

A STUDY IN THE RISE AND THREAT
OF THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took the international community by surprise in June 2014 by defeating the Iraqi military in multiple battles that culminated in the seizure of Mosul, Iraq on 10 June 2014. On 30 June 2014, ISIS publicly declared a Caliphate that stretches from northern Syria to the outskirts of Baghdad. This occurred due to corruption and sectarian strife of the Maliki regime, alongside the departure of US forces in 2011. The issue of ISIS is a sectarian issue 1,400 years in the making and likely to be unresolved short of overwhelming military force in Iraq and Syria combined with sweeping sectarian focused political changes.

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INTRODUCTION

The last fourteen years have been an intense roller-coaster ride for American citizens and policy makers with regard to terrorism. Prior to the “Manhattan Raid”¹ conducted by Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001 most Americans had little awareness of the bloody cosmic war we were being lured into. This is understandable when one considers, for example, that at the time experts in government and academia were operating on the classical paradigm of terrorism² in which we are all political actors, and thus camera time for the cause was the main objective. This is not to say that the mostly secularly motivated terrorists in the classical era were not lethal; rather, they understood that spilling blood and receiving negative press would hinder the accomplishment of their political objectives.

Sadly, we were too late to realize the paradigm had shifted significantly. Instead of mostly secular terrorists who wanted to further their cause through publicity stunts, we were and are faced with a new breed: intensely devout, religiously inspired terrorists that are engaging in a religious and ethnic genocide in order to fulfill apocalyptic prophecy, hastening the final battle of this world and the creation of a new era of life for all of us.³ In short, as the global political order evolved, so too did the grievances and ideologies of terrorists.

Not germane to one specific religion or philosophy, a central philosophy of modern terrorists is one in which the current order is so oppressive and hopeless that everything must be eliminated and renewed in the eyes of a God ostensibly seeking punishment and vengeance before a society built on love, peace and justice can be permanently cemented for

1. Bruce O. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), Kindle.

2. Peter R. Neumann, “Old and New Terrorism,” *Social Europe: The Journal of the European Left* 4, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 41–44, accessed April 12, 2015.

3. Ibid.

the true believers. One need only look at the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo, as well as any of the Islamist oriented groups to include Al Qaeda and its associated movements, as well as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, in order to understand that groups on divergent ends of the ideological spectrum both seek the same end result: the apocalypse.

Our situation has been compounded by the moral and intellectual dishonesty spoon fed to us on a regular basis by American political leaders, special interest groups, and network news talking heads bought and paid for by both sides of the aisle. We were told that Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda hated us for any of the following: our constitutionally provided freedom; our allegedly special relationship with Israel; our defense of the Saudi Kingdom from Saddam Hussein in 1991. As an aside, it is well known that Osama bin Laden felt personally slighted by the Saudis over their refusal to allow the fledgling jihadist mercenary force he championed, which would become Al Qaeda, to defend the Kingdom. Nonetheless, this one specific scenario is not what drove Al Qaeda to conduct 9/11, yet it did provide one more grievance for Bin Laden and his cronies to rationalize the global jihad. As we can quickly discern, there are elements of truth to all of this, but the composite picture is false.⁴

The truth is, as the European colonizers faded from history, they left behind a hodgepodge of so-called nation-states cobbled together based on political expediency for the colonizers. Another way to put it is this: colonized states were apportioned based on certain social cleavages endemic to each locale, which enabled an environment of divide and conquer to reign, all the while precious commodities were usurped by the colonizers. The end result has been a legacy of ethnic and religious hatred, particularly in the Arab Muslim

4. "Michael Scheuer," *The Diplomat*, last modified December 9, 2010, <http://thediplomat.com/2010/12/michael-scheuer/>.

world.

After World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled, and with it the last vestiges of a historical Muslim Caliphate going back to the 7th Century that ultimately stretched from Spain to China. Realistically the Ottoman Empire, particularly in its later years, was far from a Golden era for the Ummah (global body of Muslim believers), but to have the vanguard of all Muslims replaced by a secular Turkish state added insult to injury for Arab Muslims who had lost their collective sense of identity on the world stage. During the Cold War, as the Capitalists attempted to thwart the Communists, pan-Arabism and Socialism was peddled to the masses as a panacea to cure the loss of identity the Ummah had received via the Zionist colonizers. Yet this was proven to be a bogus system as well, especially in light of the astounding military victories Israel pulled off against its pan-Arab secular opponents time and time again. Specifically, the dominance of the Israeli Defense Forces against its Socialist Arab enemies combined with the authoritarian state run by Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser catalyzed the modern Islamist ideology, often referred to as political Islam.

Nasser was one of several Arab strongmen that muzzled society and erected police states in the name of stamping out the strain of Islamism championed by the Muslim Brotherhood. Ironically, the Soviet Union, of all actors, would be responsible for dropping the lit match inside the jihadist gas tank of the time. By fostering and eventually invading Afghanistan in order to prop up a Communist puppet regime, a centuries old lineage of Muslim theological philosophy was acted upon by state and non-state actors throughout the Muslim world. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia funded (and eventually the United States), recruited, trained and facilitated the infamous Mujahedeen rebels to battle the Godless Soviets.

During this decade long occupation, a Palestinian-born member of the Muslim

Brotherhood named Abdullah Azzam, espousing a Salafist-Jihadist prescription for defeating the Soviets, invoked an obligation for all able bodied Muslims to travel to Afghanistan and wage jihad in defense of the Ummah. Such a defensive jihad was obligatory for all Muslims to support in any way they were able to. Mr. Azzam's message resonated throughout the Muslim world, and he soon set up shop in Pakistan where he ran a clearinghouse for incoming jihadists to reclaim Afghanistan for the Muslims.

