refineries may deny jihadists an important source of revenue, but it has driven up fuel prices in much of Syria.

Rumours are rife that Mr Assad’s air force has bombed civilian areas close to military targets struck by America, creating confusion over who should be blamed. In any case, many Syrians think air strikes are not seriously hurting IS, which had already moved its men and equipment out of some of its bases before they were struck. “They’re like mosquito bites,” says a Syrian living in the Turkish city of Antakya.

Thankfully, from America’s perspective, few Syrian Sunnis regard IS as a desirable ally. And Syria’s sectarian divide is less deep than Iraq’s, so it should be easier to persuade Sunnis to work with other sects. In Iraq, by contrast, military intervention to help the Iraqi government, and to stop IS massacring Yazidis, an esoteric sect, means that America is often seen by Sunnis as the air force of the Shia and minorities. Despite the appointment of Haider al-Abadi to replace the discredited Nuri al-Maliki as Iraq’s prime minister, it is proving hard to prise Sunni tribes and former Baathists from the arms of jihadists who offer protection from, and a challenge to, Shia power. A recent Iraqi opinion poll found a gulf of perceptions between Iraqi Shias and Sunnis: whereas most Shias trusted the Iraqi army, Sunnis were overwhelmingly suspicious of it.

Anti-American griping by rebel groups may be intended to fend off accusations of being America’s pawns; in private, many rebels say they are not unhappy to see Jabhat al-Nusra hit; and many civilians dislike IS’s brand of extremism. To some analysts, there may be benefits in forcing zealous Islamists straddling the murky ground between extremists and moderates to decide where they stand. America and its allies could then train and arm moderate fighters with less fear that they will co-operate with jihadists. Yet the complaints carry a warning, too: unless America can convince the majority of Syrians that it is on their side, the biggest winners may be IS and Mr Assad. That was not the plan.

**Divisions Could Weaken U.S.-Led Coalition in Iraq and Syria**

Over the past week, the U.S.-led coalition carrying out airstrikes against Islamic State positions in Iraq and Syria has expanded to include several new members. This has enhanced its overall combat power and spread the burden more equitably. The British parliament voted Sept. 26 to join the group and has already commenced airstrikes over Iraq. Denmark and Belgium also decided to participate in direct combat operations. These new partners join two European peers,
France and the Netherlands, as well as Australia. Notably, these six countries have chosen to restrict their combat roles to Iraq. This contrasts with the role of the United States' five Arab partners – Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates – which have been carrying out airstrikes with the United States in Syria since operations expanded there Sept. 23.

This odd division of labor does not operate in the interest of efficiency but is instead an artifact of the complicated and juxtaposed reality on the ground and in the political arena. The battleground against the Islamic State is ostensibly divided between the sovereign states of Iraq and Syria. In reality, however, it is a single space spread over what has become an imaginary border. The divided coalition reflects the members' divergent political views on how to manage the respective situations of Iraq and Syria. Ultimately, the arrangement artificially separates what should be treated as a single battlefield and a single enemy. This weakens the coalition, confuses desired outcomes and often limits operations to what will appease all members. Summary

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Analysis

The coalition's division of the battle space into two parts has already led to differences in target selection. Since earlier limited U.S. operations in Iraq expanded into Syria, the United States and Arab coalition members have focused on critical infrastructure in Syria that supports Islamic State operations in Syria and Iraq. This has included command centers, finance operations, supply depots and, most recently, oil refineries. The coalition's strategy in Syria has been to degrade the Islamic State's military capabilities through destruction or disruption of the critical assets that support it.
The strategy in Iraq, however, has been quite different. There, the focus of air campaigns has been to buttress ground operations. This has translated into close air support for Kurdish peshmerga and national government forces, as well as strikes aimed at destroying Islamic State military supplies, vehicles and heavy weapons used in operations against those forces. This divergence stems in part from the different tactical situations in each country: In Iraq the coalition is operating in direct coordination with local forces, whereas in Syria efforts to facilitate anti-Islamic State ground attacks are in the early stages, with only the first steps having been taken to train Syrian anti-regime rebels in Saudi Arabia.

But these disparate tactical realities are only part of the picture. The primary differences between these operations are explained by the imperatives of the partners operating in Iraq and in Syria.
The United States' Sunni Arab partners have an interest in participating in the operations against the Islamic State in Syria. Degrading the Islamic State's capabilities there takes pressure off of anti-regime rebels currently fighting Damascus and Islamic State forces simultaneously. The United States' reliance on support from these Sunni Arab countries, however, presents the risk that the core mission in Syria will be stretched in two different directions. The United States aims to cripple the Islamic State without directly targeting Syrian President Bashar al Assad. The Sunni Arab states, though, want to dislodge al Assad's Iran-friendly regime and weaken the position of Lebanese-based Shiite militant group Hezbollah, which is assisting the Syrian government.

**Risks to Cohesion**

For their part, Australia and the coalition's European members have a different set of interests from their Arab partners. Because a large number of Islamic State foreign fighters originated in Europe, these governments fear that the militants could at some point return home and threaten national security. The Islamic State has also taken European hostages and continues to be a source for radicalization inside Europe. This means that these states have compelling reasons for carrying out strikes against the Islamic State regardless of its area of operation. All six of these powers, however, have chosen not to operate over Syria without a clear mandate from the United Nations. In European countries especially, military intervention is a touchy political subject; approval for any type of direct involvement typically requires the support of parliament, putting tight electoral constraints on such operations. These limits are less severe in the case of Iraq, where the coalition is delivering assistance to a host nation requesting help rather than conducting a military intervention in a country without coordinating with its government.

The division of the coalition into two separate areas does not necessarily limit its military capabilities, but it does pose serious risks to its cohesion and, by extension, its ability to sustain effective operations over Syria in particular. Because of the Arab states' direct interest in the outcome of the Syrian civil war, they may try to push the United States toward extending air operations to targets of the al Assad regime. This is something the United States is unwilling to do, in part because it would carry a much higher logistical cost. But if such a disagreement were to threaten operations over Syria, the Europeans' reluctance to extend their own activities into Syria would seriously limit the coalition. The United States would also risk being perceived as the sole actor on the Syrian side of the battle, rather than part of an international coalition, and this could result in significant blowback on the ground. At the same time, disagreements on the scope of operations in Syria could also constrain the effectiveness of strikes by limiting the target set to the bare minimum to which all parties can agree.

As it stands, the U.S.-led coalition is fragile. When something is this delicate and complicated, it is hard to take the decisive action required to degrade and contain a dynamic opponent such as the Islamic State.

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America is gathering allies for a long campaign against extremists in Iraq and Syria

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Once again, and more wearily than ever, America is saddling up to lead an armed posse into the badlands of Mesopotamia. In 1991 the elder George Bush gathered a coalition to chase the invading forces of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq from Kuwait. In 2003, ostensibly but misguidedly as part of his global war on terror, the younger Mr Bush invaded Iraq, rid the country of Saddam but then got bloodily stuck; it took a vast commitment of American troops and fresh thinking to bring the violence under control. Now Barack Obama, having extricated American forces in 2011, has announced a new campaign to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the jihadists who burst out of Syria and reached the gates of Baghdad.

Today’s foes are an especially vile cast of Sunni zealots, killers and misfits calling themselves Islamic State (IS). An offshoot of al-Qaeda, IS has exceeded its progenitor in terms of both political ambition and brutality. Across swathes of Syria and Iraq it has founded a “caliphate”...
the long-defunct Islamic institution that the late leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, only dreamed about in messianic discourses.

IS’s love of gore, with gleeful massacres and beheadings recorded for video distribution across the internet, the brutal persecution of religious minorities and, it is said, the enslavement of women and children, has estranged it even from al-Qaeda. IS is a “killing and destruction machine,” says Abu Qatada, a jihadist ideologue (once described as Bin Laden’s top man in Europe) who was extradited from Britain to Jordan, where he is on trial on terrorism-related charges; its fighters are the “dogs of hellfire.” The beheading of two American journalists gave the West a glimpse of the many horrors.

IS has achieved something scarcely conceivable in the Middle East by uniting the bitterest of foes in a common purpose. Such diverse actors as Europeans and Kurds, the embattled Syrian regime along with many of the rebels opposing it, Turkey, a slew of Arab states, as well as Israel and the Iraqi government itself have all clamoured for American intervention. Even Iran, though unenthusiastic about the Americans’ return to a theatre that it has worked hard to squeeze them out of, has accepted a tacit, temporary alliance with the Great Satan.

On September 10th, Barack Obama promised to “lead a broad coalition to roll back this terrorist threat.” This would include systematic air strikes against IS in support of Iraqi forces and, if necessary, in Syria too.

Turning the fleeting political alignment into a coherent campaign is a tall order. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have shown how Western armed forces can score quick initial victories, but fail to secure a stable political system to maintain security thereafter. It may be even harder given that Mr Obama, even as he deploys hundreds more soldiers to support the mission, insists America “will not get dragged into another ground war.”

From Baath to bloodbath

The strength of IS reflects the political implosion in much of the Middle East, from the destruction of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist dictatorship by the Americans to the cracking of Bashar al-Assad’s Syrian one in the succession of Arab uprisings known as the Arab Spring. IS is both the product and the chief instigator of the ever deepening Sunni-Shia enmity that runs from Bahrain to Lebanon.

Misrule and cynicism play a part, too. IS could not have established itself in Raqqa, in Syria’s north-east, had Mr Assad not held off from bombing it, though he had no qualms about killing civilians elsewhere in his attempt to crush less extreme opponents; Mr Assad’s aim was to present himself as the only alternative to the most terrifying of jihadists. And IS could not have taken control of swathes of Iraq this summer, including Mosul, the second-largest city, had it not been for the systematic marginalisation of Sunnis by the Shia-led government of Nuri al-Maliki.

IS has become bigger, better armed and financed and more brutal than other terrorist outfits. It is reckoned to earn some $1m per day from selling oil and ransoming hostages. According to recent intelligence estimates, IS and its allies count up to 30,000-45,000 men, roughly a third of whom
are thought to be highly skilled fighters. It has mobilised foreign recruits faster than groups in other conflicts, partly because of the ease of access to Syria through Turkey. Estimates for foreign passport-holders vary, but there may be 12,000 operating in Syria (perhaps 3,000 of them Westerners) of which the majority have gravitated towards IS because it offers more glamour, money and, recently, success than other rival groups, such as the official al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.

IS grew out of the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was temporarily crushed by the American-instigated awakening, or the Sahwa, of Sunni tribes in Anbar province in 2007-08. It has fomented sectarian division by carrying out suicide bombings against Shias in Baghdad. It has also attacked prisons, for instance in July 2013, when an assault on the notorious Abu Ghraib and another jail freed some 500 AQI veterans, including many former commanders.

A lot of its success stems from the team that the group’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has gathered. Quite a few are former senior officers from Saddam’s army who took to violent resistance after being banned from re-enlisting under the de-Baathification policies of America and successive Iraqi governments.

Land of two wars

IS’s war has washed from one side of Iraq’s border with Syria to the other. As it set up its base in Raqqa, it showed a greater appetite for fighting other rebel groups than the Assad regime. With the seizure of Mosul on June 10th, where the Iraqi army was routed, IS acquired a huge stockpile of American-supplied weapons: armoured vehicles, artillery, anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, fleets of Humvees and a vast quantity of ammunition. Thus strengthened, it cleared out the last Syrian forces from Raqqa province. Three weeks ago it took the al-Tabqa airfield in possibly the most significant and bloody defeat suffered by the regime since the start of the uprising three years ago.

What has characterised IS so far is its combination of strategic patience, the ability to design and direct complex military operations simultaneously in Syria and Iraq, and hybrid warfare that fuses terrorist and insurgent techniques with conventional fighting. Among the tactics it has developed is to soften targets with artillery, or open a breach with suicide bombings, and then attack with swarms of armoured Humvees mounted with anti-aircraft guns coming from what seems like all directions at once. Its aggression, speed, firepower and readiness to take casualties, combined with the well-publicised savagery that awaits anyone taken captive, terrorises defenders into flight.

While al-Qaeda lurked in the shadows and sought to attack America and Europe, which it called the far enemy, intelligence agencies think that, for the time being, IS’s preoccupation is the near enemy. That offers scant comfort, as IS threatens to destabilise a large part of the volatile Middle East. Success may inspire others: Boko Haram in Nigeria has begun to emulate IS’s tactic of seizing and trying to hold territory.

With its ideological ferocity, attachment to the propaganda of the deed, organisational skill, platoons of Western passport-holders, hatred of America and determination to become the leader
of global jihadism, IS will surely turn, sooner or later, against the far enemy. The ability of IS to act as a magnet for foreigners, particularly radicalised young Muslims from Europe, is deepening Western fears that some hardened fighters will want to return home to plot self-directed attacks. The danger of such “lone wolves” was apparent in the killing of four people at the Jewish museum in Brussels in May. The presumed attacker, Mehdi Nemmouche, a Frenchman of Algerian descent, has been identified by French former hostages in Syria as one of their jailers.

Few analysts think the beheading of American journalists, which spurred Mr Obama to announce his strategy, was really an attempt to goad the West into returning to the region. It was, perhaps, retaliation for initial American air strikes, and a warning to desist. Or perhaps it was just a “declaration of impunity,” says Jessica Lewis, a former American intelligence officer in Iraq who works at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington, DC.

IS members who appear on social media view the prospect of more intense American action with a mixture of glee and fear. For all its successes, IS also has big weaknesses. The alliance of hardcore jihadists and former Baathists could fracture under pressure. And IS is paranoid about local populations turning against it, which helps explain its brutal expulsion of minorities and moderate Sunnis from areas it controls. By choosing to create a “state” the organisation must now defend a territory stretching some 460 miles (740km) from Baghdad to Aleppo. And when IS forces go on the offensive they must drive along open roads through mainly flat terrain that offers little cover from aerial attacks.

The limited air strikes that America has conducted so far (about 150 to date) have brought humanitarian relief to the Yazidi minority, allowed outgunned Kurdish Peshmerga fighters to repel an IS advance near Kirkuk and, working with Iraqi security forces, preserved the Mosul and Haditha dams in government hands. With American support, Iraqi troops and Shia militias lifted the siege of the town of Amerli, home to Shia Turkmen. A larger air campaign could destroy many of the armoured vehicles and heavy weapons that have provided IS with the mobility and firepower to rampage across Iraq.

Ground-to-air support

Although air power may contain IS, it will take ground forces to push its fighters out of the Sunni cities it has taken and keep them out. But whose troops? The Peshmerga enjoy a reputation for being fearless fighters, but they needed American air strikes to prevent their regional capital, Erbil, from falling. The Kurds are now being hurriedly armed by Western countries, but they are unlikely to advance far beyond their semi-independent enclave. Shia militias are hardly more savoury than IS itself. Even Muqtada al-Sadr, a radical Shia cleric, this week had to disavow atrocities carried out by Shia fighters ostensibly loyal to him; they were said to have killed and beheaded several Sunnis and burned homes in the fighting for Amerli.

