

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: Ideology vs. context

By

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Abstract

This essay examines the rise and relative success of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (henceforth referred to as ISIS) as a non-state actor. It delves into the root causes of the emergence of such radical movement by deconstructing the political context that has made radicalism more or less ubiquitous in the Levant. The essay makes the case that ISIS is, by and large, not an Islamic or religious problem, but a political one. Hence, Socio-economic and political realities and pressures make many people susceptible to the message of radicalism. Those factors, rather than specific religious beliefs, are behind much of radicalism in the region. Key to understanding the emergence of ISIS is an appreciation of the general political context that has shaped intra-state as well as inter-state political interactions in a region that has proved impervious to the three waves of democracy that have characterized most of the world outside Europe and North America. Last but not least, this essay highlights and examines the framework of dictatorial or repressive violence as a main driver of radicalism.

Keywords: *ISIS, radicalism, democracy, terrorism, structural violence, sectarianism*

1. Introduction

The relative success of some homegrown non-state actors in the Middle East over the last two decades has given rise to much speculation as to how deep-rooted their success actually is. While this chapter examines the rise and relative success of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (henceforth referred to as ISIS), it attempts to deconstruct the political context that has made radicalism more or less ubiquitous in the Levant. In doing so, I argue that ISIS is, by and large, not an Islamic or religious problem, but a political one. Socio-economic and political realities and pressures make many people susceptible to the message of radicalism. Those factors, rather than specific religious beliefs, are behind much of the radicalism in the region

With the onset of the ‘Second Arab Awakening’¹ in early 2011, both Syria and Iraq became fertile ground for sectarian violence and eventually for the sudden and spectacular rise of ISIS. With the eruption of the Arab Spring,² sectarian tensions – already aggravated by the external

¹ The second Arab awakening is a term used by various scholars and pundits. Adeer Dawisha reminds us that the history of what he describes as the Arabs’ first awakening unfolded in the first two decades after the end of the Second World War, making the case that the first Arab awakening centered on anti-colonialism, and was less fundamentally concerned with democratic practices. The failure of the transformation of the post-colonial states into fully-fledged democracies after national liberation, and the defeat of imperialism, has become all too glaring, and in Dawisha’s words, Arab societies are now awakening from authoritarianism. For an in-depth analysis of the term see Adeer Dawisha, *Revolution, Democracy, and the Islamist Challenge from Tunis to Damascus* (New York: Norton, 2013)

² It seems obvious now that the concept of ‘Arab Spring’ was something of a misnomer. The idea of rapid transformation from autocratic rule to democracy was and remains a far-fetched objective. Rather than taking the holding of elections as a

intervention in Iraq– pitted Shi'is against Sunnis, thus making a radical militant group such as ISIS an appealing choice for many Sunnis, both in Iraq and eventually, as the civil war continued, in Syria. ISIS' conquest of vast swathes of territory in both Iraq and Syria attracted many disenfranchised Iraqi Sunnis as well as some 30,000 foreign fighters. Much to the chagrin of moderates in the Arab World, ISIS has excelled in pursuing a sophisticated social media campaign that has helped to recruit radicals from around the world. Its far-reaching propaganda machine has transformed the group into the new magnet of *jihadi* militants. It goes without saying that both Iraq and Syria have become the number one destinations for a third wave of global jihadists and dedicated Islamic extremists.³

Key to understanding the emergence of ISIS is an appreciation of the general political context that has, by and large, shaped intra-state as well as inter-state political interactions in a region that has proved impervious to the three waves of democracy that have characterized most of the world outside Europe and North America. Observers and pundits have already focused on the ideological roots of this phenomenon, centering their argument around one simplistic idea, that militants are driven by a strict and narrow interpretation of an ideology. Statements and apoplectic rants made by key leaders of ISIS tend to reinforce this notion of the ideological dimension of the radical movement. Too much focus on ideology can only give credence to the Islamophobic conviction that as a religion, Islam is inherently dangerous regardless of the context. Hence, if we take this argument at face value we end up blaming the religion rather than the perpetrators themselves.

While this chapter does little to downplay the significance of ideology in this part of the world, it argues that there is a different story to tell. In doing so, the chapter highlights and examines the framework of dictatorial or repressive violence as a main driver of radicalism. The French historian Jean-Pierre Filiu offers new insight into the discussion of ISIS when he argues that the neo- *Mamluks*, or the 'Arab Security mafias', are the key reason behind the emergence of the Islamic State.⁴ Filiu makes the case that the various internal security services have played a paramount role in shaping the politics of the Middle East. The 'Deep State', he argues, is determined to hold on to power, thus undermining both the Arab uprisings and the transition to a more democratic consensus.

Seen in this way, I argue that rather than considering the ruthless behavior of ISIS and its viciousness an oddity, it is a better idea to examine it as an integral part of the ubiquitous climate of 'structural violence' that has been the hallmark of most Arab countries and societies at least since the 1960s. Hence, analyzing the rise of ISIS within the framework of the

straightforward benchmark, a political culture of tolerance and respect for minority rights as well as institutions that provide for the rule of law are the main requirements for the eventual introduction of representative democracy.