Soon, this ostensibly defensive jihad would attract a cerebral and pious young Saudi named Osama bin Laden. Osama came from a life of decadent wealth and privilege, yet he sacrificed all of it in the name of global jihad, quite literally becoming a man without a country after crossing the Saudi royal family. First of course, he earned his chops as not only a facilitator, but also a combat veteran against the Red Army. At the same time, Azzam, who also happened to be his former university professor, mentored him and connected him to the Mujahedeen network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Once the Russian Bear hobbled back home, Bin Laden had created a loose network of thousands of militarily experienced Muslims who fervently believed the Caliphate should be revived. This should be accomplished by first destroying the Far Enemy (America), followed by overthrowing apostate regimes in the Muslim world, before finally destroying Israel and liberating Jerusalem. This jihad would be waged by Bin Laden's men in the network, also known as Al Qaeda (The Base).⁵

After the Afghan jihad had transitioned from a united effort against the Soviets to a brutal internecine conflict amongst the various warlords and parties, a troubled young Jordanian named Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh, a hard drinking, tattooed street thug who became a devout Salafist in prison linked up with Al Qaeda trainers. Though very rough

5. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

around the edges, they saw the devotion, intensity and brutality in his eyes and after rotating back and forth (not to mention serving more prison time), he would be grudgingly accepted by bin Laden as an associate of Al Qaeda, with his own training camp in Herat. This man, who took the kunya (war name) of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, would literally change the course of history by bringing back Al Qaeda from near death, and unleashing a savage sectarian proxy war that was 1,400 years in the making. However, Bin Laden and his lieutenants were occupied with the sucker punch they were preparing for America.⁶

This, of course, culminated in the above-referenced “Manhattan Raid.” What Americans did not, and still largely do not realize is this: we are not dealing with terrorists. Rather, we are dealing with a global Muslim jihadist army, full of combat veterans, who live a creed that involves mass executions and subjugation of non-Muslims, particularly Western civilians, in order to reclaim the Caliphate.⁷ Not only did this ideology motivate the US government to invade and ostensibly destroy Al Qaeda’s lair in Afghanistan, but to also fabricate a nexus between these same Salafist-Jihadists and the secular Baathist regime in Iraq. This was under the rubric of a Global War on Terrorism. Again the dishonesty is telling: a global war waged on a tactic. The US government has never stated the obvious: we are at war with Muslim insurgents who will stop at nothing to kill innocent Americans, whether at home or abroad. This is not to say that all Muslims are terrorists, or that all terrorists are Muslims; rather our current enemy espouses a virulent global ideology bent on ushering in the apocalypse. It is, as has been stated so many times by its leaders, a culture of death, rather than our culture of life.

6. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

7. Michael F. Morris, “Al Qaeda as Insurgency,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 39 (Winter 2005): 41–50, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/jfq/1039.pdf>.

The invasion of Iraq was a gift to jihadists the world over. Al Qaeda, from 2001-2003, really was on the ropes and could have been wiped out completely had the US government doubled down on its efforts in Afghanistan. Instead, Operation Iraqi Freedom gave jihadists exactly what they wanted: a massive US troop invasion and occupation in one of the holiest areas of Islam.⁸ The result was a horrendous insurgency that was eventually reduced to a manageable level, only to be exacerbated by a petty tyrant, acting very much in the image of Saddam Hussein himself.

This set the stage for a seemingly phantom terrorist organization, once considered destroyed by the Arab Awakening during the Iraq War, to resurrect and smash the Iraqi Army in a matter of weeks. From January to July 2014, what used to be Al Qaeda in Iraq, what was once called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and what is now simply called the Islamic State, fought, consolidated and ruled a stretch of territory from the Turkish-Syrian border to the outskirts of Baghdad. This organization, which I will reference as ISIS, combined impressive infantry tactics and seasoned military campaign planning, with a brilliant yet disgusting information operations (or psychological operations) campaign. The end result was a paralyzed public commons.

Taking advantage of failed states in Syria and Iraq, ISIS did what Al Qaeda only dreamed of: using a level of violence unseen even during Operation Iraqi Freedom, it intimidated, killed and extorted its way to a declaration of Caliphate. On June 30, 2014 (nearly 11 years to the day L. Paul Bremer handed sovereignty back to the Iraqi government), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the emir of ISIS, appeared in Mosul to declare himself Caliph Ibrahim I. In turn, he demanded obedience and allegiance from all Muslims, declaring all remaining militant groups and nation-states null and void. He also pleaded for skilled

8. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

technicians, professionals, and military veterans to make hijrah (emigrate) to the Islamic State, in order to consolidate and govern, according to their strict Salafist code.⁹

As a result, a tidal wave of foreign fighters has landed in Syria and Iraq to overthrow the apostates, execute non-Salafi adherents, and set the stage for an American intervention in Dabiq, Syria, whereupon the world as we know it will soon end. The end result: the anti-Christ will reign until Jesus Christ (known as Isa bin Maryam) descends from Heaven to “break the Roman Cross” and usher in a utopian Muslim state of existence.¹⁰ The allure to potential jihadists is unprecedented and poses a significant risk of “home grown” attacks by those who have made hijrah to the Islamic State and returned, or those unable to do so, yet unwilling to kill an infidel. One need only look to the ISIS inspired terrorist attacks in Australia, France and Canada to realize the strategic messaging power possessed by al-Baghdadi and company, not to mention the numerous Americans who have been foiled in the execution of such plots here at home.