Expelling IS will need, above all, the co-operation of Iraq’s disgruntled Sunni tribes, for whom the group is either a protector or at least a convenient ally against the Shia-led government and myriad Shia militias. Pushed by both America and Iran, the divisive and discredited Mr Maliki has been replaced by Haider al-Abadi, who this week won parliamentary support for a new government. But it will take much more than fresh faces to dispel Sunni suspicions. After all, Mr
Maliki appointed Sunni ministers, and Mr Abadi hails from the same Dawa party. “We will keep fighting alongside IS since we lost so many people under Maliki,” says Tahsein, a fighter from Karma in Iraq’s Anbar province.

It will be hard to recreate the Sahwa. For a start, there is no large American presence on the ground (there may be some special forces) that can offer protection, be it from Sunni or Shia killers. In any case Mr Abadi is thinking of a different model, with a new government-financed and supervised paramilitary force in each province. Whether such outfits will prove any more effective than the hapless Iraqi army is open to doubt. Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, an American think-tank, argues that American security-force assistance teams, each with about 10–20 soldiers, need to be deployed with Iraqi battalions for a year or so. Several thousand special forces working with the Iraqis may be needed to carry out sufficient kill or capture raids to remove the most dedicated IS fighters from the battlefield.

What to do about Assad

Fighting insurgents is infinitely harder when they enjoy a haven. Any strategy against IS must, sooner or later, involve reducing the group’s heartland in eastern Syria. But here Mr Obama’s plan is weakest. In Iraq he has outlined a counter-insurgency campaign combining Iraqi ground forces and American air power. In Syria he is talking mainly of a counter-terrorist operation, involving air strikes of the sort America carries out in Yemen and Somalia against high-profile targets such as the one that killed the leader of Somalia’s Shabab militia earlier this month (see article).

To an extent, the two-pronged policy reflects reality. In Iraq there is a government of sorts that, for all its flaws, can ask for external support and might be cajoled into reforms. In Syria the regime of Mr Assad is as loathsome as IS, and indeed acquiesced in its expansion. America knows, moreover, that Russia may well block any UN authorisation for military action in Syria, as it has done in the past.

That said, Mr Obama’s commitment to strengthen the non-IS opposition is vague and has come very late in the day. Less extreme Sunni rebels pushed out IS in the north-western provinces of Idleb and Aleppo early this year, but have since fallen back and are now caught in a pincer between IS and pro-Assad forces. Mr Obama gave no hint of how he intends to pursue the political solution to end Syria’s civil war, which has uprooted nearly half its 23m people and, by one estimate, killed at least 110,000 civilians.
To some, co-operation with Syria may be the lesser evil, if only to ensure that Syrian missiles do not shoot down coalition aircraft. But Syria’s air defences are not an insurmountable threat to Western aircraft. Syria’s army, moreover, is thinly spread, tired and demoralised. Mr Assad, whose Alawite sect is an esoteric offshoot of Shiism, has relied heavily on Shia fighters brought in from Iraq and Lebanon. Helping Mr Assad, directly or indirectly, would risk casting America as the agent of Iran and the Shias.

All these difficulties point to the need for broad support. The more allies America can gather—particularly Arab and Sunni ones—the more legitimate the war against IS will seem in the eyes...
of Sunnis and of the rest of the world. It helps that Saudi Arabia is willing to do more to train and equip Syrian fighters. Others have yet to say what they are prepared to do.

The diplomatic game is particularly hard. America is losing its hegemony in the Middle East, while the region itself has grown radically more fragmented and volatile. On top of such unresolved conflicts as the one between Israel and the Arabs, or between Turkey and Kurdish insurrectionists, the schism between Sunni and Shia has been exacerbated by a shadowy proxy struggle between the two sects’ main state champions, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Elsewhere in the region the turbulence of the Arab spring has left surviving regimes, or resurrected ones such as Egypt’s military-dominated government, far more wary and mistrustful of their traditional Western allies than ever. Conservative Arab rulers suspect America of having plotted to undermine them, and of foolishly seeking a nuclear deal with Iran as a silver bullet for regional woes. In addition, countries such as Turkey and Qatar, which backed the losing horse of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, are no longer seen as reliable partners by other Arabs.

Given the complex of military and political problems, Mr Obama is right not to put a time limit on the mission, as he has done too often in the past. The military tide may already be turning. In Iraq IS is losing some of the capacity to surprise, and has run to the limit of its ethnic base. Without the magical aura of momentum, there is at least a possibility that IS could wane almost as quickly as it waxed.

And yet, from the moment IS is seen to falter, and even before, the strange bedfellows now united against the group are nearly certain to fall out among themselves. Trying to stop them doing so, or at least to lessen the damage from inevitable frictions, will take a broader approach. Mr Obama may succeed in clobbering IS. But the jihadists are a gruesome manifestation of a wider problem that Mr Obama seems unwilling to tackle: how to fashion a future for Iraq and Syria that is attractive enough to secure consent from majorities of their citizens, Sunnis, Shias, Kurds and everyone else.

The Economist

America’s plan is a decent one—but it will take a worryingly long time to bear fruit

Sep 13th 2014

WHEN Barack Obama spoke to the American public on September 10th, his words had a bearing on more than just Islamic State (IS). His scheme to deal with the ìcancerî of IS, the gravest terrorist threat since al-Qaeda, will work only if the Middle East can begin to overcome the chaos that has engulfed it. Equally, America can act as the leader of an enduring coalition against IS only if it can recover some of the status it has lost during years of retrenchment in foreign policy. What the president called ìAmerican leadership at its bestî is thus both a fight against terrorism and a riposte to those who doubt American power.
Mr Obama’s scheme calls for a coalition of Western and Arab countries to degrade and ultimately destroy IS militarily, financially and ideologically. Even if there is no UN approval, the coalition will gain legitimacy by virtue of its Arab and Muslim backing. America will attack IS from the air in Iraq and, when necessary, in Syria. America will help the Kurds and restore Iraq’s army, weakened by its pro-Shia bias and battered by defeats at the hands of IS. It will also build up the forces of moderate rebels in Syria. There will be no marines, but American trainers and special forces will play a big part.

Mr Obama is right to proceed and he now has a plan. But Americans should steel themselves. Success will come, if it comes at all, only after a long struggle.

Will IS become was?

In the past Mr Obama wrongly judged Iraq “sovereign, stable and self-reliant” downplayed the threat from IS and, after the popular uprising against the regime of Bashar Assad, left Syria to fester. Partly as a result, IS is tearing apart the Middle East, occupying large parts of Syria and, with its appeal to disaffected Sunnis, destroying next-door Iraq. Unchecked, it might move on to Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia’s home to Islam’s holiest sites (and an ocean of oil). IS is already a threat to any Western citizen who strays into its path, and Western jihadists could well return home to launch attacks.

Mr Obama has grounds for thinking that his plan can succeed. American public opinion used to be against returning to the disasters of the Middle East. But after the recent beheading of two Americans, people now back intervention. In the same way Muslim countries, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, which had profited from America’s lower profile to make mischief, all see something to fear in IS. They recognise that only America can organise a broad campaign to stop it. John Kerry, America’s secretary of state, is on a tour of the Middle East, drumming up support. Saudi Arabia has agreed to host a training camp for moderate Syrian rebels. Lastly, Mr Obama will hope that IS is more fragile than it looks. Its success comes partly from the mystique of its rapid advance. If it is shown up by defeats in battle, that may evaporate.

Yet Mr Obama’s task is very hard. He needs support from a broad range of Arab countries. IS must be suppressed in Iraq and in Syria, otherwise it will have a refuge where it can regroup. In Iraq he needs to weaken IS by peeling off some of the Sunnis who fight alongside it. The hope is that they can be persuaded to throw in their lot with a national government instead. Yet Iraq’s new unity cabinet, under Haidar al-Abadi, is fragile and contains only token Sunni representation. In Syria, the idea is to strengthen less extreme rebels who are fighting against Mr Assad and understand the need to defeat IS, which is why allying with Mr Assad would have been self-defeating, as well as morally repugnant. But efforts to build up the moderate Syrian rebels have been feeble. It remains unclear whether they can become a match for IS or Mr Assad.

Thus Mr Obama needs time. He must use his air power to keep IS down while Iraq builds a state that Sunnis can believe in, while he trains a new Iraqi national army to reconquer the country, and while the Syrian rebels become a force that is potent enough to force a political solution on Mr Assad. Such tasks would take many months in Iraq and years in Syria.
In one respect, time is on Mr Obama’s side. IS’s cruelty and injustice are unpopular among all but the hardest-liners. But in others, time is the president’s enemy. Patience is hardly a virtue of American politics. The countries ganging up on IS have only a temporary alignment of interests. Sooner or later, their rivalry will reassert itself. If the coalition weakens, the whole enterprise will lose momentum and legitimacy.

To have the greatest chance of success, any coalition must hold together. Mr Obama thus needs to show a commitment to sustained personal diplomacy that has so far been lacking in his presidency. He also needs to demonstrate the potency of American firepower to give countries pause before turning their backs on him. But most of all, a president who wanted to focus on home needs the resolve to stay the course abroad.

Iraq, Syria and jihadism

The will and the way

The coalition may already be losing the fight against Islamic State

Oct 11th 2014 | The Economist

THese are early days, but the campaign that Barack Obama announced almost exactly a month ago to “degrade and ultimately destroy” Islamic State is not going well. In both Syria and Iraq, IS is scoring victories against the West and its Sunni Arab allies. The coalition’s strategy is beset by contradictions and self-imposed constraints, with two of the worst offenders being the two
countries that could do the most to degrade IS: America and Turkey. The coalition must rise above these shortcomings, or IS will end up being validated in the eyes of could-be jihadists—the very opposite of what the coalition leaders set out to achieve.

As *The Economist* went to press, the strategically important Kurdish town of Kobane, on the border with Turkey, had been entered by heavily armed IS fighters and surrounded on three sides. Coalition air strikes have delayed the town’s fall, but probably by only a few days. If Kobane succumbs there will be a chorus of demands for a redoubled coalition effort, offset by dire warnings of the dangers of mission creep.

IS poses a threat to the entire Middle East and is potentially a source of terrorism against the West. So more effort makes sense, but only if the campaign can resolve its contradictions.

That task starts with Turkey. Despite a vote in the parliament in Ankara on October 2nd, authorising the country’s forces to operate in Syria, Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is engaged in an elaborate juggling act. He says, correctly, that air strikes alone cannot overcome IS and that every means must be used to defeat it. But although he has tanks parked along the border, he refuses to help the Kurds, whom he sees as his enemies. Indeed, even as he leaves Kobane to its fate, his riot police are killing Kurds protesting within Turkey. Mr Erdogan seems wary of offering anything more than rhetorical Turkish support for the coalition, unless America enforces a buffer and no-fly zone on the Syrian side of the border. He is also insisting that America should make removing the Assad regime a higher priority than tackling IS.

America’s strategy is also beset with tensions. Although it wants to see Mr Assad go, it is reluctant to join that fight for now, partly because success in Iraq depends on persuading the government in Baghdad to become sufficiently inclusive to woo back the alienated Sunni tribes. And for that it needs the help of Iran, Mr Assad’s closest ally. Meanwhile, America’s collaboration with the Shia-led government has not made it any easier to win over suspicious Sunnis. While air strikes have helped the Kurds regain some ground from IS, security in Sunni-dominat ed Anbar province has continued to deteriorate. After IS fighters overran some Iraqi army bases and seized control of Abu Ghraib, within shelling range of Baghdad’s international airport, America sent in Apache attack helicopters to hit IS targets along the road that runs west of Baghdad to the IS stronghold of Falluja. Calling up the Apaches—not boots on the ground, perhaps, but certainly boots in the air—is an admission that high-flying fast jets have their limitations.

The coalition is also up against the law of unintended consequences. After its first big attack in Syria, it has targeted the oil refineries which help finance IS’s activities and other bits of IS infrastructure. But military action has also driven the dwindling band of moderate rebels the ones that America aims to train and arm into the embrace of jihadist groups, such as the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which now portray the coalition as an anti-Sunni stooge of the Assad regime.

John Allen, a former general and Mr Obama’s special envoy for the coalition against IS, flew to Ankara this week in an effort to find common ground with the Turks. Nobody would claim there are easy answers for either Mr Obama or Mr Erdogan, but both are guilty of willing an end while
withholding the means to secure it. In Mr Erdogan’s case, it is nonsense to claim he backs the
effort to destroy IS while he leaves Kobane’s Kurds to be slaughtered. If the town falls, both
Turkey’s reputation and its security will suffer a grievous blow. Better to act as a full member of
the coalition and use the goodwill this generates to influence it from the inside. Mr Erdogan
should use his troops to save Kobane and give America permission to fly from the giant NATO
airbase at nearby Incirlik.

For his part, Mr Obama needs to face up to two things. First, most of the coalition wants to see
the back of Mr Assad: his serial brutalities against his own people have appalled Sunnis
everywhere. Russia and Iran have hinted that they would accept a more pragmatic military figure
in his place if their interests were respected. Mr Obama should work on that. Second, the fight
against IS cannot succeed without competent troops on the ground to guide coalition aircraft to
their targets, pursue enemy leaders and take and hold territory. That calls for the use of special
forces in greater numbers and on more missions. Other troops need to be embedded in the better
Iraqi units to train and mentor them. When Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the joint chiefs of
staff, called for that, he was slapped down by Mr Obama. With such actions the president means
to look resolute, but the people he reassures most are the jihadists.
Turkey and Syria

While Kobane burns

The reluctance to strike IS may redound on Turkey’s president

Oct 11th 2014 | ANKARA The Economist

THE contrast could not be starker. On one side of a barbed-wire fence, beneath plumes of smoke from air strikes and amid the rattle of gunfire, the bearded fighters of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) closed their grip on Kobane, a Kurdish town on Syria’s northern border. On the other Turkey’s soldiers, with tanks and armoured personnel carriers, nonchalantly watch the show, stirring only to fire tear gas and beat back Kurdish protesters wanting to help their Syrian brethren.

The reluctance of Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to aid Kobane—even in the name of supporting his American allies as they give air support to the beleaguered defenders is as obstinate as it is puzzling. It is also counter-productive, given that it drives a wedge between Turkey and America and heightens tension with Turkey’s own Kurdish minority. It may yet rekindle Turkish Kurds’long but now dormant insurgency.

Mr Erdogan says any help to the Syrian Kurds depends on them abandoning their de facto alliance with the Syrian regime of President Bashar Assad, and joining the mainstream rebel alliance seeking to overthrow him. There were hopes in early October that this position would be softened after secret talks took place in Turkey between Syrian Kurds and assorted Turkish diplomats and spooks. The officials are said to have tentatively agreed to allow weapons from other Kurdish-run enclaves to transit Turkey and be delivered to the besieged forces of the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protections Units (YPG). But Mr Erdogan, who seems to defer to the country’s more hawkish generals on Kurdish matters these days, is said to have quashed the idea. He also told America, which has been conducting air strikes in defence of Kobane, that they would not get Turkish help unless they agreed to target Mr Assad as well as IS., and set up a no-fly zone.