³ The first wave of jihadism emerged in Afghanistan during the 1980s as a response to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It stretched over the 1990s and was clearly evident in Chechnya, Bosnia, Egypt, and Algeria, with its purpose of toppling pro-Western and pro-Russian regimes. Their inability to mobilize the 'Muslim masses' under their banner secured their failure. A second generation of jihadists came to the fore with the purpose of attacking the "far enemy." After realizing that the resilience of the pro-Western regimes (near enemy) was due to western support they decided to attack the west. It is in this context that al-Qaida attacked the United States on 9/11.

⁴ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

repressive and authoritarian violence pervasive in the region can yield a better understanding both of the root causes of radicalism and how to rein it in. Without unpacking the political context, we run the risk of becoming misled into believing that ideology alone is behind radicalism and terrorism. This sort of wrong focus can only lead to the emphasis on battling terrorism while turning a blind eye on radicalism.

That being said, I argue that the repressive framework is not confined to an autocratic political framework, as in the case of Egypt or Libya, but also a sectarian framework, as has become the case in both Iraq and Syria. The rapid rise of ISIS has reinforced a new reality: Iraq and Syria have become closer to disintegration as ‘their diverse communities – Shia, Sunni, Kurds, Alawites, and Christians – found that they were fighting for their very existence.’⁵ Obviously, ISIS has exhibited a more violent and more thoroughly sectarian nature than al-Qa‘ida. Hence, it is hard to avoid the realization that the failure of political and historical reconciliation in Iraq, as well as the lack of an effective, inclusive, democratically elected government, created a context conducive for ISIS to flourish.

Moreover, ISIS as well as other militant groups can burgeon within the context of the endemic chaos that has come to define much of the region since the fall of Saddam’s regime and the beginning of the Arab Spring. This has been more obvious in countries such as Libya, which suffers from a substantial political vacuum. With the onset of the Arab Spring, some societies (Libya, Syria, Yemen) have more or less disintegrated and thus, the moral authority of the state and its institutions has come under question. As a corollary, older forms of identity – whether tribal, sectarian, or ethnic – rather than notions of national identity have come to play a key role in regional political constellations. In these circumstances, ISIS served as an attractive model. Indeed, recruitment is bound to continue in the coming years if the political process continues to run aground, as is the case in both Iraq and Syria.

This chapter attempts to offer an in-depth answer to two key, interrelated questions. The first question has to do with the role of sectarian identity in shaping the thinking and modus operandi of ISIS. If anything, ISIS does not operate in a vacuum, and indeed, the politics of identity – aggravated by external intervention – has helped ISIS come to the fore with gusto. A second question is linked to the role played by the political context that has given impetus to the rise of radical Islamism in the Middle East.

Accordingly, this chapter is divided to three sections. The first section sets the historical scene that has helped radical movements, ISIS in particular, emerge and flourish in a tumultuous region. The second examines the sociology of violence and how the autocratic framework, whether sectarian or political, results in radicalization. A third section addresses radicalism as the root cause of terrorism. In this section, I make the case that allocating resources to fight terrorism is necessary, but by no means sufficient, to uproot radicalism and prevent it from taking root in the societies of the Middle East.

The Historical Context

In the summer of 2014, the world was stunned to see Jihadi fighters belonging to ISIS combining religious fanaticism and some military expertise, to inflict spectacular defeats on the well-equipped Iraqi army. Many observers were in disbelief when the Iraqi army retreated, leaving huge quantities of modern US weaponry behind. Within a short time, ISIS chalked up clear victories against Syrian, Iraq, and Kurdish armed forces.

⁵ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2014)

Jolted by swift ISIS victories and the fear of its expansion in Syria, the United States began its sporadic bombing campaign on September 23. The American effectiveness in battling ISIS is compromised by objective political realities. First, President Obama has been adamant not to have ‘boots on the ground.’ Instead, the American strategy centers on a very simple idea: to have an Iraqi partner in the fight against ISIS and thereby to entice the Sunni community away from it. It was hoped that Iraqi Sunnis would be mobilized and turn against ISIS, thus helping defeat the organization. Unfortunately for the US plan to defeat ISIS, there are obvious disadvantages in choosing the Iraqi government as a potential ally in this fight, since the Iraqi government is largely sectarian in nature and has largely proved unwilling to share power, money, and jobs with the Sunnis. By and large, Sunnis see the Iraqi government as nothing but a sectarian one, only representing a Shi‘i community intent on the exclusion of Sunnis. Not surprisingly, many Sunnis in the region are less afraid of ISIS than of the Iranian-backed and Iraqi Shi‘i controlled government. Hence, the US has thus far failed to eradicate ISIS from either Iraq or Syria using this strategy: the only partners it can rely on are elements among the Kurds, whose activities are generally opposed by the US’ ‘partner’, Turkey.

One wonders how long ISIS can hold on against the might of a broad coalition that includes great powers with unmatched military capabilities, although, in spite of the international coalition’s bombardment of ISIS throughout Syria and Iraq, the coalition’s military success has been relatively modest. To answer this question, it is worth examining the historical context that allowed ISIS to emerge and prosper against all odds.