Additionally, the fusion of hard core Jihadists with skilled ex-Baathist Iraqi soldiers, special operators and intelligence assets has imposed on the world a fighting force on par with many nation states: highly technologically skilled and determined to usher in the end times by whatever means necessary. As the general terrorism paradigm shifted, so has the jihadist paradigm shifted. We have seen an evolution of “Bin Ladenism” from infrequent yet

9. Richard Barrett, “The Islamic State,” The Soufan Group, last modified November 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

10. Clarion Project, “Dabiq Issue 4: The Failed Crusade,” last modified September 2014, <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-isis-magazine-Issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>.

spectacular terrorist attacks, to the absolutely revolting killing machine that is ISIS.¹¹ Aside from all of their knowledge, skills and abilities, the most demoralizing aspect is this: foreign fighters who made hijrah with their families have showcased their children, young boys often between the ages of 7-12, committing online executions of captured Syrian, Iraqi and Kurdish fighters. Not only is this despicable, but it is also ensuring that the “Cubs of the Caliphate”, as they are called, will spawn an entirely new generation of males who will have grown up in this environment, where brutal murder is the norm, and all outsiders deserve to convert or die.¹² Such dehumanization is arguably beyond the pale of Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot. This poses a multi-generational threat, much like a replicating virus. Each mutation is stronger and more virulent than the previous, posing a significant threat to global security, American interests, and American citizens.

Additionally, I would be derelict in my duties as an analyst if I did not address a remarkably salient factor: the Sunni-Shia sectarian war going on before our very eyes. The conflict between the two will be examined in Chapter I, yet it is crucial to understand that Zarqawi, and those who follow in his example, are dead set on starting a war between Sunnis and Shias that will not only serve their own organizational purposes, but also as addressed above, usher in the apocalypse. That being said, the acrimonious relationship between the United States government, the Iranian leadership and their partners in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, is something that must not be ignored. Even if the US-led Coalition, in concert with Iraqi led fighters, absolutely destroy ISIS’ leadership and infrastructure, the Sunni-Shia war

11. David Ignatius, “How Osama bin Laden is Winning, Even in Death,” *Washington Post*, last modified April 27, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-osama-bin-laden-is-winning-even-in-death/2012/04/27/gIQAtTMFmT_story.html.

12. The Soufan Group, “TSG IntelBrief: The Cubs of the Caliphate,” last modified March 12, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-cubs-of-the-caliphate/>.

will still be red hot. If the US is not careful, our forces and employees in the region could yet again be targeted by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps formations, or their proxy militias. At the end of the day, the enemy of my enemy is still my enemy.

This thesis will examine the creation and transformation of ISIS and implications for global security. Specifically, it will be broken up into five chapters: An examination of the Salafist-Islamist ideology within Islam (Chapter I); The significance of the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the primacy he still holds in ISIS (Chapter II); The political and security fallout from America's 2003 invasion of Iraq (Chapter III); How and why ISIS was able to regroup after the Sunni Arab Awakening and American Surge (Chapter IV); How and when our conflict with ISIS ends (Chapter V).

My thesis statement is this: The circumstances that led to the creation of ISIS did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is the latest segment of a 1,400 year old sectarian war between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This has been compounded by the manner in which the Global War on Terrorism was prosecuted, particularly with the execution of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The resulting social cleavages, which had been camouflaged by the reign of Saddam Hussein, reignited centuries old conflicts, which were exacerbated by an inept American occupation and an endemic culture of corruption and sectarianism within Iraqi politics. In its current form, the dynamics of our battle with ISIS have been overtaken by a power struggle between the Iranian Axis of Resistance (Shia) and the Saudi-led Gulf Arab States (Sunni). ISIS cannot be truly defeated until the underlying historical, political and social conditions germane to the Muslim world are mitigated. Until then, the conflict will rage on.

CHAPTER I

THE JIHADIST PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFT WITHIN ISLAM

The United States is renowned for its martial prowess, toughness, freedom and resourcefulness with regard to the profession of arms, as well as life in general. However, we are sorely lacking when it comes to situational awareness of emerging and present threats. When it comes to the Salafist-Islamists embodied by Al Qaeda and its progeny ISIS, by and large as a society and government we are still sorely lacking in a basic understanding of what motivates our enemies. This is a completely avoidable and unacceptable situation, and one which has and will continue to have deadly consequences, fraught with policy blunders and myopic strategic planning. No one will dispute that pre and post 9/11, our enemies have used their significant knowledge of American history, culture and motivations to their advantage, much like a skilled Judoka or Aikidoka would combine their technical proficiency with the momentum of a blundering assailant to emerge victorious. That being said, in order to have a fighting chance at mitigating the threat from ISIS and its supporters, we must have a basic understanding of the philosophical shift in Islam that began in the 7th century and in particular since the 19th century, has been repackaged as a rallying cry against modernity, Western civilization and all Muslims who disagree with the austere and brutal lifestyle imposed on them by the Salafists.

The First Sunni Rebellion

The foundation of the Islamic religion was a truly significant moment in world history; not only did the Prophet Mohammed conquer and unite the Arabian peninsula in the interests of submission to Allah, but he also set in motion a jealously monolithic religion which seeks dominance of the entire world. According to terrorism expert Walid Phares in

his book *The Coming Revolution: Struggle for Freedom in the Middle East* (2010), “Mohammed presented the Arabian society, particularly in Mecca, which was the economic capital of the Peninsula, as a universal system for faith and society (*al Islam deen was dawla*). The way it was structured, the expansion of the *deen* (religion) had to be managed, organized, and sanctioned by the *dawla* (state).”¹

The key point from Mr. Phares is this: due to Islam’s place as the third and newest Abrahamic religion, it stood to reason that it has replaced Judaism and Christianity, once and for all. As Bernard Lewis states in *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (2004), “the message was clear. In the Muslim perception, the Jews and later the Christians had gone astray and had followed false doctrines. Both religions were therefore superseded, and replaced by Islam, the final and perfect revelation in God’s sequence.”²

This self-declared position of religious primacy necessitated a system for further expansion and strength once the Prophet Mohammed was no longer alive to spread the message of Islam. This became a reality circa 632 C.E., when Mohammed did indeed pass away, leaving his followers and family to map out the future of the young religion. The end result was the Caliphate system, which spread its influence and dominance throughout the world for thirteen centuries. A key point for Americans to remember is this: Islam is not just a religion, but instead is an entire lifestyle that encompasses politics, religion, social mores and values. We as a society have become accustomed to a division between religion and government, but this is anathema to the Caliphate. Phares sheds more light on this vital point:

1. Walid Phares, “The Missed Century: How the Democratic Revolution Failed During the Twentieth Century,” in *The Coming Revolution: Struggle for Freedom in the Middle East* (New York: Pocket Books, 2010), Kindle.

2. Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004).

“In Arabic, the word for successor is *Khalifa*, or caliph. The institution of the Caliph is *al Khilafah* or the Caliphate. It has two dimensions: The first is the legal and theological structure of the *Umma*’s top spiritual office, which is comparable to the ‘papacy’, ‘monarchy’, or ‘presidency.’; the second is the entire land and resources covered by the authority of the Caliph, as in ‘empire.’ The geopolitical sense of the Caliphate is ‘empire.’”³

The Caliphate ‘empire’, though it was at first led by the Prophet Muhammad’s closest friends and advisors, was off to a rough start. This is not to say that the Caliphate was unsuccessful; on the contrary, by the 8th century, most of the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and even portions of Europe were under the sway of the Caliphate and, “the conquering Arab armies were even advancing beyond the Pyrenees into France.”⁴

However, of the first four Caliphs (known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs or Rashidun), three were either assassinated or killed in battle. This became problematic due to the lack of a succession plan being bequeathed to the Ummah by the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, the Rashidun were all members of Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh, and often times close relatives by blood and/or marriage.⁵ It is with the fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abu Talib, that we turn our attention. His life, or rather the end of his life, was a monumental event in Islamic and world history, and would in fact create a grievance that has caused tens of thousands of deaths at the hands of Jihadists around the world.

A Changing of the Guard

On 19th Ramadan in the year 661 CE, Caliph Ali was assassinated as he led prayers

3. Phares, *The Coming Revolution*.

4. Lewis, *Crisis of Islam*, 34.

5. “Rightly Guided Caliphs,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito, *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2018>.

in Kufa, Iraq. In the crowd of worshippers was an assassin named Abdur Rahman bin Muljam, one of the lone survivors of a sect known as the Khawarij, or Renegades.⁶ The motive behind the assassination was wartime revenge. According to Ghaffar Hussain, “a few years earlier, in 37 AH (CE 657), Ali had temporarily ended hostilities with his long-time rival Muawiyah, through arbitration. As Ali and his army marched back to Kufa, a group of 12,000 men kept their distance from the main part of the army- they were not happy with the way things had ended. They denounced Ali and Muawiyah for accepting arbitration as a means of resolving hostilities because in their view, only God could decide such matters.”⁷ This aversion to arbitration is something that has become a key tenet of modern Salafist philosophy, and has become a main argument in the case of overthrowing apostate regimes. As such, the Khawarij coined the rallying cry of “La Hukma Illa Lillah, which means No Rule Except by Allah.”⁸ Eventually, Ali and his army faced down the 12,000 strong Khawarij force with overwhelming force at the Battle of Nahrawan in 658 CE. The force was so overwhelming in fact, that only nine men from the Khawarij survived the battle.

Of course, Abdur Rahman was one of the nine survivors and from that day forward made it his goal to avenge the Battle of Nahrawan. As he attacked Caliph Ali from behind with a poison tipped sword, Abdur Rahman screamed, “Authority belongs to God, Ali, not to you.”⁹ The end result was a civil war which, according to Walid Phares, “exploded...between the ‘partisans’ of Ali [who] became the Shia, and those who opposed them became the

6. Ghaffar Hussain, “A Brief History of Islamism,” Quilliam Foundation, January 1, 2010, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/brief-history-of-islamism.pdf>.

7. Ibid., 1.

8. Hussain, “A Brief History of Islamism,” 1.

9. Ibid.

Sunnis.”¹⁰ Thus with the thrust of a sword, the Ummah was split between Sunni and Shia, consecrating an acrimonious sectarian war for leadership of Islam. This war has endured and 1,358 years after it began, it has snared America into a street fight amongst Islamists who not only want to destroy each other, but also to destroy the West, in order to resurrect the Caliphate and dominate the world.

While the Caliphate was dominated by Sunni Arabs, it became embroiled in Christendom’s Crusades, which resulted in an eternal perception by Muslims (in general) that the “People of the Book” (Christians and Jews) were bloodthirsty warriors who only wanted to dominate and exterminate Muslims and plunder their resources. According to Bernard Lewis, by the end of the Crusades, “the jihad had become almost entirely defensive--resisting the Reconquest in Spain and Russia, resisting the movements for national self-liberation by the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire, and finally, as Muslims see it, defending the very heartlands of Islam against infidel attack. This phase has come to be known as imperialism.”¹¹ Coinciding with this imperialism, the Caliphate underwent a dramatic shift in leadership from Arabs, to Mongols, and eventually power was claimed by Turks, who instituted the Ottoman Empire in 1517 CE.¹²

The Ottoman Empire would lead the Ummah through World War I, but its political decline ushered in an opportunity for Western Colonizers to assist in the degradation and destruction of the Caliphate. This clash between largely secular Western modernity and the Muslim Caliphate would cause many Muslim philosophers to theorize about how to either coexist or repulse the Infidel colonizers. From this, a chain of thinkers from Jamal al-din al-

10. Phares, *The Coming Revolution*

11. Lewis, *Crisis of Islam*, 35-36.

12. Phares, *The Coming Revolution*.

Afghani to Abdullah Azzam would craft an aggressive justification for jihad and global dominance, in the name of reversing Western dominance and corruption. However, before we examine these men and the ideological and theological lineage whose ideas have been adopted by modern day Islamists in their struggle to resurrect the glory days of the earliest Muslims, we must first look back to medieval times and address the most significant Muslim scholar with regard to the current Salafist trend, Taqi al-din Ibn Taymiyya.