His inaction is stirring Kurdish accusations that Mr Erdogan is either co-operating with IS’ jihadis, or at least fears them less than he does the YPG, an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) that has waged a decades-long insurgency for self-rule in Turkey. Yet Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, has warned that peace talks with the Turkish government would end if the jihadis were allowed to prevail. On October 7th young Kurds went on a rampage, burning vehicles, looting shops, and hurling Molotov cocktails and rocks at police, who responded with tear gas and water cannons. More than 20 died.

Tanks and armoured vehicles were deployed to impose curfews in the predominantly Kurdish cities of Diyarbakir, Batman, Bingol, and Van, as well as other areas. Mr Erdogan’s calculation
that the Kurds cannot afford to open a second front against Turkey while they are grappling with the jihadists is being tested. Mr Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development party may be hurt by the turmoil, especially if it scares off foreign investors before parliamentary elections due to be held next summer.

A sinister dimension is the fact that most of those killed in street violence died in clashes between sympathisers of rival Kurdish groups—the PKK on one side and Huda-Par, a pro-Islamic group, on the other. Huda-Par has links to an armed Kurdish faction known as Hizbullah (unconnected to the militia in Lebanon); in the 1990s it fought a nasty war against the PKK that believed to have egged on the Islamists against their nationalist brethren. Mr Erdogan’s much-vaunted peace process with the Kurds is fast collapsing.

**Turkey and the PKK: The emergence of another Kurdish entity on its borders unsettles the government**

Oct 4th 2014 | ANKARA AND QANDIL | The Economist

A SENIOR commander of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a rebel group that has been fighting for Kurdish self-rule inside Turkey since 1984, declared on September 21st that the Ankara government had until October 1st to meet several conditions. "Otherwise we may resume our war," said Cemil Bayik at the PKK’s headquarters in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq. On October 1st the government duly issued a directive that lets unspecified observers monitor its peace talks with Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned PKK leader (pictured on the flag). A long-running PKK demand was thus fulfilled and an 18-month-old, mutually observed, ceasefire salvaged. But for how long?

The question is gaining urgency as fighters calling themselves Islamic State (IS) continue their onslaught against Ain al-Arab (known as Kobane in Kurdish), a Syrian town with a majority Kurdish population on the Turkish border. Kobane and a cluster of villages is one of the three enclaves governed by Syria’s Kurds. Syria’s president, Bashar Assad, ceded them to a group known as the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) so that he could concentrate his fight against rebels elsewhere. The PYD and its armed wing, the People’s Defence Units (YPG), are closely linked to the PKK.

Mr Bayik insists that Turkey is backing IS fighters and that this is because they want to "crush" the Syrian Kurds’ fledgling autonomy. Turkey denies these claims. It supported the American-led coalition against IS, albeit only after the group released 46 Turkish hostages, seized at the Turkish consulate in Mosul on June 10th. As The Economist went to press, parliament was poised to pass a vaguely worded bill that allows Turkish troops to intervene against terrorist groups inside Iraq and Syria. It also allows foreign troops to use Turkish bases in the fight against the jihadists, a move that is bound to stir controversy among pro-secular Turks and the pious base of the ruling Justice and Development party (AK).
Turkey is deeply unnerved by the emergence of yet another Kurdish entity on its frontier. Making matters worse is that, unlike Iraqi Kurdistan, which is now Turkey's biggest regional ally and trading partner, the Syrian Kurdish region, known as Rojava in Kurdish, is dominated by Turkey's biggest foe, the PKK.

This unforeseen twist shoved Turkey's long-festering Kurdish problem beyond its borders, propelling a panic-stricken AK to resume peace talks with Mr Ocalan. Rojava's fate and the peace process in Turkey are inseparable, argues Arzu Yılmaz, an academic. Turkey's plan, she adds, is to keep the ceasefire running until next summer's parliamentary elections by throwing titbits at the Kurds.

These were supposed to include the introduction of optional Kurdish-language lessons in state run schools. But the scheme has not taken off. For the past three years my children have been trying to sign up for Kurdish classes but they either tell us that there are no teachers or not enough demand, complains Altan Tan, an MP for the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party. The Kurds have attempted to set up informal Kurdish-language schools of their own, but these were promptly shut by the police last month. A group calling itself the PKK's youth wing responded by torching more than 30 government schools in the Kurdish region, provoking a barrage of outrage among ordinary citizens, Kurds included.

Yet even though the PKK moans about the lack of progress in Turkey, much of their horse-trading with the AK currently revolves around Syria's Kurds. Turkey is pressing the PYD to end its undeclared non-aggression pact with Mr Assad and to join the rebels seeking to overthrow him. At the same time they are being told to share power with rival Syrian Kurdish groups. More implausibly still, Turkey also wants the PYD to sever ties with the PKK and perhaps even to cede control over Kobane, which would become part of a planned safe pocket to park refugees and to train and equip the rebels.

In fact, Turkey has made many conciliatory gestures. It has opened its doors to tens of thousands of Kurdish refugees fleeing the violence in Kobane and is allowing wounded YPG fighters to be treated in Turkish hospitals, a first. Turkey's friends in the West continue to single out the peace talks with the PKK as the AK's great achievement.

Nuray Mert of Istanbul University warns that the government risks denting Mr Ocalan's credibility by overloading him with demands, including getting the PKK to disarm, with little to show for his co-operation. This may weaken Mr Ocalan's grip over the PKK. And the nightmare result, says a senior AK party official, would be Turkey fighting IS and the PKK at the same time.

Might Turkey be pre-empting the jihadists by taking the battle to them first? That is how pundits interpret a recent unconfirmed story in Yeni Safak, a pro-AK daily, that dozens of Turkish soldiers guarding the tomb of Suleyman Shah, the grandfather of the first Ottoman ruler Osman, 20 kilometres (12 miles) south of the Turkish border, near Kobane, have been encircled by IS fighters. Either way, Turkey may well use its men's safety as a pretext to intervene in Syria. The question remains: would its main target be IS or the Kurds?
Islam, Iraq and Syria

Caliphornia dreamin’

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declares himself leader of all Muslims—who don’t buy it

Jul 12th 2014 | CAIRO | The Economist

The man who would be caliph

A FEW details looked out of place: the watch on the speaker’s right wrist, a fan whirring behind him and machine guns propped against the walls. Otherwise, as a thickly bearded, black-robed preacher slowly mounted the pulpit of the Mosque of Noureddin Zangi in the Iraqi city of Mosul on July 4th, the first Friday of Ramadan, the scene could have been set 750 years ago. Just as then, when the mosque’s builder and namesake ruled the surrounding region and rallied the faithful against Christian Crusaders in Palestine, the sermon was a rousing call for Muslims to fall in and join the jihad.

The difference is that this preacher, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, styles himself not a local emir but a caliph, the presumed commander of all the world’s 1.5 billion faithful. And another difference: his jihad has so far been waged not so much against infidels as against fellow Muslims. But perhaps the most significant innovation is that Mr Baghdadi had his performance filmed in high-resolution video, a slick advertisement both for his band of international terrorists, now titled the State of the Islamic Caliphate (SIC), and for his hitherto-reclusive self.

Mr Baghdadi’s rise appears meteoric. When he took its helm four years ago his group, which started as a stepchild of al-Qaeda in the armed resistance to America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, had been all but smashed. Its roaring comeback started with a wave of bombings targeting Iraqi Shias. In 2012 it expanded into Syria, attracting thousands of jihadists from around the world to become the strongest rebel militia and establishing a proto-state centred on the city of Raqqa. Unlike earlier jihadist groups, SIC has created a full-scale administrative apparatus, including institutions such as courts and social-welfare programmes.

Last month it returned to Iraq, leading a charge by Sunni insurgents towards the capital, Baghdad. Since Mr Baghdadi’s declaration of a caliphate on June 30th SIC has captured more land in Iraq, secured a new chunk of Syria around the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, and now threatens to push north and west into areas held by rival Syrian rebel groups.

A mix of ruthlessness, astute publicity and clever tactics has allowed SIC to punch above its strength, estimated anywhere between 7,000-20,000 fighters. Its expansion in both Iraq and Syria has followed a pattern. Potential allies such as tribal groups and local militias are wooed with cash, guns and promises. Leaders who resist pledging allegiance, as well as allies who have
served their purpose, are then targeted for assassination. Recent victims reportedly include the incumbent imam of the Nouredden Zangi mosque and a dozen other Sunni clerics in Mosul, as well as former Iraqi army officers who helped plan SIC’s stunning seizure of Iraq’s second-largest city last month.

Yet Mr Baghdadi faces some big obstacles. Aside from young Islamist hotheads, like-minded jihadist groups and co-opted local militias, few Muslims anywhere have responded to his claims with enthusiasm. The International Union of Muslim Scholars, a group of Sunni clerics chaired by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Egyptian preacher, lambasted SIC’s declaration of a caliphate as illegitimate, destructive not only to the Sunni uprisings in Iraq and Syria but to Islam in general. Not even Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Jordanian cleric released from prison last month and widely respected in jihadist circles, endorses the caliphate project. Reform yourselves, repent, stop killing fellow Muslims and distorting religion, he commanded in a recent statement.

Perhaps most tellingly, a survey carried out in Syria in May by ORB, a British firm that specialises in opinion-taking in war zones, found that only 4% of respondents believed that SIC best represents the interests and aspirations of the Syrian people. Even in their stronghold of Raqqa, the group’s popularity was an unimpressive 24%. No wonder Mr Baghdadi dismisses democracy as an infidel abomination.

Islamic doctrine

A cause of strife

Jihadists’ claim to the caliphate is challenged by scholars

Oct 4th 2014 The Economist

WHEN Islamic State (IS) declared on June 29th that its leader was the new caliph, no one was more perplexed than his supposed flock of 1.6 billion Muslims. All but the most avid jihadists reject the claim outright. In the case of the 126 distinguished scholars and clerics who recently penned a lengthy, 24-point refutation, the dismissal was carefully argued on grounds of Islamic jurisprudence: a caliph can only be chosen by general consensus; anything else would be fitna, Arabic for strife or sedition.

The yearning for the caliphate, and its propaganda value to IS, are understandable. Schoolbooks paint the rule of the first four caliphs or successors to Muhammad as a golden age. Arabs wistfully recall the glory of the caliphates of 8th-century Damascus and 9th-century Baghdad. Modern Islamism, with its leitmotif of grievance against the West, has long harped on the fall of the last titular caliph, in 1924, as a deep wound to the faith. Even the doubting signatories of the letter admit that establishing the caliphate is an obligation upon the ummah (or Muslim nation).
And yet the institution had been in decline long before Turkish republicans deposed Abdul-Majid II (pictured), the last Ottoman sultan and titular caliph, who ended his years in Paris painting and collecting butterflies. His claim was in any case thin. The Ottomans had acquired the title by war: among booty from their conquest of Egypt in 1516, along with hairs from the prophet’s beard, was the last caliph of the previous, Abbasid line, who surrendered the title in exchange for his freedom. His forebears had fled to Egypt following the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258, and had for centuries been paraded on state occasions to legitimate the rule of Egypt’s Mameluke sultans.

Long before the Mongol onslaught, Abbasid generals and ministers had already assumed more real power than their ostensible masters, several of whom were famed for drunkenness or debauchery. Besides, in the 10th century, rival caliphs in Cordoba and Cairo vied for dominance. Even in the earliest times, clashes between different lines of descent from the prophet often cast doubt on the legitimacy of caliphs. Some insisted the office should not be inherited at all. Instead, as happened with Muhammad’s immediate successors, caliphs should be chosen from among those most qualified. (Such disputes gave rise to the Sunni-Shia divide.)

Supporters of IS’s supposed caliph, who calls himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, say that he is a pious man and a skilled commander, as well as a descendant of the prophet. Since he has established a state, imposed Sharia (Islamic law) and removed evil Muslims must now atone for abandoning the caliphate, and pledge allegiance. Perhaps so, but the Koran is more ambivalent. When God tells the angels he will place a caliph on earth they ask, will he do harm and shed blood? God replies, “Surely I know that which ye know not.”

You Can't Understand ISIS If You Don't Know the History of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia

Part I of Alastair Crooke's historical analysis of the roots of ISIS

Posted: 08/27/2014 11:56 am EDT Updated: 09/05/2014 5:59 pm EDT Huffington Post

BEIRUT -- The dramatic arrival of Da’ish (ISIS) on the stage of Iraq has shocked many in the West. Many have been perplexed -- and horrified -- by its violence and its evident magnetism for Sunni youth. But more than this, they find Saudi Arabia's ambivalence in the face of this manifestation both troubling and inexplicable, wondering, "Don't the Saudis understand that ISIS threatens them, too?"

It appears -- even now -- that Saudi Arabia's ruling elite is divided. Some applaud that ISIS is fighting Iranian Shiite "fire" with Sunni "fire"; that a new Sunni state is taking shape at the very
heart of what they regard as a historical Sunni patrimony; and they are drawn by Da'ish's strict Salafist ideology.

Other Saudis are more fearful, and recall the history of the revolt against Abd-al Aziz by the Wahhabist Ikhwans (Disclaimer: this Ikwan has nothing to do with the Muslim Brotherhood Ikwan -- please note, all further references hereafter are to the Wahhabist Ikwan, and not to the Muslim Brotherhood Ikwan), but which nearly imploded Wahhabism and the al-Saud in the late 1920s.

Many Saudis are deeply disturbed by the radical doctrines of Da'ish (ISIS) -- and are beginning to question some aspects of Saudi Arabia's direction and discourse.

THE SAUDI DUALITY

Saudi Arabia's internal discord and tensions over ISIS can only be understood by grasping the inherent (and persisting) duality that lies at the core of the Kingdom's doctrinal makeup and its historical origins.

One dominant strand to the Saudi identity pertains directly to Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab (the founder of Wahhabism), and the use to which his radical, exclusionist puritanism was put by Ibn Saud. (The latter was then no more than a minor leader -- amongst many -- of continually sparring and raiding Bedouin tribes in the baking and desperately poor deserts of the Nejd.)

The second strand to this perplexing duality, relates precisely to King Abd-al Aziz's subsequent shift towards statehood in the 1920s: his curbing of Ikhwani violence (in order to have diplomatic standing as a nation-state with Britain and America); his institutionalization of the original Wahhabist impulse -- and the subsequent seizing of the opportune surging petrodollar spigot in the 1970s, to channel the volatile Ikhwani current away from home towards export -- by diffusing a cultural revolution, rather than violent revolution throughout the Muslim world.