Interestingly, although the media seems profoundly obsessed with ISIS, it seems that ISIS is still fenced in by walls of ambiguity. This is especially true among Arab intellectuals who are enamored by the idea that ISIS was created by the United States,⁶ an example of the kind of obsessive conspiratorial thinking that is pervasive throughout much of the Middle East. Many refer to Hillary Clinton’s writings that American hesitancy in the first stage of the Syrian revolution helped ISIS emerge.⁷ Of course, there are others who insist that ISIS is nothing but an *Iranian* invention, and that the embattled Syrian president released hundreds of ISIS members from the Saydnaya prison in September 2011 in order to infuse the revolution with Islamist terrorism. Indeed, many of ISIS’ militants were former inmates in the prison, radicalized by their experience in jail. Needless to say, some even accuse Turkey and other Gulf states of funding and arming ISIS, and it is of course true that apart from its setting up an Islamic caliphate, most of ISIS’ ideology is almost indistinguishable from the Wahhabi doctrine that functions as the ‘official ideology’ of Saudi Arabia. What mars most of these analyses is the fact that authors often seek relevance at the expense of rigor. Furthermore, apocalyptic rants from members of ISIS and some Western elected officials or media pundits have in a sense destroyed any type of gray zone, thus creating a kind of hate speech on both sides of the divide. Few, if any, examine the conditions that allow such radicalism to take root.

Influenced by the dogmatic and untested ideas of the neo-cons about regime change, President Bush ordered his army to occupy Iraq in 2003, thus unleashing a series of events whose impacts

⁶ This impression is widely spread in the Arab World. I have been asked this question many times by my students and colleagues. It is worth saying that such impression exists especially in politicized societies where people are relatively powerless. Also, Arab publics do not want to believe that ISIS, although perhaps *facilitated* by the US, is essentially a home-grown product.

⁷ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014)

would be felt far across the region. Explicit in the American official discourse was the desire to ‘democratize’ Iraq and empower the Iraqi opposition, who had until then lived mostly in the diaspora. The Iraqi opposition parties, long fragmented, coalesced around two straightforward ideas: removing Saddam Hussein and bringing democracy to Iraq.

The conventional wisdom on authoritarian stability was shattered in one stroke. It seems to have been believed that change in Iraq in 2003 would pave the way to set up a model of democracy for the region. Almost thirteen years after regime change in Iraq, Iraq is far from a stable or democratic state. While the Americans were celebrating ‘mission accomplished’, a Jordanian jihadi – Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi – had a different opinion. Having experienced the shock of the US’ new project of empowering the Shi‘i majority at the expense of Sunnis, he started planning an insurgency campaign that would, in a less than a decade, reach a pinnacle of violence. He formed an organization called *al-Qa‘ida in Iraq*, which was first recognized but later disavowed by ‘*al-Qa‘ida central*’.

Casting aside the role of ideology, one can cite two factors that helped al-Zarqawi build what later became known as ISIS. First, the thoroughly ill-advised American policies in remaking Iraq. The US’ policies of dissolving the Iraqi army, de-Ba‘thification, and courting all components of Iraqi society except the Sunnis, contributed to the Sunnis’ belief that they were going to be politically excluded from the new Iraq. The new regime in Iraq was fast becoming sectarian in nature and autocratic in essence. Second, Iran took advantage of the new situation and began to dominate Iraq by expanding its influence over Shi‘i political forces. By propping up the Shi‘is and simultaneously excluding the Sunnis, Iran helped make the Sunnis feel even more apprehensive of the unfolding situation. Amid this emerging reality, al-Zarqawi capitalized on Sunni grievances and managed to create a safe haven for his Salafi *jihadi* group among the Sunni community. He became a wild card in Iraq and his eventual death in 2006 did not weaken the working assumptions of his organization.

The ability of al-Zarqawi to recruit fighters was also enhanced by regional developments. Syria, for instance, feared the discourse of the neo-conservatives about regime change through the spread of democracy in the Middle East. It is therefore not unnatural in this case, that Syria would have preferred to see the Americans fail in Iraq. As a corollary, turning Iraq into a quagmire for American troops proved handy. Like-minded states colluded with the fighters who were seeking to arrive in Iraq to fight American troops. In addition, at least until late 2004, President Asad of Syria turned a blind eye while hundreds, if not thousands, of foreign fighters crossed the border between Syria and Iraq to join the battle against the American occupation. In a few years, Iraq turned into a hub for al-Qa‘ida with al-Zarqawi as its undisputed point man.⁸ Given al-Zarqawi’s aggressive mindset, the organization would take a more bloody turn.

Although al-Zarqawi’s oath of allegiance was made to Osama Bin Laden of al-Qa‘ida, he was by no means subservient to al-Qa‘ida in terms of vision or even strategy. Differences between al-Zarqawi and al-Qa‘ida, albeit hidden from the public discourse, were of paramount significance that would later on account for the divorce between al-Zarqawi’s successors –

⁸ For more details, see, Naomi Klein, “Baghdad Year Zero: Pillaging Iraq in Pursuit of Neocon Utopia,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2004, available at: <http://harpers.org/archive/2004/09/baghdad-year-zero/>.

particularly Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – and al-Qa‘ida. Equally important, the character of al-Zarqawi and his stubbornness may help us understand his quasi-independence from al-Qa‘ida. While he did not part ways with Osama Bin Laden on the need to fight the Americans, he established a defiant mindset among his followers in Iraq, who began to see the priorities of jihad in a diametrically different manner.