The Original Salafist

Taqi al-din Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) was and is a revolutionary figure in Islam. Born in 13th century Harran, Syria to a prominent family of Muslim scholars subscribing to the Hanbali School of jurisprudence, he followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and quickly showed his aptitude as a theologian.¹³ However, it was the circumstances of his childhood that cemented his significance as a scholar. To say it was a time of strife is an understatement.

According to LTC James P. Nelson, “The Crusaders had not been fully expelled from the region and the effects of Christian thought and western logic were diminishing the practice(s) of Islam. The Mongols had all but destroyed Islam in the eastern empire when they conquered Baghdad in AD 1258.”¹⁴ Additionally, “In Egypt the Mamlukes were in power and had consolidated their hold over Syria. Within Muslim society, various Sufi orders were spreading beliefs and practices not condoned by orthodox Islam, while the orthodox schools of jurisprudence were ineffective in their messages on religious thought and

13. James Pavlin, “Ibn Taymiyya, Taqi Al-Din (1263-1328),” *Islamic Philosophy*, 1998, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H039.htm>.

14. James P. Nelson, “X-LAM: Roots of Terror and the Battle Ahead,” *Defense Technical Information Center*, August 6, 2002, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA404497>.

practice.”¹⁵

Further, due to the Mongol invasion of his homeland, when he was seven years old his family relocated to Damascus, Syria. While his father served as the head of the Sukkarayiah Madrasah, Ibn Taymiyyah prodigiously mastered every subject of Islam and the Quran. He reportedly also mastered advanced mathematics, Greek philosophy and the Hanbali jurisprudence. Due to his status as a master academician, he eventually transcended the confines of not only the Hanbali, but also the other three Islamic schools of jurisprudence as well, considered a *Mujtahid* or original thinker.¹⁶ In essence, he was a Renaissance man above all else. He was also a bold man, willing to speak and act on the convictions of his heart. As such, his religious conviction was quite simple: all of life was explained and managed by the Quran and the Sunnah.¹⁷ This literalist interpretation of Islam left no margin for modernity or co-habitation with non-Muslims. Taymiyyah would expound on this literalist lifestyle and use it as justification to wage a jihad against the Mongol invaders.

However, the proposition to wage jihad against the Mongols was quite controversial due to the fact that they had recently converted to Islam. According to Christopher Henzel, “Ibn Taymiyya reasoned that because the Mongol ruler permitted some aspects of tribal law to persist alongside the Islamic *Shariah* code, the Mongols were apostates to Islam and

15. James P. Nelson, “X-LAM: Roots of Terror and the Battle Ahead,” Defense Technical Information Center, August 6, 2002, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA404497>.

16. Ibn Taimiyah and Sheikh Ul-Islam, “Text on the Fundamental Beliefs of Islam and Rejection of False Concepts of Its Opponents,” Kalamullah.com, 1996, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Sharh-Al-Aqeedat-il-Wasitiyah.pdf>.

17. Ibid.

therefore legitimate targets of jihad.”¹⁸ This was a controversial move based on the Quranic prohibition of Muslims killing fellow Muslims. Additionally, this could be considered precedent for the *Takfir* ideology that became so popular amongst Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Al Qaeda in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. By invoking *Takfir*, one Muslim is essentially calling out a fellow Muslim and accusing them of not being true Muslims. This is what transpired between Taymiyyah and the Mongols, and something that has transpired persistently for the last two decades, with the most current example being the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Nonetheless, Taymiyyah did eventually wage jihad against the Mongol forces and became a celebrated figure amongst Muslims of the time and scholars of jurisprudence. Though Taymiyyah was focused primarily on his perception of Mongols as apostates, his enmity did not end there. Since Islam was perceived to have replaced Judaism and Christianity, he was quite angry that they had not abandoned their religion and submitted to Islam. Sufi orders also raised his ire, due to the perception that they were mystics and thus did not truly believe as true Muslims should.

Ibn Taymiyyah was a prolific writer, and his ideas made a revolutionary impact throughout the Muslim world. Mohammad Ibn Abd al Wahab immersed himself in Taymiyyah’s example and essentially focused what would become Wahabbism around the core ideas of Taymiyyah. And what were the core ideas that inspired Wahabbism?

According to former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer, “[Taymiyyah] said jihad was the responsibility of each individual when Islam was attacked by non-Muslims, when Muslim rulers were ungodly, when they ruled by man-made law rather than Sharia, and when they

18. Christopher Henzel, “The Origins of Al Qaeda’s Ideology: Implications for US Strategy,” Defense Technical Information Center, 2005, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA486421>.

oppressed their subjects.”¹⁹ Steven Simon goes even further by assessing that Taymiyyah essentially made jihad the sixth pillar of Islam, elevating “physical combat against unbelievers...to the rank of the canonical five pillars of Islam.”²⁰

The ideas propagated by Ibn Taymiyyah were the catalyst for an ideological and theological lineage that begins, as we will see below, in the 19th century and really picked up momentum in mid-20th century Egypt when the Muslim Brotherhood incorporated and utilized his philosophy. As noted above, Wahabbism which is essentially the state religion of Saudi Arabia, is heavily influenced by Taymiyyah. In turn, the Afghan Arabs of the anti-Soviet jihad would dust off Taymiyyah’s case for compulsory jihad against the “near enemy”, eventually transforming into Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda’s “far enemy” concept of jihad. Of course, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was a zealous believer in Taymiyyah’s philosophy and it is firmly ensconced in the guiding principles of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s ISIS.