But this "cultural revolution" was no docile reformism. It was a revolution based on Abd al-Wahhab's Jacobin-like hatred for the putrescence and deviationism that he perceived all about him -- hence his call to purge Islam of all its heresies and idolatries.

MUSLIM IMPPOSTORS

The American author and journalist, Steven Coll, has written how this austere and censorious disciple of the 14th century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, Abd al-Wahhab, despised "the decorous,arty, tobacco smoking, hashish imbibing, drum pounding Egyptian and Ottoman nobility who travelled across Arabia to pray at Mecca."

In Abd al-Wahhab's view, these were not Muslims; they were imposters masquerading as Muslims. Nor, indeed, did he find the behavior of local Bedouin Arabs much better. They aggravated Abd al-Wahhab by their honoring of saints, by their erecting of tombstones, and their "superstition" (e.g. revering graves or places that were deemed particularly imbued with the divine).
All this behavior, Abd al-Wahhab denounced as *bida* -- forbidden by God.

Like Taymiyyah before him, Abd al-Wahhab believed that the period of the Prophet Muhammad’s stay in Medina was the ideal of Muslim society (the “best of times”), to which all Muslims should aspire to emulate (this, essentially, is Salafism).

Taymiyyah had declared war on Shi’ism, Sufism and Greek philosophy. He spoke out, too, against visiting the grave of the prophet and the celebration of his birthday, declaring that all such behavior represented mere imitation of the Christian worship of Jesus as God (i.e. idolatry). Abd al-Wahhab assimilated all this earlier teaching, stating that "any doubt or hesitation" on the part of a believer in respect to his or her acknowledging this particular interpretation of Islam should "deprive a man of immunity of his property and his life."

One of the main tenets of Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine has become the key idea of *takfir*. Under the *takfiri* doctrine, Abd al-Wahhab and his followers could deem fellow Muslims infidels should they engage in activities that in any way could be said to encroach on the sovereignty of the absolute Authority (that is, the King). Abd al-Wahhab denounced all Muslims who honored the dead, saints, or angels. He held that such sentiments detracted from the complete subservience one must feel towards God, and only God. Wahhabi Islam thus bans any prayer to saints and dead loved ones, pilgrimages to tombs and special mosques, religious festivals celebrating saints, the honoring of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad's birthday, and even prohibits the use of gravestones when burying the dead.

Abd al-Wahhab demanded conformity -- a conformity that was to be demonstrated in physical and tangible ways. He argued that all Muslims must individually pledge their allegiance to a single Muslim leader (a Caliph, if there were one). Those who would not conform to this view should be killed, their wives and daughters violated, and their possessions confiscated, he wrote. The list of apostates meriting death included the Shi'ite, Sufis and other Muslim denominations, whom Abd al-Wahhab did not consider to be Muslim at all.

There is nothing here that separates Wahhabism from ISIS. The rift would emerge only later: from the subsequent institutionalization of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine of "One Ruler, One Authority, One Mosque" -- these three pillars being taken respectively to refer to the Saudi king, the absolute authority of official Wahhabism, and its control of "the word" (i.e. the mosque).

It is this rift -- the ISIS denial of these three pillars on which the whole of Sunni authority presently rests -- makes ISIS, which in all other respects conforms to Wahhabism, a deep threat to Saudi Arabia.

**BRIEF HISTORY 1741-1818**

Abd al-Wahhab's advocacy of these ultra radical views inevitably led to his expulsion from his own town -- and in 1741, after some wanderings, he found refuge under the protection of Ibn Saud and his tribe. What Ibn Saud perceived in Abd al-Wahhab's novel teaching was the means to overturn Arab tradition and convention. It was a path to seizing power.
Ibn Saud's clan, seizing on Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine, now could do what they always did, which was raiding neighboring villages and robbing them of their possessions. Only now they were doing it not within the ambit of Arab tradition, but rather under the banner of *jihad*. Ibn Saud and Abd al-Wahhab also reintroduced the idea of martyrdom in the name of jihad, as it granted those martyred immediate entry into paradise.

In the beginning, they conquered a few local communities and imposed their rule over them. (The conquered inhabitants were given a limited choice: conversion to Wahhabism or death.) By 1790, the Alliance controlled most of the Arabian Peninsula and repeatedly raided Medina, Syria and Iraq.

Their strategy -- like that of ISIS today -- was to bring the peoples whom they conquered into submission. They aimed to instill fear. In 1801, the Allies attacked the Holy City of Karbala in Iraq. They massacred thousands of Shiites, including women and children. Many Shiite shrines were destroyed, including the shrine of Imam Hussein, the murdered grandson of Prophet Muhammed.

A British official, Lieutenant Francis Warden, observing the situation at the time, wrote: "They pillaged the whole of it [Karbala], and plundered the Tomb of Hussein... slaying in the course of the day, with circumstances of peculiar cruelty, above five thousand of the inhabitants ..." 

Osman Ibn Bishr Najdi, the historian of the first Saudi state, wrote that Ibn Saud committed a massacre in Karbala in 1801. He proudly documented that massacre saying, "we took Karbala and slaughtered and took its people (as slaves), then praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, and we do not apologize for that and say: 'And to the unbelievers: the same treatment."

In 1803, Abdul Aziz then entered the Holy City of Mecca, which surrendered under the impact of terror and panic (the same fate was to befall Medina, too). Abd al-Wahhab's followers demolished historical monuments and all the tombs and shrines in their midst. By the end, they had destroyed centuries of Islamic architecture near the Grand Mosque.

But in November of 1803, a Shiite assassin killed King Abdul Aziz (taking revenge for the massacre at Karbala). His son, Saud bin Abd al Aziz, succeeded him and continued the conquest of Arabia. Ottoman rulers, however, could no longer just sit back and watch as their empire was devoured piece by piece. In 1812, the Ottoman army, composed of Egyptians, pushed the Alliance out from Medina, Jeddah and Mecca. In 1814, Saud bin Abd al Aziz died of fever. His unfortunate son Abdullah bin Saud, however, was taken by the Ottomans to Istanbul, where he was gruesomely executed (a visitor to Istanbul reported seeing him having been humiliated in the streets of Istanbul for three days, then hanged and beheaded, his severed head fired from a canon, and his heart cut out and impaled on his body).

In 1815, Wahhabi forces were crushed by the Egyptians (acting on the Ottoman's behalf) in a decisive battle. In 1818, the Ottomans captured and destroyed the Wahhabi capital of Dariyah. The first Saudi state was no more. The few remaining Wahhabis withdrew into the desert to regroup, and there they remained, quiescent for most of the 19th century.

**HISTORY RETURNS WITH ISIS**

It is not hard to understand how the founding of the Islamic State by ISIS in contemporary Iraq might resonate amongst those who recall this history. Indeed, the ethos of 18th century Wahhabism did not just wither in Nejd, but it roared back into life when the Ottoman Empire collapsed amongst the chaos
of World War I.

The Al Saud -- in this 20th century renaissance -- were led by the laconic and politically astute Abd-al Aziz, who, on uniting the fractious Bedouin tribes, launched the Saudi "Ikhwan" in the spirit of Abd-al Wahhab's and Ibn Saud's earlier fighting proselytisers.

The Ikhwan was a reincarnation of the early, fierce, semi-independent vanguard movement of committed armed Wahhabist "moralists" who almost had succeeded in seizing Arabia by the early 1800s. In the same manner as earlier, the Ikhwan again succeeded in capturing Mecca, Medina and Jeddah between 1914 and 1926. Abd-al Aziz, however, began to feel his wider interests to be threatened by the revolutionary "Jacobinism" exhibited by the Ikhwan. The Ikhwan revolted -- leading to a civil war that lasted until the 1930s, when the King had them put down: he machine-gunned them.

For this king, (Abd-al Aziz), the simple verities of previous decades were eroding. Oil was being discovered in the peninsular. Britain and America were courting Abd-al Aziz, but still were inclined to support Sharif Husain as the only legitimate ruler of Arabia. The Saudis needed to develop a more sophisticated diplomatic posture.

So Wahhabism was forcefully changed from a movement of revolutionary jihad and theological takfiri purification, to a movement of conservative social, political, theological, and religious da'wa (Islamic call) and to justifying the institution that upholds loyalty to the royal Saudi family and the King's absolute power.

OIL WEALTH SPREAD WAHHABISM

With the advent of the oil bonanza -- as the French scholar, Giles Kepel writes, Saudi goals were to "reach out and spread Wahhabism across the Muslim world ... to "Wahhabise" Islam, thereby reducing the "multitude of voices within the religion" to a "single creed" -- a movement which would transcend national divisions. Billions of dollars were -- and continue to be -- invested in this manifestation of soft power.

It was this heady mix of billion dollar soft power projection -- and the Saudi willingness to manage Sunni Islam both to further America's interests, as it concomitantly embedded Wahhabism educationally, socially and culturally throughout the lands of Islam -- that brought into being a western policy dependency on Saudi Arabia, a dependency that has endured since Abd-al Aziz's meeting with Roosevelt on a U.S. warship (returning the president from the Yalta Conference) until today.

Westerners looked at the Kingdom and their gaze was taken by the wealth; by the apparent modernization; by the professed leadership of the Islamic world. They chose to presume that the Kingdom was bending to the imperatives of modern life -- and that the management of Sunni Islam would bend the Kingdom, too, to modern life.

But the Saudi Ikhwan approach to Islam did not die in the 1930s. It retreated, but it maintained its hold over parts of the system -- hence the duality that we observe today in the Saudi attitude towards ISIS.

On the one hand, ISIS is deeply Wahhabist. On the other hand, it is ultra radical in a different way. It could be seen essentially as a corrective movement to contemporary Wahhabism.
ISIS is a "post-Medina" movement: it looks to the actions of the first two Caliphs, rather than the Prophet Muhammad himself, as a source of emulation, and it forcefully denies the Saudis' claim of authority to rule.

As the Saudi monarchy blossomed in the oil age into an ever more inflated institution, the appeal of the Ikhwan message gained ground (despite King Faisal's modernization campaign). The "Ikhwan approach" enjoyed -- and still enjoys -- the support of many prominent men and women and sheikhs. In a sense, Osama bin Laden was precisely the representative of a late flowering of this Ikhwani approach.

Today, ISIS' undermining of the legitimacy of the King's legitimacy is not seen to be problematic, but rather a return to the true origins of the Saudi-Wahhab project.

In the collaborative management of the region by the Saudis and the West in pursuit of the many western projects (countering socialism, Ba'athism, Nasserism, Soviet and Iranian influence), western politicians have highlighted their chosen reading of Saudi Arabia (wealth, modernization and influence), but they chose to ignore the Wahhabist impulse.

After all, the more radical Islamist movements were perceived by Western intelligence services as being more effective in toppling the USSR in Afghanistan -- and in combating out-of-favor Middle Eastern leaders and states.

Why should we be surprised then, that from Prince Bandar's Saudi-Western mandate to manage the insurgency in Syria against President Assad should have emerged a neo-Ikhwan type of violent, fear-inducing vanguard movement: ISIS? And why should we be surprised -- knowing a little about Wahhabism -- that "moderate" insurgents in Syria would become rarer than a mythical unicorn? Why should we have imagined that radical Wahhabism would create moderates? Or why could we imagine that a doctrine of "One leader, One authority, One mosque: submit to it, or be killed" could ever ultimately lead to moderation or tolerance?

Or, perhaps, we never imagined.

Part II of Alastair Crooke's historical analysis of the roots of ISIS and its impact on the future of the Middle East.

**Middle East Time Bomb: The Real Aim of ISIS Is to Replace the Saud Family as the New Emirs of Arabia**

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BEIRUT -- ISIS is indeed a veritable time bomb inserted into the heart of the Middle East. But its destructive power is not as commonly understood. It is not with the "March of the Beheaders"; it is not with the killings; the seizure of towns and villages; the harshest of "justice" -- terrible though they are -- that its true explosive power lies. It is yet more potent than its exponential pull on young Muslims, its huge arsenal of weapons and its hundreds of millions of dollars.

Its real potential for destruction lies elsewhere -- in the implosion of Saudi Arabia as a foundation stone of the modern Middle East. We should understand that there is really almost nothing that the West can now do about it but sit and watch.

The clue to its truly explosive potential, as Saudi scholar Fouad Ibrahim has pointed out (but which has passed, almost wholly overlooked, or its significance has gone unnoticed), is ISIS' deliberate and intentional use in its doctrine -- of the language of Abd-al Wahhab, the 18th century founder, together with Ibn Saud, of Wahhabism and the Saudi project:

*Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the first "prince of the faithful" in the Islamic State of Iraq, in 2006 formulated, for instance, the principles of his prospective state ... Among its goals is disseminating monotheism "which is the purpose [for which humans were created] and [for which purpose they must be called] to Islam..." This language replicates exactly Abd-al Wahhab's formulation. And, not surprisingly, the latter's writings and Wahhabi commentaries on his works are widely distributed in the areas under ISIS' control and are made the subject of study sessions. Baghdadi subsequently was to note approvingly, "a generation of young men [have been] trained based on the forgotten doctrine of loyalty and disavowal."

And what is this "forgotten" tradition of "loyalty and disavowal?" It is Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine that belief in a sole (for him an anthropomorphic) God -- who was alone worthy of worship -- was in itself insufficient to render man or woman a Muslim?

He or she could be no true believer, unless additionally, he or she actively denied (and destroyed) any other subject of worship. The list of such potential subjects of idolatrous worship, which al-Wahhab condemned as idolatry, was so extensive that almost all Muslims were at risk of falling under his definition of "unbelievers." They therefore faced a choice: Either they convert to al-Wahhab's vision of Islam -- or be killed, and their wives, their children and physical property taken as the spoils of jihad. Even to express doubts about this doctrine, al-Wahhab said, should occasion execution.

The point Fuad Ibrahim is making, I believe, is not merely to reemphasize the extreme reductionism of al-Wahhab's vision, but to hint at something entirely different: That through its intentional adoption of this Wahhabist language, ISIS is knowingly lighting the fuse to a bigger regional explosion -- one that has a very real possibility of being ignited, and if it should succeed, will change the Middle East decisively.

For it was precisely this idealistic, puritan, proselytizing formulation by al-Wahhab that was "father" to the entire Saudi "project" (one that was violently suppressed by the Ottomans in 1818, but spectacularly resurrected in the 1920s, to become the Saudi Kingdom that we know today).
But since its renaissance in the 1920s, the Saudi project has always carried within it, the "gene" of its own self-destruction.

THE SAUDI TAIL HAS WAGGED BRITAIN AND U.S. IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Paradoxically, it was a maverick British official, who helped embed the gene into the new state. The British official attached to Aziz, was one Harry St. John Philby (the father of the MI6 officer who spied for the Soviet KGB, Kim Philby). He was to become King Abd al-Aziz's close adviser, having resigned as a British official, and was until his death, a key member of the Ruler's Court. He, like Lawrence of Arabia, was an Arabist. He was also a convert to Wahhabi Islam and known as Sheikh Abdullah.