If anything, the politics of identity played a key role in shaping al-Zarqawi’s worldview. America’s ill-advised policies in the immediate aftermath of the occupation of Iraq contributed no small amount to the disintegration of Iraqi society. Soon, the societal fault-lines began to take a sectarian line. It was in the context of Shi‘i control of the political process –made possible by the complicit American position and the growing influence of Iran in Iraq – that sectarian identities manifested themselves in ways that damaged the prospects for political reconciliation. Sunnis in Iraq felt that they were alone and unprotected, and that the emerging new order in Iraq would not only be at their expense, but also would exclude them from the public life.

Al-Zarqawi was quick to capitalize on the Sunni sense of exclusion. When he set up *al-Tawhid w’al-Hijrah* (the forerunner of AQI) in 2003 he played up the identity issue. In a meticulous way, he began to incite a sectarian war against the Shi‘is. His calculations were straightforward: Sunnis would join his organization against the infidels. In his many statements and speeches, he referred to the Shi‘is as lurking snakes and a creeping enemy.⁹ Thus, fighting the Shi‘is occupied a central pillar in al-Zarqawi’s worldview, and would remain so until his death in 2006. When he died, he left behind some coherent guidelines for his followers to pick up where he left off. When ‘The Islamic State of Iraq’ was declared in October 2006, the fixation with this identity-based approach continued unchecked. This trajectory would manifest itself more clearly when the Syrian crisis erupted. Against this backdrop, ISIS was declared. While this organization is evidently rooted in Salafi Jihadi ideology, one should not be oblivious to the emerging context that made such an ideology relevant, and equally important, the final divorce between al-Qa‘ida and ISIS. The key bone of contention between the two organizations centers on their different sets of priorities, a struggle that al-Qa‘ida had to cave into, out of necessity.¹⁰

Indeed, the establishment of al-Qa‘ida and later ISIS in Iraq passed through four stages. In the period between 2004 and 2006, al-Zarqawi established ‘al-Qa‘ida in Mesopotamia’. During this stage, the organization targeted both American and Shi‘i forces. This period came to an end with the death of al-Zarqawi in 2006. Soon, the radicals established the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) only to find themselves under attack toward the end of the American occupation of Iraq. America’s clear strategy with the awakening (*sahwa*) helped defeat ISI. But with the onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, ISI took advantage of the emerging chaos and declared ISIS. At this point, President Obama withdrew the last US forces from Iraq, and hence created a vacuum in which ISI became much stronger. The new emerging rift between al-Qa‘ida and its al-Nusra branch in Syria on the one hand and ISI on the other hand led to the establishment of ISIS, and paved the way for the fourth stage after June 2014, when ISIS chalked up major victories, now

⁹ For more details, see Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi, ‘Risala min Abi Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi ila al-Shaikh Osama bin Laden (hafidhahu Allah) (letter from Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi to Sheikh Osama bin Laden, may God protect him)’, February 15, 2004. See *Majmu‘ Rasa’il al-Zarqawi* (A collection of al-Zarqawi’s letters), p. 59.

¹⁰ For more details, see Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, *The 'Islamic State' Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2015), pp. 71

controlling a huge chunk of Syria and Iraq and also many of the oil wells of the region. Emboldened by its victories, ISIS established an 'Islamic State' or 'Islamic Caliphate' headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

During the early stages of the attack on Saddam's regime, jihadists had begun to change much of the old rhetoric of al-Qa'ida. Now in line with the jurisprudential principle of *al-Wala' w'al-Bara'* (loyalty towards Muslims and disavowal of infidels), al-Zarqawi declared his new doctrine that stated that there was no distinction between a foreign enemy (the far enemy) and those Muslims who collaborate with the infidels (Shi'is included). The final split between al-Qa'ida and ISIS led to polarization. Each one followed a different *modus operandi*, with ISIS cultivating a reputation of brutally targeting its adversaries, particularly the Shi'is, and forcing local populations under its control to implement Islamic religious law. It is this point that gave ISIS – as a new and highly effective non-state actor – its new hallmark.

In a nutshell, the emergence and development of ISIS is circumstantial. The demise of Saddam's regime led to a security vacuum and a political environment fraught with uncertainty. During the nine-year American occupation of Iraq, the Americans did not succeed in establishing an effective army, nor adequate security forces to fill the vacuum created by the fall of the Ba'athist state. Equally important, given the imbalances that the US invasion created, the political empowerment of the Shi'is took place at the expense of the Sunnis. The lack of an inclusive democratic government, coupled with the presence of a particularly sectarian Prime Minister (2006-14), Nuri al-Maliki, turned Iraq into a hostile place for the majority of the Arab Sunni population. Against this backdrop, ISIS slowly but surely came to the fore. The nine years that followed the demise of Saddam were fraught with risky developments.