Though he did not refer to himself as such, Ibn Taymiyyah could well be considered the first Salafist in Muslim philosophy. His strict adherence to the Sunnah and dedication to a life in the literal image of the Prophet Mohammad certainly make him a pioneer for modern adherents of Salafism, particularly those who use it to legitimize terrorism in the name of religion.

Having examined the significance of Ibn Taymiyyah, we will now delve into the events and leaders that encapsulated and preserved his ideas to be consumed by modern Salafist-

19. “Chapter 6: The Young Bin Laden, 1957–1979: Family, Education, And Religion,” in *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2002).

20. Steven Simon, “The New Terrorism: Securing the Nation Against a Messianic Foe,” Brookings Institute, 2003, accessed June 28, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2003/01/winter-terrorism-simon>.

Jihadists.

What Was Old Is New Again

By the early 19th century, European colonizers had by and large infiltrated the Ottoman Caliphate. This is highlighted by Napoleon Bonaparte's arrival and conquering of Egypt in 1798.²¹ Lewis provides a telling vignette of the dominance quickly established by Colonial rivals in the Muslim world: "But for a small Western force to invade one of the heartlands of Islam was a profound shock. The departure of the French was, in a sense, an even greater shock. They were forced to leave Egypt not by the Egyptians, nor by their suzerains the Turks, but by a small squadron of the British Royal Navy." This was, according to Lewis "the second bitter lesson the Muslims had to learn: Not only could a Western power arrive, invade, and rule at will but only another Western power could get it out."²²

Eventually, Western colonizers would begin to slowly suffocate Ottoman hegemony and sovereignty, from the Levant to the Horn of Africa. As one might imagine, those under Colonial rule may not have welcomed such interference. Politics aside, Islam is not amenable to loss of power and territory, thus this was quite a traumatic occurrence for the Ummah.

This ushered in an era of Pan-Islamism "as a form of resistance to European colonialism."²³ Specifically, this was championed by Jamal al-din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Afghani (1837-1897) and his student Abduh (1849-1905), "maintained that whilst Muslims needed to adopt certain ideas from the West in order to progress, they should also formulate a Muslim response to Western cultural and political hegemony."²⁴

21. Lewis, *Crisis of Islam*, 54.

22. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

23. Hussain, *History of Islamism*, 1.

24. *Ibid.*, 1–2.

Afghani and Abduh, as one may ascertain from their thought processes, were not opposed to using logic and rationality, in concert with Islam and modernity. In fact, they were often referred to as neo-Mutazilites, a nod to the 8th century Muslim rationalists. They did however, “suggest that Muslims should reject the blind following of earlier Muslim authorities, whom they accused of deviating from the true message of Islam.”²⁵ Once again we are presented with yet another common theme amongst Islamists: the deviation from true Islam. This stance that somehow Islam as it was intended to be practiced and administered was corrupted, is an idea that would eventually spark the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 20th century.

Abduh would in turn influence Rashid Rida (1865-1935), the founder of *Al Manar* magazine. Rida recognized that, according to his perception, the Ummah was being held back due to European colonization in the Middle East. Specifically, he lamented the “failure to achieve progress in science and technology.” He also advocated for a return to the glory days of the Rashidun, with a conviction that “these weaknesses could only be surmounted by a return to what he saw as ‘true Islam.’ An Islam purged of Pagan and Western influences, as practiced by the first generation of Muslims, an Islam that was in tune with the needs of modern society.”²⁶ Rida had the opportunity to influence a multitude of young men who perceived the Ummah the same way he did. This influence lay in the pages of *Al Manar*, and it just so happened that one Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) was a devout reader of Rida’s publication.²⁷

It is important to pause and take note of one thing: the gentlemen discussed above

25. Hussain, *History of Islamism*, 1–2.

26. Hussain, *History of Islamism*, 1.

27. Ibid.

(Afghani, Abduh, Rida) are considered the first modern proponents of the Salafist movement, known as *Salafīyya*. Essentially, it references a desire to return to a world and lifestyle explicitly modeled on that which occurred during the time which Mohammed and his companions blazed the trail for Islam. Al-Bannah is significant because he immersed himself in the Salafist philosophy, and created an organization which would ultimately be responsible, at least from an ideological standpoint, for the creation of Al Qaeda and ISIS. In short, Mr. Bannah's words and ideas would ultimately shed much blood. The uncompromising austerity of Salafism combined with al-Bannah's virulent anti-Colonialism to launch an organization built on jihad and resurrecting the Caliphate.²⁸

The Muslim Brotherhood, or *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen* was founded in March 1928 in Cairo, Egypt. The motto adopted by al-Bannah and the Brotherhood is quite telling: "God is our goal, the Quran is our Constitution, the Prophet is our leader, struggle [jihad] is our way, and death in the service of God is the loftiest of our wishes. God is great. God is great."²⁹ Al-Bannah was adamant that Islam should not only roll back the onslaught of Western Colonization, but it should also conquer the world. Specifically, he stated "It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its law on all nations and to extend its power to the entire planet."³⁰ Again, beginning with the Khawarij in 7th century Arabia, a steady and sequential lineage of Sunni Salafist ideology began to fray the nerves of the Ummah, slowly raising the heat in the cauldron of anger until it would boil over in global violent expression.

28. "The Muslim Brotherhood," The Investigative Project on Terrorism, June 17, 2008, accessed April 15, 2015, <https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/135.pdf>.

29. "The Muslim Brotherhood," 1.

30. Ibid.

Yet, until this expression began to happen, we must note one thing: as sobering as the early Ikhwan motto was, along with al-Bannah's statements, he alone is not responsible for the willingness to use unadulterated violence in the reclamation of the Caliphate. That honor would fall to Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Before we assess Mr. Qutb's relevance to this topic, it is only fair to state a truth about the Brotherhood: it did not start out as, nor did it completely evolve into, a terrorist organization along the lines of Al Qaeda. While the Brotherhood certainly would find itself in the crosshairs of many Arab regimes, it did combine Islam with the populist leftist politics popular at the time to organize itself as a community building organization.