St. John Philby was a man on the make: he had determined to make his friend, Abd al-Aziz, the ruler of Arabia. Indeed, it is clear that in furthering this ambition he was not acting on official instructions. When, for example, he encouraged King Aziz to expand in northern Nejd, he was ordered to desist. But (as American author, Stephen Schwartz notes), Aziz was well aware that Britain had pledged repeatedly that the defeat of the Ottomans would produce an Arab state, and this no doubt, encouraged Philby and Aziz to aspire to the latter becoming its new ruler.

It is not clear exactly what passed between Philby and the Ruler (the details seem somehow to have been suppressed), but it would appear that Philby’s vision was not confined to state-building in the conventional way, but rather was one of transforming the wider Islamic ummah (or community of believers) into a Wahhabist instrument that would entrench the al-Saud as Arabia's leaders. And for this to happen, Aziz needed to win British acquiescence (and much later, American endorsement). "This was the gambit that Abd al-Aziz made his own, with advice from Philby," notes Schwartz.

BRITISH GODFATHER OF SAUDI ARABIA

In a sense, Philby may be said to be "godfather" to this momentous pact by which the Saudi leadership would use its clout to "manage" Sunni Islam on behalf of western objectives (containing socialism, Ba'athism, Nasserism, Soviet influence, Iran, etc.) -- and in return, the West would acquiesce to Saudi Arabia's soft-power Wahhabisation of the Islamic ummah (with its concomitant destruction of Islam's intellectual traditions and diversity and its sowing of deep divisions within the Muslim world).

As a result -- from then until now -- British and American policy has been bound to Saudi aims (as tightly as to their own ones), and has been heavily dependent on Saudi Arabia for direction in pursuing its course in the Middle East.

In political and financial terms, the Saud-Philby strategy has been an astonishing success (if taken on its own, cynical, self-serving terms). But it was always rooted in British and American intellectual obtuseness: the refusal to see the dangerous "gene" within the Wahhabist project, its latent potential to mutate, at any time, back into its original a bloody, puritan strain. In any event, this has just happened: ISIS is it.
Winning western endorsement (and continued western endorsement), however, required a change of mode: the "project" had to change from being an armed, proselytizing Islamic vanguard movement into something resembling statecraft. This was never going to be easy because of the inherent contradictions involved (puritan morality versus realpolitik and money) - and as time has progressed, the problems of accommodating the "modernity" that statehood requires, has caused "the gene" to become more active, rather than become more inert.

Even Abd al-Aziz himself faced an allergic reaction: in the form of a serious rebellion from his own Wahhabi militia, the Saudi Ikhwan. When the expansion of control by the Ikhwan reached the border of territories controlled by Britain, Abd al-Aziz tried to restrain his militia (Philby was urging him to seek British patronage), but the Ikhwan, already critical of his use of modern technology (the telephone, telegraph and the machine gun), "were outraged by the abandonment of jihad for reasons of worldly realpolitik ... They refused to lay down their weapons; and instead rebelled against their king ... After a series of bloody clashes, they were crushed in 1929. Ikhwan members who had remained loyal, were later absorbed into the [Saudi] National Guard."

King Aziz's son and heir, Saud, faced a different form of reaction (less bloody, but more effective). Aziz's son was deposed from the throne by the religious establishment -- in favor of his brother Faisal -- because of his ostentatious and extravagant conduct. His lavish, ostentatious style, offended the religious establishment who expected the "Imam of Muslims," to pursue a pious, proselytizing lifestyle.

King Faisal, Saud's successor, in his turn, was shot by his nephew in 1975, who had appeared at Court ostensibly to make his oath of allegiance, but who instead, pulled out a pistol and shot the king in his head. The nephew had been perturbed by the encroachment of western beliefs and innovation into Wahhabi society, to the detriment of the original ideals of the Wahhabist project.

SEIZING THE GRAND MOSQUE IN 1979

Far more serious, however, was the revived Ikhwan of Juhayman al-Otaybi, which culminated in the seizure of the Grand Mosque by some 400-500 armed men and women in 1979. Juhayman was from the influential Otaybi tribe from the Nejd, which had led and been a principal element in the original Ikhwan of the 1920s.

Juhayman and his followers, many of whom came from the Medina seminary, had the tacit support, amongst other clerics, of Sheikh Abdel-Aziz Bin Baz, the former Mufti of Saudi Arabia. Juhayman stated that Sheikh Bin Baz never objected to his Ikhwan teachings (which were also critical of ulema laxity towards "disbelief"), but that bin Baz had blamed him mostly for harking on that "the ruling al-Saud dynasty had lost its legitimacy because it was corrupt, ostentatious and had destroyed Saudi culture by an aggressive policy of westernisation."

Significantly, Juhayman's followers preached their Ikhwani message in a number of mosques in Saudi Arabia initially without being arrested, but when Juhayman and a number of the Ikhwan finally were held for questioning in 1978. Members of the ulema (including bin Baz) cross-examined them for heresy, but then ordered their release because they saw them as being no
more than traditionalists harkening back to the Ikhwan-- like Juhayman grandfather -- and therefore not a threat.

Even when the mosque seizure was defeated and over, a certain level of forbearance by the ulema for the rebels remained. When the government asked for a fatwa allowing for armed force to be used in the mosque, the language of bin Baz and other senior ulema was curiously restrained. The scholars did not declare Juhayman and his followers non-Muslims, despite their violation of the sanctity of the Grand Mosque, but only termed them *al-jamaah al-musallahah* (the armed group).

The group that Juhayman led was far from marginalized from important sources of power and wealth. In a sense, it swam in friendly, receptive waters. Juhayman's grandfather had been one of the leaders of the the original Ikhwan, and after the rebellion against Abdel Aziz, many of his grandfather's comrades in arms were absorbed into the National Guard -- indeed Juhayman himself had served within the Guard -- thus Juhayman was able to obtain weapons and military expertise from sympathizers in the National Guard, and the necessary arms and food to sustain the siege were pre-positioned, and hidden, within the Grand Mosque. Juhayman was also able to call on wealthy individuals to fund the enterprise.

**ISIS VS. WESTERNIZED SAUDIS**

The point of rehearsing this history is to underline how uneasy the Saudi leadership must be at the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Previous Ikhwan manifestations were suppressed -- but these all occurred inside the kingdom.

ISIS however, is a neo-Ikhwan rejectionist protest that is taking place outside the kingdom -- and which, moreover, follows the Juhayman dissidence in its trenchant criticism of the al-Saud ruling family.

This is the deep schism we see today in Saudi Arabia, between the modernizing current of which King Abdullah is a part, and the "Juhayman" orientation of which bin Laden, and the Saudi supporters of ISIS and the Saudi religious establishment are a part. It is also a schism that exists within the Saudi royal family itself.

According to the Saudi-owned *Al-Hayat* newspaper, in July 2014 "an opinion poll of Saudis [was] released on social networking sites, claiming that 92 percent of the target group believes that 'IS conforms to the values of Islam and Islamic law.'" The leading Saudi commentator, Jamal Khashoggi, recently warned of ISIS' Saudi supporters who "watch from the shadows."

*There are angry youths with a skewed mentality and understanding of life and sharia, and they are canceling a heritage of centuries and the supposed gains of a modernization that hasn't been completed. They turned into rebels, emirs and a caliph invading a vast area of our land. They are hijacking our children's minds and canceling borders. They reject all rules and legislations, throwing it [a]way ... for their vision of politics, governance, life, society and economy. [For] the citizens of the self-declared "commander of the faithful," or Caliph, you have no other choice ... They don't care if you stand out among your people and if you are an educated man, or a*
lecturer, or a tribe leader, or a religious leader, or an active politician or even a judge ... You must obey the commander of the faithful and pledge the oath of allegiance to him. When their policies are questioned, Abu Obedia al-Jazrawi yells, saying: "Shut up. Our reference is the book and the Sunnah and that's it."

"What did we do wrong?" Khashoggi asks. With 3,000-4,000 Saudi fighters in the Islamic State today, he advises of the need to "look inward to explain ISIS' rise". Maybe it is time, he says, to admit "our political mistakes," to "correct the mistakes of our predecessors."

**MODERNIZING KING THE MOST VULNERABLE**

The present Saudi king, Abdullah, paradoxically is all the more vulnerable precisely because he has been a modernizer. The King has curbed the influence of the religious institutions and the religious police -- and importantly has permitted the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence to be used, by those who adhere to them (al-Wahhab, by contrast, objected to all other schools of jurisprudence other than his own).

It is even possible too for Shiite residents of eastern Saudi Arabia to invoke Ja'afri jurisprudence and to turn to Ja'afri Shiite clerics for rulings. (In clear contrast, al-Wahhab held a particular animosity towards the Shiite and held them to be apostates. As recently as the 1990s, clerics such as bin Baz -- the former Mufti -- and Abdullah Jibrin reiterated the customary view that the Shiites were infidels).

Some contemporary Saudi ulema would regard such reforms as constituting almost a provocation against Wahhabist doctrines, or at the very least, another example of westernization. ISIS, for example, regards any who seek jurisdiction other than that offered by the Islamic State itself to be guilty of disbelief -- since all such "other" jurisdictions embody innovation or "borrowings" from other cultures in its view.

The key political question is whether the simple fact of ISIS’ successes, and the full manifestation (flowering) of all the original pieties and vanguardism of the archetypal impulse, will stimulate and activate the dissenter 'gene' -- within the Saudi kingdom.

If it does, and Saudi Arabia is engulfed by the ISIS fervor, the Gulf will never be the same again. Saudi Arabia will deconstruct and the Middle East will be unrecognizable.

In short, this is the nature of the time bomb tossed into the Middle East. The ISIS allusions to Abd al-Wahhab and Juhayman (whose dissident writings are circulated within ISIS) present a powerful provocation: they hold up a mirror to Saudi society that seems to reflect back to them an image of "purity" lost and early beliefs and certainties displaced by shows of wealth and indulgence.

This is the ISIS "bomb" hurled into Saudi society. King Abdullah -- and his reforms -- are popular, and perhaps he can contain a new outbreak of Ikhwani dissidence. But will that option remain a possibility after his death?
And here is the difficulty with evolving U.S. policy, which seems to be one of "leading from behind" again -- and looking to Sunni states and communities to coalesce in the fight against ISIS (as in Iraq with the Awakening Councils).

It is a strategy that seems highly implausible. Who would want to insert themselves into this sensitive intra-Saudi rift? And would concerted Sunni attacks on ISIS make King Abdullah's situation better, or might it inflame and anger domestic Saudi dissidence even further? So whom precisely does ISIS threaten? It could not be clearer. It does not directly threaten the West (though westerners should remain wary, and not tread on this particular scorpion).

The Saudi Ikhwani history is plain: As Ibn Saud and Abd al-Wahhab made it such in the 18th century; and as the Saudi Ikwan made it such in the 20th century. ISIS' real target must be the Hijaz -- the seizure of Mecca and Medina -- and the legitimacy that this will confer on ISIS as the new Emirs of Arabia.

The ISIS Chronicles: A History

"If the Islamic State's history is any indication, then one should be concerned about it deepening political polarization and sectarianism in both Lebanon and Jordan..."

Robert G. Rabil   The National Interest

July 17, 2014

On June 10, 2014, Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq and the capital of Ninawa province, fell to the Salafi-Jihadi organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The fall of Mosul and the subsequent blitz with which ISIS took over other Sunni majority cities shocked Washington and Baghdad. However, the leaderships of the two countries have entertained different visions as to how to deal with this surging threat to regional and international stability. This has only added another layer of misconception about ISIS and its future military and religiopolitical program in the Middle East. ISIS has achieved what Al Qaeda failed to accomplish. A recent statement by ISIS in which it rebranded itself as the Islamic State, declaring the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, led by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as Caliph Ibrahim, shows both the astuteness of its military command and ingenuity of its ideologues. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Islamic State has already replaced Al Qaeda as the paradigm organization of Salafi-Jihadists and stands, if not defeated in its formative stage, not only to change the map of political geography of the Middle East, but also the scope and breadth of Salafi-jihadi threat to the West and Middle East.

The ideological roots of the ISIS can be traced to the Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which was established in Iraq in 2004 by the Salafi-jihadi Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi soon pledged his allegiance to Al Qaeda's founder Osama bin Laden, and changed the name of his organization to Tanzim Al Qaeda fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (Al Qaeda Organization in the Country of the Two Rivers). This organization became commonly known as Al Qaeda in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi was killed by American troops in 2006 in Iraq. His successors Abu Hamza al-Muhajir
and Abu Omr al-Baghdadi were both killed in 2010, whereupon the leadership of Al Qaeda in Iraq passed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

In principle, Al Qaeda in Iraq embraces a Salafi-jihadi ideology, best advocated by Al Qaeda. The ideology underscores first the return to the authentic beliefs and practices of the al-salaf al-salih (pious ancestors), who comprised the companions of Prophet Muhammad (d. 632), the followers of the companions, and the followers of the followers of the companions. Establishing an Islamic state or a caliphate constitutes the means by which these beliefs and practices are applied. Next, the ideology focuses on the concept of tawhid (oneness/unity of God). This concept is divided into three categories: tawhid al-rububiyyah (Oneness of Lordship), tawhid al-uluhiyah (Oneness of Godship), and tawhid al-asma ‘wal-sifat (Oneness of the Names and Attributes of God). Tawhid al-rububiyyah implies that God is the only creator and to attribute any power of creation to other than God constitutes kufr (unbelief). Tawhid al-uluhiyah implies that God only is the object of worship and to worship other than God or to associate worship with God constitutes unbelief. Tawhid al-asma ‘wal-sifat implies that God’s depiction is literally limited only to that presented in the revelation. Correspondingly, Salafi-jihadists apply a literalist reading of the texts of the revelation, comprising the Koran and the Sunnah (customs and traditions of Prophet Muhammad), and they uphold ridding Islam of all bida’ (reprehensible/illegitimate innovations) in belief and practice. As such, they enforce their vision of Islam in belief and manifest action, and they endorse waging jihad against idolatrous regimes that do not govern according to God’s rules.

In practice, however, Al Qaeda in Iraq has disagreed with other Salafist organizations, especially Al Qaeda, over how to bring about the caliphate. Initially, Al Qaeda in Iraq had a fallout with Al Qaeda on account of al-Zarqawi’s blood-spattering actions that inflicted heavy damages on both Sunnis and Shi’as irrespective of Iraq’s communal and political situation. At the heart of the dispute was al-Zarqawi’s plan to first and foremost wage a jihad against the Shi’as, for, according to him, they held the key to radical change in Iraq.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al Qaeda and one of its major ideologues, blamed al-Zarqawi for alienating many Iraqis and therefore undermining Al Qaeda in Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is reportedly trained by al-Zarqawi and shares his views about the Shi’as and his zeal for violent actions as the means by which to apply Salafi-jihadi ideology and to bring about a caliphate. His reputation as a fierce commander and military strategist, together with his both higher education as a recipient of a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence from Baghdad Islamic University and his reported lineage from the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh, has endeared him to a new generation of Salafi-jihadists growing disillusioned with what they consider the scraggy jihad of al-Zawahiri’s Al Qaeda.