Structural and Cultural Violence

The term 'structural violence' is by no means novel. It refers to a situation where the social structure may hurt people by denying them the potential of obtaining their basic necessities. In his seminal study on this issue, Johan Galtung made a useful distinction between three key concepts that make up what he calls the violence triangle: structural violence, cultural violence, and direct violence. Both structural and cultural violence lead to direct violence, whereas the latter reinforces the former.¹¹

Structural violence takes place when a certain class, or sect in this case, are seen to have more access to social goods than other classes or sects. It is a situation where an unequal advantage is ingrained in the social, political and economic systems that control the dynamic of a given society. At this point, personal suffering is linked with social, cultural, and political choices. Equally important, cultural violence is linked to dominant beliefs and attitudes ingrained since childhood about the utility and importance of violence.

We have witnessed various forms of direct violence in both Iran and Syria, where the victims are mainly Sunnis, (although it should be emphasized that Sunnis form 70 per cent of the population of Syria). Ethnic cleansing, humiliation, and repression are the hallmark of the approach used by the ruling Shi'i elite in Iraq and the Asad regime in Syria. The many militias affiliated with the Syrian and Iraqi regimes (and, to be fair, their opponents) have committed

¹¹ Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6, 3, 1969, 167-91

atrocities, rape, and even ethnic and sectarian cleansing. Indeed, the omnipresence of both structural and cultural violence in Iraq and Syria created two different yet interrelated outcomes: chaos and the emergence of ISIS as a model to balance structural violence. Ever since ISIS gained a foothold in a conflict-torn zone in the Middle East, the regional power dynamic has shifted no small amount. It seems that politicians are still engaging in the blame game behind the rise of ISIS.

With the onset of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, some key countries – Syria and Iraq in particular – became a sort of failed state. Of course, Iraq was on a slippery road towards becoming a failed state long before the advent of the Arab Spring. Chaos rather than stability characterize the two states, and the Syrian civil war is being fought by proxies on both sides. In Aaron David Miller's words, ISIS 'emerged, gained power, and is now operating more effectively because it exists in an environment of failed or failing states. This, in an environment notable for its lack of a viable order — authoritarian or otherwise — and a coherent state that can offer an alternative to IS by offering good, reliable governance, political inclusion, and economic opportunity to both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border.'¹² This reality accounts, in part, for the advent of such an organization.

Many commentators on Middle Eastern politics are not oblivious to the fact that several countries in the Middle East are not really functioning polities. This is not confined to Syria or Iraq. In fact, 'the contagion of bad governance (or no governance at all) could be contained as a 'local' problem. But alas, that is not the case: the Arab world is melting down. Libya and Syria are torn apart by civil war; Iraq is decentralizing; Yemen now faces a determined Houthi insurgency; the Lebanese state has lacked the capacity to control its own territory for years, and the putative state of Palestine is riven with political divides.'¹³

Seen in this way, attention should be paid to the endemic anarchy that has befallen the Middle East during the second decade of the twenty first century. Hence, the ascent of ISIS is better understood within the context of the prevalent climate of 'structural violence' that has dominated the scene over the last few years.¹⁴ A quick look at many of the Arab uprisings clearly shows that the anarchy is more or less ubiquitous. At the time of writing, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are in shambles. Additionally, Egypt's situation is far from benign, with a military dictatorship running the country while the Sinai Peninsula has degenerated into anarchy and has turned to be largely uninhabitable thanks to the presence of radical militants affiliated with ISIS. In Syria, the fusion of arms and money is coming from almost all regional backers of the different sides of the conflict. In a sense, the battle is not only in Syria but also *for* Syria. The extent of the 'failing state' cannot be more obvious than in Iraq. As mentioned earlier, Iraqi politicians –empowered first by the American occupation of Iraq and then by the growing influence of Iran – failed miserably to build a new nation based on inclusive democratic institutions. To the vast majority of the Sunni Iraqis, and indeed the Kurds, the present central government in Baghdad is nothing but an embodiment of Iraqi Shi'i identity. Worse, successive central governments in Baghdad have been accused of being puppets of Iran. To be sure, the latter played the sectarian card to secure a strong foothold in Iraq. By design or default, the

¹² Aaron David Miller, "Middle East Meltdown," *Foreign Policy*, October 30th, 2014, available at the following link: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/30/middle-east-meltdown/>

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, *op. cit.*, p.311

Iranian influence in Iraq has had a negative effect on the political process and indeed has blocked what might have been processes of historical and political reconciliation between the various components of Iraqi society.

Not surprisingly, the sectarian nature of the Iraqi government has alienated the Sunnis who see the government as anti-Sunni. Explicit in the attitudes of Sunnis in Iraq, as well as Syria, is that the moral authority of the state has come under question. Nationalism has largely ceased to be an identity that represents all Iraqis or all Syrians. With the failure of the state and with the descent into anarchy and insecurity, people began to identify with sub-national identities such as tribes and sects for protection.