In fact, according to Ghaffar Hossain, "over the next two decades, al-Bannah worked relentlessly at the grassroots level to establish a complex but structured organization that propagated its ideas effectively. The Ikhwan attached itself to, and built strategic relations with mosques, welfare associations and neighborhood groups, whilst seeking to influence existing activists with its revolutionary ideas. By joining local cells, members could access a well-established and well-resourced community of activists who would help them in all aspects of their lives. The foundations of what we know as Islamism were being laid."³¹ This foundation would not only influence the likes of Qutb, but through his example, the likes of Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abdullah Azzam, and Osama bin Laden. Mr. Bin Laden's reputation and influence precedes itself; suffice it to say, al-Bannah and the Salafists could certainly be considered the Godfathers of jihad.

Sayyid Qutb started out as an unlikely jihadist. Prior to his ascendancy in the Brotherhood, he was a school teacher in Egypt, and actually spent time in the United States on a fellowship to study the American educational system, earning a Master's degree from

31. Hossain, *Islamism*, 2.

the University of Northern Colorado. Upon his return, he wrote a book titled *The America I Have Seen: In The Scale Of Human Values* (1951) in which he expressed his absolute disgust at the decadent and decaying American society. Considering the era in which he visited, for an American it is rather amusing to read the litany of charges against 1950s American society. Nonetheless, this was an important milestone that assisted in his ideological transformation. Throughout the book, he credits America with being hardworking and resourceful, but lacking of cultural values.

For example, he observed “when humanity closes the windows to faith in religion, faith in art, and faith in spiritual values altogether, there remains no outlet for its energy to be expended except in the realm of applied science and labor, or to be dissipated in sensual pleasure. And this is where America has ended up after four hundred years.”³²

Eventually Qutb resigned from his position as an educator, and dedicated his life to the Brotherhood. After Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser and his compatriots took power in Egypt, the Brotherhood was scorned by Nasser and his Pan-Arab duplicity. As would become a common tactic, a member of the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Nasser. In return, he and his regime went on the offensive, imprisoning massive amounts of Ikhwan members.

Qutb just so happened to be arrested, and “during his first three year in prison, [Qutb] was made to reside in appalling conditions and was routinely beaten and tortured. This, however, only strengthened his resolve and conviction that only Islamism could rescue Egypt

32. Sayyid Qutb, “The America I Have Seen: In The Scale Of Human Values,” *Sociology of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Portland State University, January 1, 1951, accessed April 15, 2015, [http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.sociologyofislam/files/media_assets/The America I Have Seen Sayyid Qutb Ustad.pdf](http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.sociologyofislam/files/media_assets/The_America_I_Have_Seen_Sayyid_Qutb_Ustad.pdf).

from the ‘new pharaohs.’³³ All in all, he would spend a decade languishing in prison, focusing his time on writing and refining his ideological convictions.

One of the books that he wrote in prison became, perhaps, the defining work in the modern Islamist movement: *Milestones* (1964) introduced the world to Qutb’s theory of *Jahiliyyah*. *Jahiliyyah* is the admission that the Ummah and the world writ large had descended into a state of ignorance and corruption, much like the pagan tribes that would be conquered by the Prophet Muhammad and Islam. With regard to what constitutes a Jahili society, Qutb posits “the jahili society is any society other than the Muslim society...any society is a jahili society which does not dedicate itself to submission to God alone, in its beliefs and ideas in its observances of worship, and in its legal regulations.”³⁴ Qutb uses this definition as a basis for declaring the entire world to be in a jahili state, thus ripe for the resurrection of the Caliphate.

He then addresses all of the current Muslim states, by way of informing them of their jahili status as well: “their way of life is not based on submission to God alone. Although they believe in the Unity of God, still they have relegated the legislative attribute of God to others and submit to this authority, and from this authority they derive their systems, their traditions and customs, their laws, their values and standards, and almost every practice of life.”³⁵ This is quite a fascinating passage because it is very much in tune with the

33. Sayyid Qutb, “The America I Have Seen: In The Scale Of Human Values,” *Sociology of Islam and Muslim Societies*, Portland State University, January 1, 1951, accessed April 15, 2015, [http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.sociologyofislam/files/media_assets/The America I Have Seen Sayyid Qutb Ustad.pdf](http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.sociologyofislam/files/media_assets/The_America_I_Have_Seen_Sayyid_Qutb_Ustad.pdf).

34. Sayyid Qutb, “Milestones,” *Izharudeen*, January 1, 1964, accessed April 15, 2015, http://www.izharudeen.com/uploads/4/1/2/2/4122615/milestones_www.izharudeen.com.pdf.

35. *Ibid.*, 66.

condemnation of Ali by the Khawarijites, in particular his assassin Abdur Rahman. This stance of complete aversion to manmade authority or legislation which took prominence in the 7th century, was repackaged by Qutb as a rallying cry for overthrowing the apostate regimes in the Ummah.