To be sure, the rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq had significantly emanated from Iraqi and regional sociopolitical factors. The Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki has heretofore pursued a virtually sectarian policy in the country not only alienating Sunnis, but also excluding them from the political system. Members of al-Sahwa, a group of tribal leaders and their followers who were supported by United States to evict Al Qaeda members from their communities in the mid-2000s, were either arrested or chased from their villages. Even Sunni politicians, such as vice president of Iraq Tariq al-Hashimi, were sentenced to death in absentia. Meanwhile, disaffected
Ba’thist officers from the dismantled Iraqi army organized themselves in the Army of Men of the Naqshabandi Order, which mixed Islamic and nationalist ideas. Alienation from and dissension towards al-Maliki government brought these disparate groups together into a symbiotic relationship that Al Qaeda in Iraq exploited when the rebellion in Syria erupted in March 2011.

Led by al-Baghdadi, Al Qaeda in Iraq forged an alliance with the Syrian Salafi-jihadi organization Jabhat al-Nusra in 2011. In fact, the Syrian leader of Jabhat al-Nusra Abu Muhammad al-Golani operated under the flag of Al Qaeda in Iraq until he established his own organization in 2011, whereupon he pledged his allegiance to Al Qaeda. Although it fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad, Al Qaeda in Iraq moved slowly but steadily and stealthily to control strategic areas in al-Reqqa and Dayr el-Zour provinces, including oil facilities. Practically, Al Qaeda in Iraq focused more on reinforcing and expanding its area of operations in Syria than on fighting the Ba’thist regime. Once confident about its military presence in Syria, Al Qaeda in Iraq announced in 2013 its merger with Jabhat al-Nusra under the name of Al Qaeda in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). This merger did not last long as ISIS moved, against the wishes of Al Qaeda, to impose its authority on contiguous territories straddling both Syria and Iraq and on geostrategic areas in Iraq’s al-Anbar and Ninawa provinces. These strategic moves pointed to a phased campaign to wrest control of geostrategic areas in both Iraq and Syria to create a transnational state. An examination of ISIS’s al-Naba’ (annual report) covering the period from November 2012 to November 2013 by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) revealed that ISIS has a disciplined military command that planned a phased campaign to wrest control of Iraq from the country’s security forces. The ISW analysis also observed that ISIS functions as a military, rather than as a terrorist, network.

It was against this background that ISIS ran over Mosul and other Sunni majority areas in Iraq before controlling the major border crossings between Iraq and Syria. Once ISIS controlled a contiguousity of Iraqi and Syrian territories, it declared in late June the establishment of the Caliphate, renaming itself the Islamic State, and proclaiming al-Baghdadi Caliph Ibrahim. The declaration, bearing the title the Promise of Allah, posted on the Twitter account of the organization’s al-I’isaam Media Foundation, and translated into multiple languages by al-Hayat Media Center, justified the establishment of the Caliphate on theological Salafi grounds, whereby the flag of tawhid rises and flutters, idolatrous orders destroyed, infidels disgraced, heretical people humiliated, and Islamic law implemented. Significantly, the declaration called on Islamist organizations and Muslims to pledge their allegiance to Caliph Ibrahim and support him.

Soon enough, al-Baghdadi, or Caliph Ibrahim, issued on the eve of the Muslim holiday month of Ramadan a message to the mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah (community of believers). His message, in much the same vein as that of Osama bin Laden’s first missive to the Ummah following the September 11 terror attacks, split the world in two camps, the camp of Islam and faith and the camp of disbelief and hypocrisy. Furthermore, he, wearing the mantle of a Caliph dedicated to restoring the glory and rectitude of Islam to the Muslim Umma, called on Muslims to support the religion of Allah through jihad in the path of Allah, and to emigrate to the Islamic State because emigration (hijrah) to the land of Islam is obligatory. Clearly, al-Baghdadi is trying to make his Islamic State the focus of loyalty and jihad for all Muslims. He supported
his message with Koranic verses and hadiths (sayings) that were meant to cast an aura of legitimacy over his Caliphate.

Although the message evoked mixed responses, they clearly revealed a schism in Salafist and Islamist circles, especially in Al Qaeda's orbit of Salafi-jihadists, and demonstrated the rise of the Islamic State as the new flagship of jihadists. Significantly, Al Qaeda-affiliated organizations from North Africa to the Levant, such as Ansar al-Shari‘a, Al Qaeda in Maghreb led by Abu Abdullah Othman al-Assimi, and the Army of the Companions of the Prophet in Greater Syria, rushed to pledge their allegiance to Emir al-Mu‘minin (Commander of the Faithful) Caliph Ibrahim. No less significant, both the establishment of the Islamic State and the message also demonstrated an attempt by a younger generation of jihadi intellectuals to move away from the ideological jihadi realm of Al Qaeda, as propagated by al-Zawahiri, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi and Abu Qatada al-Falastini. In fact, the renowned, young jihadi intellectual Turki al-Bin‘ali, formerly known by his pseudonym, Abu Hamam Bakr bin Abd al-Aziz al-Athari, had ideologically portended the establishment of the Islamic State and preordained al-Baghdadi as the Muslim Caliph. Interestingly, al-Bin‘ali had been a student of al-Maqdissi, who appointed him as a member of the Shari‘a council on al-Maqdissi’s Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad website. Notably, al-Bin‘ali, since 2013, has been a fervent supporter of al-Baghdadi, calling on Salafi-jihadists to pledge their fealty to the Emir. Al-Bin‘ali has emphatically written on the suitable qualities of al-Baghdadi as a Caliph. Among the qualities he cites are his courage, lineage from Prophet Muhammad's Quraysh tribe, and his scholarly Islamic credentials.

Parallel to this ideological attempt to sanctify the Islamic State and its leader, sociopolitical processes in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Syria have helped the Islamic State to extend its influence there. Whereas al-Maliki’s policies in Iraq alienated Sunnis there, the sectarian war in Syria enhanced the communal solidarity among Sunnis on the basis of Salafist ideological principles asserting authentic Islam and avowing support to Sunnis. No less significant, the Islamization of some tribes in Jordan, Iraq and Syria as a result of both governmental neglect and appeal of Salafism has enabled the Islamic State to lure tribes into pledging their allegiance in exchange for economic and political benefits. Reportedly, the Islamic State, which controls most oil refineries in Syria, has given concessions to tribal chiefs to buy a barrel of oil for only twelve dollars. On the other hand, Salafi-jihadism has been growing in Jordan and Lebanon since the 1990s. It is no coincidence, for example, that the founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq al-Zarqawi hailed from the Salafist stronghold of al-Zarqa in Jordan. Al-Zarqawi early on relied on his tribal connections both in Jordan and Iraq to develop Al Qaeda in Iraq. His family belongs to the Bedouin tribe of Bani Hassan, which has tribal affiliations with the Hamada and Hedwan tribes, all of which have extensive presence in Iraq and Jordan. Most importantly, many of the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan are leaning towards supporting the Islamic State, egged on no less by the appeal of authentic Islam and violent activism embraced by Salafi-jihadists than by the dismal regional and international support of their dire condition.

In sum, neither United States nor the international community should be surprised or shocked if the Islamic State further expanded its control of more territories in Syria and Iraq and moved to create chaos in Lebanon and Jordan. If the Islamic State’s history is any indication, then one should be concerned about it deepening political polarization and sectarianism in both Lebanon and Jordan, let alone trying to further its appeal by carrying out spectacular acts of violence in
the Middle East or the West. The international community should internalize the fact that the Islamic State is theologically driven to apply Salafist ideology in belief and manifest action by way of jihad in the path of Allah against idolatrous regimes and unbelievers to expand God’s realm on earth. Each day the Islamic State goes unchecked, the harder it becomes to defeat it. Therefore, the international community, led by United States, should pursue all means at their disposal to curb the power and expansion of this jihadi group, irrespective of any regional and/or international concerted political effort, which at the moment, seems unlikely to happen anytime soon.

Robert G. Rabil is a professor of political science and the LLS distinguished professor of current affairs at Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of the forthcoming Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism (Georgetown University Press, 2014).

What ISIS's Leader Really Wants: The longer he lives, the more powerful he becomes

By Graeme Wood Graeme Wood is a contributing editor at The New Republic.

On June 29, 2014 or the first of Ramadan, 1435, for those who prefer the Islamic calendar to the Gregorian the leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) publicly uttered for the first time a word that means little to the average Westerner, but everything to some pious Muslims. The word is Khalifah. ISIS's proclaimation that day formally hacked the last two letters from its acronym (it's now just The Islamic State) and declared Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, born Ibrahim ibn Awwad ibn Ibrahim ibn Ali ibn Muhammad al-Badri al-Samarrai, the Caliph of all Muslims and the Prince of the Believers. For Muslims of a certain hyper-antiquarian inclination, these titles are not mere nomenclature. ISIS's meticulous use of language, and its almost pedantic adherence to its own interpretation of Islamic law, have made it a strange enemy, fierce and unyielding but also scholarly and predictable. The Islamic State obsesses over words like Khalifah (Arabic: khalifa) and Khalifateh (khilafa), and news reports and social media from within ISIS have depicted frenzied chants of The Caliphate is established! The entire self-image and propaganda narrative of the Islamic State is based on emulating the early leaders of Islam, in particular the Prophet Muhammad and the four rightly guided caliphs who led Muslims from Muhammad's death in 632 until 661. Within the lifetimes of these caliphs, the realm of Islam spread like spilled ink to the farthest corners of modern-day Iran and coastal Libya, despite small and humble origins.

Muslims consider that period a golden age and some, called Salafis, believe the military and political practices of its statesmen and warriors barbaric by today's standards but acceptable at the time deserve to be revived. Hence ISIS's taste for beheadings, stonings, crucifixions, slavery, and dhimmitude, the practice of taxing those who refuse to convert to Islam.
Other Muslims have romanticized the time of the early caliphs but by occupying a large area and ruling it for more than a year, the Islamic State can claim to be their heirs more plausibly than any recent jihadist movement. It has created a blood-soaked paradise that groups like Al Qaeda contemplated only as a distant daydream.

There is a mystical belief that, if you just establish the caliphate in the right way, Muslims will come to you and everything will fall into place, says Fred Donner, a historian of early Islam at the University of Chicago. And it is precisely this promise of inexorable, righteous expansion that has drawn recruits from all over the globe not just nearby, war-ravaged nations, but England and Australia and France, too. Together, they have formed the most monstrous squad of historical reenactors of all time.

The word khalifa means successor (to Muhammad), and as such, a rightful caliph can demand the allegiance of all Muslims. But historically, an applicant for the job has had to fulfill a few conditions. He (always he) must be Muslim, fully grown, devout, sane, and physically whole. Because he is theoretically meant to lead Muslims in battle, missing limbs or a sickly disposition will automatically disqualify him. He must also hail from the Quraysh tribe of the Arabian peninsula, a requirement that turns out to matter a great deal in the case of the current caliph.

After the first four caliphs whose rule the Islamic State remembers as a period of Muslim solidarity, although three died violently dynasties of Sunni caliphs ruled out of Damascus (the Umayyads, 661–750), Iraq and Syria (the Abbasids, 750–1258), and Istanbul (Ottomans, 1299–1924). As Islam aged, many not-so-exemplary men held the office of caliph. By the Ottoman period, they receded from view and remained as figureheads, with military rulers called sultans making all decisions of consequence. The last Ottoman caliph, Abdülmecit II, was ousted by the secularist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and reacted not by raising an army of vengeful zealots but by retiring to a life of beard-grooming and nude portraiture in Paris.

We don’t know which caliphs from history are most revered by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who rules by his birth name Caliph Ibrahim. To him, the ineffectual aesthetes of the Ottoman period may not even count as caliphs. (That softie Osama bin Laden likely accepted them as legitimate: In his early statements, he bemoaned their downfall.) Baghdadi seems to have sentimental fondness for the Abbasid caliphate. The Abbasids ruled primarily from Baghdad, where the current caliph is said to have earned a doctorate in Islamic law. And Harun al-Rashid, perhaps the greatest Abbasid caliph, briefly relocated the caliphate to Raqqa, the Syrian city that is the capital of the Islamic State. After ISIS fighters invaded Mosul and slew a dozen imams, Baghdadi led Friday prayers at the main mosque and wore all black the regnal color of the Abbasid caliphs as if the last eight centuries never happened.

Past caliphates have bent the rules and selected corrupt or worldly men for leadership. Some have also ignored the Qurayshi requirement, or fabricated caliphs’ pedigrees on the grounds of necessity. But the Islamic State refuses to let such things slide. Baghdadi’s Mosul sermon demonstrated command of the florid rhetoric of classical Arabic, so his religious chops are confirmed. And his Qurayshi lineage is beyond public dispute. Many Iraqis, including Saddam Hussein, can also boast Qurayshi descent, and because no one knows much about Baghdadi’s
certainly not enough to trace his lineage back 1,400 years to a preliterate society a thousand miles away. It’s hard (and in the Islamic State, probably fatal) to suggest he’s lying. Slavish loyalty to historical example at least makes the beliefs and plans of ISIS a little more predictable than those of a spry, global-reach organization like Al Qaeda.

Interpretations of what constitutes a legitimate caliph are so loose that it’s surprising how few caliphates have been declared since 1924. But radical Muslims have been reluctant to invoke the word for reasons both practical and purist. If you go back to the 1970s, you’ll find they all just call themselves groups or fronts, says Thomas Hegghammer, who studies jihadists for the Norwegian government. Not until the late 1980s do you find the first jihadist emirate, which is a state run by an emir, a secular prince. Some Muslims have suggested that the Taliban Mullah Omar is caliph material. He styles himself prince of the faithful, a historical term nearly but not quite synonymous with caliph. But he is neither Qurayshi nor (some would say) physically intact, due to an eye lost in battle. And bin Laden never declared himself caliph, either, in part because he lacked Qurayshi blood. (Fred Donner told me that the bin Ladens’ Kennedy-like prominence in Saudi Arabia ensured that no lie about Qurayshi descent could gain traction.)

This tenderness about using the term caliph extends to almost everyone in the old guard of Al Qaeda, which hates ISIS. In general, the grayer the beard, the less enthusiasm for rule by Baghdadi. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the Palestinian jihadi theorist who mentored Abu Musa al-Zarqawi (himselves Baghdadi’s guru), has condemned the declaration of the caliphate on the grounds that it creates discord among mujahedin. Bernard Haykel, an Islamic law expert at Princeton, says caliphs are supposed to be chosen by consultation with all Muslim scholars, and Baghdadi hasn’t shown he has the support of even a majority of ultra-radical Muslims.