This climate of ever-present structural violence has led, in part, to the rise of ISIS, but equally important, to the present relevance of ISIS as an attractive model in other areas such as Libya. Seen from a different perspective, the rise of this model— bad as it may look – can work for people who experience traumatic situations. It is the context, rather than the ideology, that makes ISIS and like-minded groups relevant for some people. It follows that as long as sectarian politics continue unchecked, little can be done to check or limit ISIS, let alone to prevent the emergence of other militant groups. In other words, these organizations are always bound to surface as long as the Sunni predicament in Iraq and Syria is not solved in an acceptable manner.

Indeed, the situation in Iraq and Syria is by no means exceptional. When the United States toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the wake of the terrible attacks of September 2011, many observers were quick to hail the occupation as a clear defeat for al-Qa‘ida and the Taliban. And yet, military victory did not last for long, and did not in the final analysis translate into a political victory for the Afghan people. The lopsided political process led to instability, and Afghanistan is far from being a post-conflict zone. Certainly, various offshoots of al-Qa‘ida resurfaced, specifically ISIS. All the political and military investment in fighting al-Qa‘ida did not succeed in wiping out the organizations once and for all, simply because the conditions that have produced these organizations are omnipresent now in Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

Important as it may be, defeating ISIS requires much more than the military dimension. Inflicting defeat on ISIS may not generate regional stability nor strengthen Arab societies or make them immune to the radical message. Again, when the Taliban regime fell apart, no one seems to have foreseen the turbulent time ahead, and therefore little attention was paid to the growing conditions of instability. Unfortunately, politicians underestimated the resolve and determination of the radical militants to hold their ground.

It is evident that the region is not heading toward the same old balance of power. Nor is it heading toward a more peaceful future, given the failure of the Arab uprisings to bring about stability and democratic governance, although, with hindsight, that was far too much to have expected. In some places, particularly Tunisia and Egypt, the autocratic past was dismantled painstakingly and with vigor, but future stability is far from being certain. Hence the future may be fraught with disorder, chaos, and primeval affiliations. In other words, the autocratic stability model is being competed against not by a democratic model, but rather by a radical model, which is fixed on setting agonizing conflicts in motion.

In a short, the emergence and relevance of this model may serve as a good reminder, and herein lies the crux of the matter, of the need to understand and address the conditions that turn ‘ordinary people’ into radicals, an issue to be addressed in the following sections.

Radicalism vs Terrorism: a paradigm shift

The wealth of evidence gathered suggests that a better, and more effective, way of pulling the rug out from under the feet of the terrorists, and of winning over their societies, entails rethinking the sequences of terrorism and radicalism, and strategizing accordingly. In this section, I argue that there is a need to devise a strategy not only to fight against terrorism, but also to address the root causes of radicalism, especially in the Islamic world.

In his study on the need to fight radicalism, Omer Taspinar of the Johns Hopkins University sketches out the polarizing debate in the United States about ‘the underlying causes of violent extremism in the Islamic world’.¹⁵

On the one hand, there are those who argue that the best way of defeating terrorism is by focusing on the conditions that create terrorism. In other words, it is not enough to dedicate resources to fight terrorism, but instead the focus must be on preventing radicalism, given that prevalent socio-economic and political conditions (poverty, isolation, lack of economic and social opportunity) make many people susceptible to the message of terrorists. Thus, fighting radicalism – they argue – would provide the best possible approach for defeating terrorism for some good reasons.

In the first place, radicalism is linked to the ideological and political dimension of the threat. For this reason, ‘no matter how diverse the causes, motivations, and ideologies behind terrorism, all attempts at premeditated violence against civilians share the traits of violent radicalism.’¹⁶ Second, unlike terrorism – which is deemed a lethal security challenge – radicalism is a *political* challenge. Hence, a political approach, rather than a coercive one, should be considered in dealing with radicalism. It is not clear yet when a radical turns into a terrorist. In fact, all radicals are not terrorists whereas all terrorists are radicals. Hence, one could make the case that focusing on radicalism is the best preventive strategy, not only to weaken terrorists, but also to prevent their message from resonating widely among radicals. It is at this stage that non-coercive measures could pay off. Third, one should pay attention to the radicalized social habitat. It is hard to avoid the realization that radicalized societies suffer from structural violence, and a deep-seated sense of deprivation, humiliation, and frustration. Among these societies, there may be a degree of support for terrorists.¹⁷

On the other hand, there are those who are not really moved by the arguments advanced by the first school of thought. The correlation between socio-economic and political conditions and terrorism is dismissed by those who make the case that many terrorists are neither poor nor uneducated.¹⁸ They argue that the majority of terrorists come from the middle class, and indeed are, or are often, educated. Unlike the first school of thought, in this case, terrorism should be dealt with as a security threat with no linkages to its socio-economic dimensions. The remedy, according to proponents of this line of thinking, is by directing the ‘fight against Islamist

¹⁵ Omer Taspinar, ‘Fighting Radicalism, not ‘Terrorism’: Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined,’ *S AIS Review*, vol. xxix, no. 2 (summer-fall 2009), pp.75-86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

terrorism with a single-minded focus on state actors, jihadist ideology, counter-intelligence, and coercive action.¹⁹

Interestingly enough, extreme Islamist organizations such as ISIS do not speak for 'Islam', nor do they enjoy the backing of ordinary Muslims. Recently, a Doha-based center released a poll in which 89 per cent of respondents in twelve Arab countries said that they are opposed to ISIS.²⁰ Even in non-Arab Muslim countries, the view of ISIS is almost entirely negative. In the aftermath of the Paris attack, Pew Research Center conducted a poll in eleven Arab and Muslim countries. The overwhelming majority of people from Nigeria to Jordan to Indonesia expressed negative views of ISIS.²¹

Indeed, personal piety does not correlate with radical views. As clearly illustrated by John Esposito, terrorists do appeal to religion or to political convictions, for instance, to recruit fighters or suicide bombers, as do others such as the Marxist Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka when they appealed to Hindu identity to attract fighters and suicide bombers for their cause. Even many of those who condoned the terrible attacks of September 11 defended their position in secular and world terms rather than citing the Qur'an. One respondent in Indonesia said that the American government was too controlling and colonizing.²² Hence, fears of occupation or political domination can serve as a driver of radicalism.

To wrap up, the most successful way of handling terrorism is by addressing its root causes. In other words, radicalism is the key behind terrorism. If this stage is defined, then there is a clear need to devise a strategy to deal with the socio-economic and political conditions that breed radicalism. Having established that a military approach in dealing with ISIS is far from enough, perhaps education and economic empowerment for the societies can serve as the best antidote to radicalization. As Robert Satloff argues, ISIS may be defeated, but it will appear again in a different form. This cycle, in his words, 'will be repeated until Sunni governments, societies and communities effectively snuff out the mindset and circumstances that allow such extremism to take root.'²³

Apocalyptic rants from some radical Islamists should not distract us from the root causes of radicalism in this part of the world. The autocrats in the Arab world long played up the danger of radical Islam only to perpetuate their hold on power and maintain their relevance in the region. Many autocrats exploited the West's panic in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 to secure more Western support for their regimes. In other words, some Arab leaders have used Islamism as a scarecrow to frighten the west,²⁴ and this tactic has largely paid off. Many

¹⁹ Ibid., p.75.

²⁰ For more details on Arab attitudes towards ISIS, see the opinion poll conducted and published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/content/cb12264b-1eca-402b-926a-5d068ac60011> (last visited January 1, 2016)

²¹ See "In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS," Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis/> (last visited 9 January 2016). (it is worth pointing out that in Pakistan 28 per cent expressed an unfavorable view of ISIS whereas 62 per cent indicated no clear opinion)

²² For more details, see John Esposito & Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Muslims? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, Gallup Press, 2007

²³ Robert Satloff, 'Beyond the Oval Office: Filling in the Blanks of U.S. Strategy Against the Islamic State,' The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-the-oval-office-filling-in-the-blanks-of-u.s.-strategy-against-the-i> (last visited January 1, 2016).

²⁴ Jeffery Goldberg, 'The Modern King in the Arab Spring', *The Atlantic*, April 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/04/monarch-in-the-middle/309270/> (last visited December 2, 2015)

Western countries continue to support undemocratic regimes such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and later provide what is called security rent (money provided by outside government to maintain stability and security).

In his groundbreaking book *From Deep State to Islamic State*, Jean-Pierre Filiu argues that the various deep states have staged counter-revolutions to bring brought about the failure of the Arab Spring. This has led, in part, to the emergence of ISIS. In his words, ‘The Arab revolutions have been foiled – Tunisia apart – by successful counter-revolutions organized by the ‘deep state’. In Syria – as in Egypt and Yemen – the deep state is the hard core of a regime that strongly resembles those of the Mamluks in Egypt and the Levant long ago.’²⁵

The ebb and flow of the conduct of the autocrats has, in part, created the dynamic for the emergence of the Islamic state. According to Filiu, the Syrian neo-Mamluks are behind the rise of the Islamic state, not to mention the destruction of Syria.²⁶ The neo-Mamluk regimes played with Jihadi fire in their bid to defeat the Arab Spring. In doing so, they contributed to the emergence of ISIS. One cannot help but argue that authoritarian regimes and their readiness to tolerate, or indeed foster, *jihadi* groups are a key cause for the advent of ISIS.

If anything, the deep state acts beyond the law. It is as if those in charge of the deep state deem themselves as the custodians of the well being of the nation or a higher interest that justifies them in doing what it takes to keep the state intact and immune to change. Whether by design or default, the elite of the deep state believe that they should do what it takes. And this ‘to do what it takes’ attitude is rooted in a patrimonial view of the state itself, and the paternalistic view of the citizen. In fact, both views reflect the deep state actors’ view of collective self-interest. The term deep state refers to a series of opaque and indeed secretive actors or institutions within the state who control key policy decisions away from public scrutiny.

In both Egypt and Syria, for instance, the deep state could not be more obvious. The Egyptian counter-revolution was organized by the deep state partly to prevent the transformation of Egypt into a transparent democracy and partly to get rid of the Muslim Brotherhood once and for all. The military coup of July 2013 was the epitome of the interference of the deep state that could lead people to more radical views. On the other hand, the history of the Syrian regime is characterized by the manipulation of politics by the deep state. Thus it should not be surprising that the number of those who hold distaste for the regime is on the increase. Once a radical movement stepped in to capitalize on this state of despair, there is a chance that the disgruntled population would not oppose it.