Mostly, though, caliphate declarations have been rare because they are outrageously out of sync with history. The word conjures the majesty of bygone eras and of states that straddle continents. For a wandering group of hunted men like Al Qaeda to declare a caliphate would have been Pythonesque in its deluded grandeur, as if a few dozen Neo-Nazis or Italian fascists declared themselves the Holy Roman Empire or dressed up like Augustus Caesar. Anybody who actively wishes to reestablish a caliphate must be deeply committed to a backward-looking view of Islam, says Donner. The caliphate hasn’t been a functioning institution for over a thousand years.

Cole Bunzel, a doctoral candidate at Princeton, thinks Baghdadi maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity about when to declare himself caliph. The Islamic State has acted like a caliph from the beginning, but they couldn’t announce themselves as one because they would have sounded ridiculous. Now that they’ve controlled Raqqa for more than a year and oversee as much territory as Abu Bakr, the first rightly guided caliph, himself the claim looks far more credible. The mass executions and public crucifixions have also done much to erase any lingering aura of comedy.
Slavish loyalty to historical example at least makes the beliefs and plans of ISIS a little more predictable than those of a spry, global-reach organization like Al Qaeda. We know, for example, that Baghdadi demands total allegiance and that the caliphal structure of ISIS does not lend itself to the cell-based activity that made the bin Laden network hard to eradicate. It also severely limits what ISIS can do, since any attack on a Western city would draw an immediate and devastating counterattack on Raqqa, and wouldn’t require the laborious fumigation of hundreds of mountain caves.

So how do we fight ISIS? Giving Baghdadi more time as caliph might only make him more plausible in the role and allow him to draw more fighters to his state. If that is true, one concerned Western scholar told me, we would be wise to kill him fast. Right now only an infinitesimal number of Muslims have sworn fealty to him. The biggest danger is letting that number grow. Once he becomes a popular figure instead of a divisive one, his death will have spillover effects. Killing the religious leader of even a small minority of Muslims is not good propaganda, says Cole Bunzel.

But a massive invasion by the United States would have equally deplorable effects, because it would instantly convert Baghdadi’s squalid army into the world’s premier terrorist organization. A balanced and effective approach, then, would be to kill him as fast as possible and to use Kurdish and Shia proxies to arrest his state’s expansion. By confining U.S. action to surgical raids and proxy war, we might avoid accidentally anointing him or his successor Grand Poobah of the Mujahedin.

It’s also true that killing one caliph can extinguish a whole line. Consider the fate of Baghdad’s last Abbasid caliph, al-Mustasim Billah. When the Mongols sacked Baghdad in 1258, their leader Hulagu Khan (grandson of Genghis) ordered slaughter on a scale rarely witnessed in history. His men murdered as many as a million Muslims in a week, in an age when death was still dealt manually, with blades and cudgels. Even in victory, Hulagu treated the caliph with circumspection. Because it was bad luck to let royal blood touch the earth, Hulagu rolled Mustasim in a carpet before loosing a whole stable of horses to stampede over his body. Whether by drone, or by a well-placed bullet from one of Kurdistan’s famous female commandos, it seems likely that Baghdadi’s death will be less tidy.

ISIS almost certainly has a successor in mind. But the supply of caliphs is not infinite, according to some Baghdadi-aligned Islamic scholars studied by Bunzel. One of those scholars, the Bahraini cleric Turki al-Bin’ali, cites a saying attributed to Muhammad that predicts a total of twelve caliphs before the end of the world. Bin’ali considers only seven of the caliphs of history legitimate. That makes Baghdadi the eighth out of twelve and in some Sunni traditions, the name of the twelfth and final caliph, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, has already been foretold.

These beliefs would be merely peculiar, if the punctilious nature of ISIS did not suggest that its leaders believe in the literal truth of prophecy and will act accordingly. David Cook, a historian at Rice University who studies Muslim apocalypticism, points out that the battles preceding the Day of Judgment will take place in modern Syria, with a final showdown in the year 1500 of the Islamic Hijra calendar, or A.D. 2076. If ISIS scholars are right, we could be as few as four air strikes away from forcing the caliphate to find and appoint a physically robust man named
Muhammad ibn Abdullah, who has both eyes and no missing limbs. The end of the world may be coming, one Hellfire missile at a time.

Graeme Wood is a contributing editor at *The New Republic*.

**A Point of View: Isis and what it means to be modern**

Although it claims to be reviving a traditional Islamic system of government, the jihadist group Isis is a very modern proposition, writes John Gray.

When you see the leader of Isis, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, in Mosul announcing the creation of a caliphate - an Islamic state ruled by a religious leader - it's easy to think that what you're watching is a march back into the past. The horrifying savagery with which the jihadist organisation treats anyone that stands in its way seems to come from a bygone era. The fact that Isis - the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, which has now changed its name to the Islamic State - claims that it wants to restore an early type of Islam, leads many of us to see it as trying to bring about a reversion to mediaeval values.

To my mind, this gives too much credence to the way Isis views itself. There's actually little in common between the horribly repressive regime it has established in parts of Iraq and Syria and the subtle Islamic states of mediaeval times, which in Spain, for example, exercised a degree of tolerance at a time when the rest of Europe was wracked by persecution. Destroying ancient shrines and mosques, Isis is trying to eradicate every trace of Islamic tradition. It's probably even more oppressive than the Taliban were in Afghanistan. In power, Isis resembles a 20th Century totalitarian state more than any type of traditional rule.

Surprising as it may sound, Isis is in many respects thoroughly modern. Like al-Qaeda before them, these jihadists have organised themselves as a highly efficient company. Initially funded by donations from wealthy supporters, they've rapidly expanded into a self-financing business. Through kidnapping and extortion, looting and selling antiquities, siphoning off oil in territories they conquer, seizing gold bullion and other assets from banks and acquiring large quantities of American military hardware in the course of their advance, Isis has become the wealthiest jihadist organisation in the world. According to some estimates, it's worth well over $2bn.

Isis uses this wealth to expand its popular base, providing public services and repairing damaged infrastructure in the areas it controls. Its use of social media is highly professional. On its websites it issues annual reports containing detailed accounts of its acquisitions and operations, including breakdowns of the bombings, assassinations and suicide missions it has carried out.

Isis makes effective use of the internet to broadcast the brutal manner with which it deals with anyone judged to be an enemy. Isis's savagery isn't impulsive. Everything suggests it's a strategy developed over a number of years. When it posts videos of people being beheaded or shot, Isis advances several of its goals - simultaneously inspiring dread in its enemies, teaching the
communities it controls the dire consequences of departing from an exceptionally extreme interpretation of Islam and sowing chaos in the population as a whole. There's nothing mediaeval about this mix of ruthless business enterprise, well-publicised savagery and transnational organised crime. Dedicated to building a new society from scratch, Isis has more in common with modern revolutionary movements.

Though al-Baghdadi constantly invokes the early history of Islam, the society he envisions has no precedent in history. It's much more like the impossible state of utopian harmony that western revolutionaries have projected into the future. Some of the thinkers who developed radical Islamist ideas are known to have been influenced by European anarchism and communism, especially by the idea that society can be reshaped by a merciless revolutionary vanguard using systematic violence. The French Jacobins and Lenin's Bolsheviks, the Khmer Rouge and the Red Guards all used terror as a way of cleansing humanity of what they regarded as moral corruption.

Isis shares more with this modern revolutionary tradition than any ancient form of Islamic rule. Though they'd hate to hear it, these violent jihadists owe the way they organise themselves and their utopian goals to the modern West. And it's not just ideas and methods that Isis has taken from the West. Western military intervention gave Isis its chance of power. While Saddam was in charge, there were no jihadist movements operating in Iraq - none at all. With all the crimes Saddam's dictatorship committed, it was a regime that applied secular law and had made some steps towards emancipating women.

In my view, toppling Saddam was bound to unravel this secular state and the Iraqi state itself. Even if the American-led occupiers hadn't made the mistake of disbanding the army and dissolving the ruling party, the country would eventually have broken up. Iraq was constructed from provinces of the former Ottoman Empire by the British in the 1920s, with the Sunni minority being the ruling group. The Sunnis had ruled since 1638, when the Ottomans took Baghdad from the Persians. The Kurds, who were included in the new state because the British prized the oil resources in the north of the country, were sure to take any opportunity to seize independence. Whatever the failings of the Maliki government, the idea that a stable federal system could develop in these circumstances has always been far-fetched. As some of those who opposed the war from the start foresaw, regime change created many of the conditions for a failed state. These are the same conditions that have allowed Isis to emerge and thrive.

It's sometimes suggested that ideology played no real part in the invasion of Iraq - grabbing the country's oil was what it was all about. No doubt geopolitical calculation played a part, but I think an idea of what it means to be modern was more important. The politicians and opinion-formers who clamoured for the invasion believed that all modern societies are evolving towards a single form of government - the type that exists in western countries. If only tyranny was swept away in Iraq, the country would move towards democracy and the rest of the Middle East would follow. Until just a few months ago, some were convinced that a similar process could take place in Syria.

As I see it, this has never been more than an ideological fantasy. The modern world isn't evolving in any single direction. Liberal democracy is only one of several possible destinations. With its delusional ambitions (which, if we are to believe recent statements, include
reconquering Spain) Isis illustrates a darker aspect of the modern world - the practice of using terror and violence in an attempt to achieve impossible goals.

Isis may have already over-reached itself. It’s facing determined opposition from many sides - not just from Shia militias but also rival Sunni jihadists such as Al Qaeda, from which it’s an offshoot. There are conflicting interests among the disparate elements Isis has recently recruited, and it’s not clear that it can govern a state on any long-term basis. Moreover, Baghdadi’s claim to speak for all Muslims is dismissed by Islamic scholars and rejected as absurd by practically the entire Muslim world. Even so, Isis poses a real danger - and not just in the Middle East.

CALIPHATE
Name given to Islamic state led by supreme religious and political leader known as caliph, or successor to the Prophet Muhammad

- Succession of Muslim empires described as "caliphates"; most famous is Ottoman caliphate or empire (1453-1924)
- Centering on power of Turkish sultans, Ottoman Caliphate expanded to cover the Balkans and Hungary under Suleiman the Magnificent in 16th Century, and reached gates of Vienna
- Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk abolished Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 and exiled the last caliph, Abdulmecid

It's hard for anyone to estimate in precise terms the scale of the threat Isis poses to countries such as Britain. Its main targets are in the Middle East. Still, there must be a danger that Western citizens who have gone to Syria and Iraq as Isis fighters will return battle-hardened and with new bomb-making skills. Also, Isis has now declared war not only on the west but also on al-Qaeda. In these circumstances there may be an increased risk that one or other of these groups will be tempted to stage a spectacular act of terror in order to secure a position of leadership in the global jihadist struggle.

Through their policies of regime change, Western governments have pursued an ideological vision that leaves out the dark side of the modern world. In doing so, they’ve unwittingly let loose a particularly nasty version of modern savagery. Whatever happens to the self-styled caliphate, the forces it embodies aren't going to fade away. Isis is a part of the revolutionary turmoil of modern times, and until we grasp that uncomfortable fact we won't be able to deal with the dangers we face.

A Point of View is broadcast on Fridays on Radio 4 at 20:50 BST and repeated Sundays 08:50 BST- or listen on BBC iPlayer

What does Islamic State want?

The group aims to establish a "caliphate", a state ruled by a single political and religious leader according to Islamic law, or Sharia.
Although currently limited to Iraq and Syria, IS has promised to "break the borders" of Jordan and Lebanon and to "free Palestine". It attracts support from Muslims across the world and demands that all swear allegiance to its leader - Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, better known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

IS can trace its roots back to the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who set up Tawhid wa al-Jihad in 2002. A year after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden and formed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which became a major force in the insurgency.

After Zarqawi’s death in 2006, AQI created an umbrella organisation, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). ISI was steadily weakened by the US troop surge and the creation of Sahwa (Awakening) councils by Sunni Arab tribesmen who rejected its brutality. After becoming leader in 2010, Baghdadi rebuilt ISI's capabilities. By 2013, it was once again carrying out dozens of attacks a month in Iraq. It had also joined the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, setting up the al-Nusra Front.

In April 2013, Baghdadi announced the merger of his forces in Iraq and Syria and the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Isis). The leaders of al-Nusra and al-Qaeda rejected the move, but fighters loyal to Baghdadi split from al-Nusra and helped Isis remain in Syria.

At the end of December 2013, Isis shifted its focus back to Iraq and exploited a political stand-off between the Shia-led government and the minority Sunni Arab community. Aided by tribesmen, the group took control of the central city of Falluja.

In June 2014, Isis overran the northern city of Mosul, and then advanced southwards towards Baghdad. At the end of the month, after consolidating its hold over dozens of cities and towns, Isis declared the creation of a caliphate and changed its name to Islamic State.

Some estimate that IS and its allies control about 40,000 sq km (15,000 sq miles) of Iraq and Syria - roughly the size of Belgium. Others believe they control closer to 90,000 sq km (35,000 sq miles) - about the size of Jordan. That territory includes cities - Mosul, Tikrit, Falluja and Tal Afar in Iraq; Raqqa in Syria - oil fields, dams, main roads and border crossings.

Eight million people are believed to be living under partial or full IS control, where the group implements a strict interpretation of Sharia, forcing women to wear veils, non-Muslims to pay a

US officials believe IS could have as many as 31,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria. Iraq expert Hisham al-Hashimi says about 30% are "ideologues", with the remainder joining out of fear or coercion.

A significant number of IS fighters are neither Iraqi nor Syrian. The Soufan Group recently estimated that more than 12,000 foreign nationals from at least 81 countries, including 2,500 from Western states, had travelled to Syria to fight over the past three years.

IS fighters have access to, and are capable of using, a wide variety of small arms and heavy weapons, including truck-mounted machine-guns, rocket launchers, anti-aircraft guns and
portable surface-to-air missile systems. They have also captured tanks and armoured vehicles from the Syrian and Iraqi armies. Their haul of vehicles from the Iraqi army includes Humvees and bomb-proof trucks that were originally manufactured for the US military.

The group is believed to have a flexible supply chain that ensures a constant supply of ammunition and small arms for its fighters. Their considerable firepower helped them overrun Kurdish Peshmerga positions in northern Iraq in August, surprising many.

Islamic State is reported to have $2bn (£1.2bn) in cash and assets, making it the world's wealthiest militant group. Initially, much of its financial support came from individuals in Arab Gulf states. Today, IS is a largely self-financed organisation, earning millions of dollars a month from the oil and gas fields it controls, as well as from taxation, tolls, smuggling, extortion and kidnapping. The offensive in Iraq has also been lucrative, giving it access to cash held in major banks in cities and towns it has seized.

**Islamic State: Who supports the jihadist group?**

IS members are jihadists who adhere to an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam and consider themselves the only true believers. They hold that the rest of the world is made up of unbelievers who seek to destroy Islam, justifying attacks against other Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Beheadings, crucifixions and mass shootings have been used to terrorise their enemies. IS members have justified such atrocities by citing the Koranic verses that talk of "striking off the heads" of unbelievers, but Muslims have denounced them. Even al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who disavowed IS in February over its actions in Syria, warned Zarqawi in 2005 that such brutality loses "Muslim hearts and minds".
their enclave at Kobani on the Turkish border. In central Syria, near Palmyra, Isis fought the Syrian army as it overran the al-Shaer gasfield, one of the largest in the country, in a surprise assault that left an estimated three hundred soldiers and civilians dead. Repeated government counter-attacks finally retook the gasfield but Isis still controls most of Syria’s oil and gas production. The Caliphate may be poor and isolated but its oil wells and control of crucial roads provide a steady income in addition to the plunder of war.

The birth of the new state is the most radical change to the political geography of the Middle East since the Sykes-Picot Agreement was implemented in the aftermath of the First World War. Yet this explosive transformation has created surprisingly little alarm internationally or even among those in Iraq and Syria not yet under the rule of Isis. Politicians and diplomats tend to treat Isis as if it is a Bedouin raiding party that appears dramatically from the desert, wins spectacular victories and then retreats to its strongholds leaving the status quo little changed. Such a scenario is conceivable but is getting less and less likely as Isis consolidates its hold on its new conquests in an area that may soon stretch from Iran to the Mediterranean.

The very speed and unexpectedness of its rise make it easy for Western and regional leaders to hope that the fall of Isis and the implosion of the Caliphate might be equally sudden and swift. But all the evidence is that this is wishful thinking and the trend is in the other direction, with the opponents of Isis becoming weaker and less capable of resistance: in Iraq the army shows no signs of recovering from its earlier defeats and has failed to launch a single successful counter-attack; in Syria the other opposition groups, including the battle-hardened fighters of al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, are demoralised and disintegrating as they are squeezed between Isis and the Assad government. Karen Koning Abuzayd, a member of the UN’s Commission of Inquiry in Syria, says that more and more Syrian rebels are defecting to Isis: “They see it better, these guys are strong, these guys are winning battles, they were taking territory, they have money, they can train us.” This is bad news for the government, which barely held off an assault in 2012 and 2013 by rebels less well trained, organised and armed than Isis; it will have real difficulties stopping the forces of the Caliphate advancing west.

In Baghdad there was shock and terror on 10 June at the fall of Mosul and as people realised that trucks packed with Isis gunmen were only an hour’s drive away. But instead of assaulting Baghdad, Isis took most of Anbar, the vast Sunni province that sprawls across western Iraq on either side of the Euphrates. In Baghdad, with its mostly Shia population of seven million, people know what to expect if the murderously anti-Shia Isis forces capture the city, but they take heart from the fact that the calamity has not happened yet. “We were frightened by the military disaster at first but we Baghdaquis have got used to crises over the last 35 years,” one woman said. Even with Isis at the gates, Iraqi politicians have gone on playing political games as they move ponderously towards replacing the discredited prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki.

“It is truly surreal,” a former Iraqi minister said. “When you speak to any political leader in Baghdad they talk as if they had not just lost half the country.” Volunteers had gone to the front after a fatwa from the grand ayatollah, Ali al-Sistani, Iraq’s most influential Shia cleric. But these militiamen are now streaming back to their homes, complaining that they were half-starved and forced to use their own weapons and buy their own ammunition. The only large-scale counter-attack launched by the regular army and the newly raised Shia militia was a disastrous foray into Tikrit on 15 July that was ambushed and defeated with heavy losses. There is no sign
that the dysfunctional nature of the Iraqi army has changed. They were using just one helicopter in support of the troops in Tikrit, the former minister said, so I wonder what on earth happened to the 140 helicopters the Iraqi state has bought in recent years?

Probably the money for the missing 139 helicopters was simply stolen. There are other wholly corrupt states in the world but few of them have oil revenues of $100 billion a year to steal from. The sole aim of many officials has long been to get the largest kickback possible and they did not much care if jihadi groups did the same. I met a Turkish businessman in Baghdad who said he had had a large construction contract in Mosul over the last few years. The local emir or leader of Isis, then known as al-Qaida in Iraq, demanded $500,000 a month in protection money from the company. He complained again and again about this to the government in Baghdad, the businessman said, but they would do nothing about it except to say that I could add the money I paid al-Qaida to the contract price. The emir was soon killed and his successor demanded that the protection money be increased to $1 million a month. The businessman refused to pay and one of his Iraqi employees was killed; he withdrew his Turkish staff and his equipment to Turkey. Later I got a message from al-Qaida saying that the price was back down to $500,000 and I could come back, he said. This was some time before Isis captured the city.

In the face of these failures Iraq’s Shia majority is taking comfort from two beliefs that, if true, would mean the present situation is not as dangerous as it looks. They argue that Iraq’s Sunnis have risen in revolt and Isis fighters are only the shock troops or vanguard of an uprising provoked by the anti-Sunnī policies and actions of Maliki. Once he is replaced, as is almost certain, Baghdad will offer the Sunnis a new power-sharing agreement with regional autonomy similar to that enjoyed by the Kurds. Then the Sunni tribes, former military officers and Baathists who have allowed Isis to take the lead in the Sunni revolt will turn on their ferocious allies. Despite all signs to the contrary, Shia at all levels are putting faith in this myth, that Isis is weak and can be easily discarded by Sunni moderates once they achieved their goals. One Shia said to me: I wonder if Isis really exists.

Unfortunately, Isis not only exists but is an efficient and ruthless organisation that has no intention of waiting for its Sunni allies to betray it. In Mosul it demanded that all opposition fighters swear allegiance to the Caliphate or give up their weapons. In late June and early July they detained between 15 to 20 former officers from Saddam Hussein’s time, including two generals. Groups that had put up pictures of Saddam were told to take them down or face the consequences. Aymenn al-Tamimi, an expert on jihadists, said, that the rest of the Sunni military opposition will be able to turn against Isis successfully. If they do, they will have to act as quickly as possible before Isis gets too strong. He points out that the supposedly more moderate wing of the Sunni opposition had done nothing to stop the remnants of the ancient Christian community in Mosul from being forced to flee after Isis told them they had to convert to Islam, pay a special tax or be killed. Members of other sects and ethnic groups denounced as Shia or polytheists are being persecuted, imprisoned and murdered. The moment is passing when the non-Isis opposition could successfully mount a challenge.

The Iraqi Shia offer another explanation for the way their army disintegrated: it was stabbed in the back by the Kurds. Seeking to shift the blame from himself, Maliki claims that Erbil, the Kurdish capital, is a headquarters for Isis, Baathists, al-Qaida and terrorists. Many Shia believe
this: it makes them feel that their security forces (nominally 350,000 soldiers and 650,000 police) failed because they were betrayed and not because they wouldn’t fight. One Iraqi told me he was at an iftar meal during Ramadan with a hundred Shia professional people, mostly doctors and engineers and they all took the stab-in-the-back theory for granted as an explanation for what went wrong. The confrontation with the Kurds is important because it makes it impossible to create a united front against Isis. The Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani, took advantage of the Iraqi army flight to seize all the territories, including the city of Kirkuk, which have been in dispute between Kurds and Arabs since 2003. He now has a 600-mile common frontier with the Caliphate and is an obvious ally for Baghdad, where Kurds make up part of the government. By trying to scapegoat the Kurds, Maliki is ensuring that the Shia will have no allies in their confrontation with Isis if it resumes its attack in the direction of Baghdad. Isis and their Sunni allies have been surprised by the military weakness of the Baghdad government. They are unlikely to be satisfied with regional autonomy for Sunni provinces and a larger share of jobs and oil revenues. Their uprising has turned into a full counter-revolution that aims to take back power over all of Iraq.

At the moment Baghdad has a phoney war atmosphere like London or Paris in late 1939 or early 1940, and for similar reasons. People had feared an imminent battle for the capital after the fall of Mosul, but it hasn’t happened yet and optimists hope it won’t happen at all. Life is more uncomfortable than it used to be, with only four hours of electricity on some days, but at least war hasn’t yet come to the heart of the city. Nevertheless, some form of military attack, direct or indirect, will probably happen once Isis has consolidated its hold on the territory it has just conquered: it sees its victories as divinely inspired. It believes in killing or expelling Shia rather than negotiating with them, as it has shown in Mosul. Some Shia leaders may calculate that the US or Iran will always intervene to save Baghdad, but both powers are showing reluctance to plunge into the Iraqi quagmire in support of a dysfunctional government.

Iraq’s Shia leaders haven’t grappled with the fact that their domination over the Iraqi state, brought about by the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein, is finished, and only a Shia rump is left. It ended because of their own incompetence and corruption and because the Sunni uprising in Syria in 2011 destabilised the sectarian balance of power in Iraq. Three years on, the Isis-led Sunni victory in Iraq threatens to break the military stalemate in Syria. Assad has been slowly pushing back against a weakening opposition: in Damascus and its outskirts, the Qalamoun mountains along the Lebanese border and Homs, government forces have been advancing slowly and are close to encircling the large rebel enclave in Aleppo. But Assad’s combat troops are noticeably thin on the ground, need to avoid heavy casualties and only have the strength to fight on one front at a time. The government tactic is to devastate a rebel-held district with artillery fire and barrel bombs dropped from helicopters, force most of the population to flee, seal off what may now be a sea of ruins and ultimately force the rebels to surrender. But the arrival of large numbers of well-armed Isis fighters fresh from recent successes will be a new and dangerous challenge for Assad. They overran two important Syrian army garrisons in the east in late July. A conspiracy theory, much favoured by the rest of the Syrian opposition and by Western diplomats, that Isis and Assad are in league, has been shown to be false.

Isis may well advance on Aleppo in preference to Baghdad: it’s a softer target and one less likely to provoke international intervention. This will leave the West and its regional allies – Saudi
Arabia, Qatar and Turkey— with a quandary: their official policy is to get rid of Assad, but Isis is now the second strongest military force in Syria; if he falls, it’s in a good position to fill the vacuum. Like the Shia leaders in Baghdad, the US and its allies have responded to the rise of Isis by descending into fantasy. They pretend they are fostering a third force of moderate Syrian rebels to fight both Assad and Isis, though in private Western diplomats admit this group doesn’t really exist outside a few beleaguered pockets. Aymenn al-Tamimi confirms that this Western-backed opposition is getting weaker and weaker; he believes supplying them with more weapons won’t make much difference. Jordan, under pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia, is supposed to be a launching pad for this risky venture but it’s getting cold feet. Jordan is frightened of Isis, one Jordanian official in Amman said. Most Jordanians want Assad to win the war. He said Jordan is buckling under the strain of coping with vast numbers of Syrian refugees, the equivalent of the entire population of Mexico moving into the US in one year.

The foster parents of Isis and the other Sunni jihadi movements in Iraq and Syria are Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey. This doesn’t mean the jihadists didn’t have strong indigenous roots, but their rise was crucially supported by outside Sunni powers. The Saudi and Qatari aid was primarily financial, usually through private donations, which Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, says were central to the Isis takeover of Sunni provinces in northern Iraq: ‘Such things do not happen spontaneously.’ In a speech in London in July, he said the Saudi policy towards jihadists has two contradictory motives: fear of jihadis operating within Saudi Arabia, and a desire to use them against Shia powers abroad. He said the Saudis are ‘deeply attracted towards any militancy which can effectively challenge Shiadom’. It’s unlikely the Sunni community as a whole in Iraq would have lined up behind Isis without the support Saudi Arabia gave directly or indirectly to many Sunni movements. The same is true of Syria, where Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to Washington and head of Saudi intelligence from 2012 to February 2014, was doing everything he could to back the jihadi opposition until his dismissal. Fearful of what they’ve helped create, the Saudis are now veering in the other direction, arresting jihadi volunteers rather than turning a blind eye as they go to Syria and Iraq, but it may be too late. Saudi jihadists have little love for the House of Saud. On 23 July, Isis launched an attack on one of the last Syrian army strongholds in the northern province of Raqqa. It began with a suicide car-bomb attack; the vehicle was driven by a Saudi called Khatab al-Najdi who had put pictures on the car windows of three women held in Saudi prisons, one of whom was Hila al-Kasir, his niece.

Turkey’s role has been different but no less significant than Saudi Arabia’s in aiding Isis and other jihadi groups. Its most important action has been to keep open its 510-mile border with Syria. This gave Isis, al-Nusra and other opposition groups a safe rear base from which to bring in men and weapons. The border crossing points have been the most contested places during the rebels’ civil war within the civil war. Most foreign jihadists have crossed Turkey on their way to Syria and Iraq. Precise figures are difficult to come by, but Morocco’s Interior Ministry said recently that 1122 Moroccan jihadists have entered Syria, including nine hundred who went in 2013, two hundred of whom were killed. Iraqi security suspects that Turkish military intelligence may have been heavily involved in aiding Isis when it was reconstituting itself in 2011. Reports from the Turkish border say Isis is no longer welcome, but with weapons taken from the Iraqi army and the seizure of Syrian oil and gasfields, it no longer needs so much outside help.

For America, Britain and the Western powers, the rise of Isis and the Caliphate is the ultimate disaster. Whatever they intended by their invasion of Iraq in 2003 and their efforts to get rid of
Assad in Syria since 2011, it was not to see the creation of a jihadi state spanning northern Iraq and Syria run by a movement a hundred times bigger and much better organised than the al-Qaida of Osama bin Laden. The war on terror for which civil liberties have been curtailed and hundreds of billions of dollars spent has failed miserably. The belief that Isis is interested only in Muslim against Muslim struggles is another instance of wishful thinking: Isis has shown it will fight anybody who doesn’t adhere to its bigoted, puritanical and violent variant of Islam. Where Isis differs from al-Qaida is that it’s a well-run military organisation that is very careful in choosing its targets and the optimum moment to attack them.

Many in Baghdad hope the excesses of Isis—for example, blowing up mosques it deems shrines, like that of Younis (Jonah) in Mosul—will alienate the Sunnis. In the long term they may do just that, but opposing Isis is very dangerous and, for all its brutality, it has brought victory to a defeated and persecuted Sunni community. Even those Sunnis in Mosul who don’t like it are fearful of the return of a vengeful Shia-dominated Iraqi government. So far Baghdad’s response to its defeat has been to bomb Mosul and Tikrit randomly, leaving local people in no doubt about its indifference to their welfare or survival. The fear will not change even if Maliki is replaced by a more conciliatory prime minister. A Sunni in Mosul, writing just after a missile fired by government forces had exploded in the city, told me: Maliki’s forces have already demolished the University of Tikrit. It has become havoc and rubble like all the city. If Maliki reaches us in Mosul he will kill its people or turn them into refugees. Pray for us. Such views are common, and make it less likely that Sunnis will rise up in opposition to Isis and its Caliphate. A new and terrifying state has been born.