²⁵ The original Mamluks ruled Egypt from 1250-1517 and Syria from 1260-1516. The original Mamluks gained legitimacy from a weak Caliph who remained under their control. By the same token, the modern Mamluks gained legitimacy from the popular ‘votes’ held under martial law. Filiu then links this categorization of the Mamluks to the concept of the *deep state* in contemporary Turkish history.

²⁶ For more details on how the neo-Mamluks appeared in Syria in the 1960s, see Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2015). In fact, ‘the historical process of power struggles that led to the consolidation of the modern Arab Mamluks, mainly in Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Yemen. Those four countries shared the same characteristics of a reframed nationalist narrative, a populist discourse, a ubiquitous repressive apparatus and a systematic plundering of national resources. More important, they extolled the virtues of the military as the dominant source of legitimacy, while the hegemonic ruling party organized regular plebiscites.’

2. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the emergence of ISIS as a non-state actor and its notorious savagery by examining the context rather than the ideology that has bred the radicalism of non-state actors, with particular emphasis on ISIS. It also places ISIS within the broader global jihadist movement.

The mantra that Salafi ideology generates terrorism became a convenient fig leaf for many autocratic Arab leaders who sought to use Islamism as a bogeyman. Evidently, autocratic leaders have linked Islamists and terrorism to scare the West, and created the impression that the alternative to their undemocratic regimes is not democracy but Islamist terror. When Western leaders accept this reasoning they make a cardinal error because it is inaccurate to view ISIS as a purely terrorist organization.

While ISIS is an extension of the broader global jihadist movement in terms of ideology and perspective, its political and social genesis is rooted in the heart of the Levant, particularly in Iraq and Syria. With the blend of Iraq-based al-Qa'ida and many former members of the all too hastily disbanded Iraqi army, one can talk about the Iraqization of the movement, which also accounts for its viciousness and lethal methods in addition to different priorities.

As well as being an Islamic problem, ISIS is a political one. The US-led occupation of Iraq brought about a rupture in Iraqi society, although sectarianism in the form of anti-Shi'ism had been a feature of Iraqi policies since the 1980s. Subsequent American policies – such as disbanding the army and de-Ba'athification – profoundly altered an increasingly fragile *status quo*. These ill-advised policies created a vacuum that triggered an unprecedented Sunni-Shi'i rift, allowing radical militants to gain a foothold.

The empowerment of Shi'is, and the failure to bring about political reconciliation among the warring Iraqi factions caused a rupture in Iraq's social fabric. Worse, the ascendance of Shi'is, coupled with the rise of Iran as the most influential actor in Iraq, led to the disempowerment of the Sunnis. All of the Sunnis' legitimate complaints fell on deaf ears as al-Maliki's government began harassing Iraq's Sunni communities and leaders. Not surprisingly, the Sunni feeling of abandonment and discrimination created an important opening for radical Islamists to step in and champion their claims. ISIS managed to instrumentalize Sunni grievances, and hence it was perceived as an actor capable of defending Sunnis in the face of the Iran-backed Shi'is, especially given the powerlessness of the state to protect them.

As examined in this chapter, ideology cannot be dismissed. However, there is a great deal of structural violence in both Iraq and Syria. The presence of unequal advantage in both Iraq *and* Syria is rooted in the political, economic, and social systems. Given the lack of democracy or respect for diversity and pluralism, there has been a degree of cultural violence that is linked to the prevalent conviction that violence can pay off. This had an opening when chaos descended on Iraq and Syria.

Of course, a full appreciation of ISIS and its relevance has to be linked to the long history of the existence of autocratic regimes in the conflict-torn zone in the Middle East. Therefore, one should focus more on political and social contexts rather than ideology. For this reason, ISIS' outreach campaign targets disgruntled Sunni youth while also focusing on the near enemy (Shi'is, other non-Sunni Muslim groups and 'heretical' non-Muslim minorities such as the Yazidis and *Ahl-i Haqq*).

There is no quick fix for the situation, but two points should be clear. First, ISIS is symptomatic of the dysfunctional political situation at the heart of the Levant and the spread of outsider-backed civil war in restive societies. Second, a solution to the Syrian conflict should put an end to the disintegration of the country and the continuation of the rivalry among warlords and militias. The continuation of the crisis – let alone the regional and global proxy wars in Syria – can, and will always provide ISIS with further ammunition. Seen in this way, one can argue that emasculating ISIS entails approaching the Sunnis with a different bottom-up approach to degrade ISIS. The Iraqi government, for instance, needs to work with ordinary Sunni citizens in order to have them internalize that the government is inclusive and for all Iraqis regardless of their ethnic or sectarian backgrounds. For this to materialize, Sunnis need to be assured that they have a stake in the central government in Baghdad. As long as Sunnis view the Iraqi government as the epitome of Iranian-backed Shi'i hegemony, ISIS and like-minded groups can exploit the rift not only in Iraq but also across the region.