Qutb continues his thesis by reducing the world into two spheres: the enlightened Islamic world, and the knuckle dragging, decadent jahiliyyah world. As such, “there is only one place on earth which can be called the home of Islam (Dar-ul-Islam), and it is that place where the Islamic state is established and the Shariah is the authority and God’s limits are observed, and where all the Muslims administer the affairs of the state with mutual consultation. The rest of the world is the home of hostility (Dar-ul-Harb). A Muslim can only have two possible relations with Dar-ul-Harb: peace with a contractual agreement, or war. A country with which there is a treaty will not be considered the home of Islam.”³⁶

This simplistic reduction of the world into black and white was and is an insidiously threatening idea. This is largely due to the fact that unlike the Shia side of the house, Sunni Muslims have no recognized clergy. Thus, a highly influential philosopher like Qutb, though not a cleric, can legitimately claim that war be enacted upon non-Muslims, or at the very least subjugating religious minorities to 2nd class dhimmi status. This very idea has been used by Bin Laden, Zawahiri, Zarqawi, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to legitimize and socialize their uber violent, apocalyptic vision for the world. In fact, Qutb proposed a Muslim vanguard rise up and eradicate the jahili society.³⁷

Nasser realized the devastating potential that Qutb’s vision possessed, and after a decade of imprisonment, Qutb was convicted of treason and summarily executed in 1966. In

36. Qutb, “Milestones,” 66.

37. Investigative Project, 8.

the aftermath of his death, many Brothers made a mass exodus to the Arabian Peninsula, including his brother Mohammed, who would eventually become a university lecturer in Saudi Arabia. He would ensure that his brother's unpublished works would be have widest dissemination, in turn creating an almost mythic cult of personality on behalf of Sayyid that goes on to this day. Not only would his colleague Abdullah Azzam make his mark upon the world, but Mohammed would have the great honor of mentoring a young Osama bin Laden in the ways of Salafiyah. Thus, Sayyid Qutb's legacy lives on to this day, through the words and deeds of the global jihadist insurgency that we have been engaged with since September 11th, 2001.

As impressive and significant as Qutb was, Abdullah Azzam is without question, one of the most significant ideologues in modern jihadist history. While his beliefs were very much in line with Qutb, he took the idea of jihad and crafted it into a recruiting magnet for the Afghan jihad. Aside from this, Azzam was simply a remarkable person. Born and raised in the West Bank, the rest of his life was shaped by his experiences growing up in the Palestinian territories. A budding Shariah scholar, Azzam went into self-imposed exile after the Six Days War of 1967. According to Islamist terrorism expert Thomas Hegghammer, "his exile in 1967 made him an aggrieved and rootless 'citizen of the Islamic world.'"³⁸

Moreover, after resuming his legal studies in Jordan, he soon directly involved himself in the anti-Israeli Fedayeen movement. Leaving his young family for the battlefield, he spent 1969-1970 in the field with the Jordanian Fedayeen engaging in combat against the Israel Defense Forces. This is a significant milestone for him and the movement because it, in the parlance of our times, gave him "street cred." All of the philosophers mentioned in this chapter are meaningful to the Salafist movement in their own right, largely through influence

38. Investigative Project, 8.

via the written and spoken word. Azzam has this as well, but dropping everything to wage jihad against the Israelis brings an entirely different level of respect from his fellow jihadists. Hegghammer states that “Azzam’s decision to join the Afghan jihad is often described as a case of cleric-turned-warrior, but in reality, Azzam had been a warrior before he became a cleric.”³⁹

In order to truly understand just how Azzam changed the perception of jihad, we must go straight to the source; Azzam, who had a Doctorate in Shariah (studying and teaching in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia), wrote several books about Islamism. One of his more remarkable works, titled *Defense of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation After Iman* makes a compelling argument for engaging in obligatory offensive jihad against all infidels. Within this work, Azzam heavily references quotes from Ibn Taymiyyah, a 13th century theologian who demanded a “literal interpretation of scripture” and also denigrated Sufis and the invading Mongols, even going so far as to declare fatwas “against them as unbelievers at heart despite claims to be Muslim.”⁴⁰ Thus, Azzam perpetually reinforces the message that “the first obligation after iman is the repulsion of the enemy aggressor who assaults the religion and the worldly affairs.”⁴¹ The primacy of this cannot be overstated. This is the first line in the first page of the first chapter for one reason: to underscore the centrality of jihad to being a pious believer. Specifically, Iman refers to the basic belief in the tenets of Islam that all Muslims profess and ostensibly live by. Thus, performing and living by the five pillars,

39. Investigative Project, 367.

40. John L. Esposito, ed., “Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqi al-Din Ahmad,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam in the Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e959>.

41. Abdullah Azzam, “Defense of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation After Iman,” Kalamullah.com, accessed April 16, 2015, <http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/defence.pdf>.

the Quran, the Sunnah, etc., should be the nucleus of a pious life. However, running the infidels out of the former Caliphate is the next most important part of any Muslim's life. In short, jihad is the only way to live a pleasing life to Allah.

Azzam then introduces the concepts of *Fard Kifaya* and *Fard Ayn*. *Fard Kifaya*, or offensive jihad, is not mandatory for all Muslims to engage in. However, it is mandatory for some sort of military formation to engage the *Kuffar* at least once a year. There are a few caveats: 1) this only occurs when the *Kuffar* are not engaging in offensive action against Muslims; 2) this is often used to collect *jizya* (a mandatory tax paid by non-Muslims); 3) failure of the Ummah to comply is a sin.⁴² With regard to *Fard Ayn*, or defensive jihad, it is “the most important of the compulsory duties” and to be clear, it is “compulsory for all.” This jihad is executed when one of four conditions is met: “1) If the *Kuffar* enter a land of the Muslims; 2) If the rows meet in battle and they begin to approach each other; 3) If the imam calls a person or a people to march forward then they must march; 4) If the *Kuffar* capture and imprison a group of Muslims.”⁴³

Azzam reiterates the importance of defensive jihad thusly: “If the *Kuffar* infringe upon a hand span of Muslim land, jihad becomes *Fard Ayn* for its people and for those nearby. If they fail to repel the *Kuffar* due to lack of resources or due to indolence, then the *Fara'id* of jihad spreads to those behind, and carries on spreading in this process, until the jihad is *Fard Ayn* upon the whole earth from the East to the West.”⁴⁴ He then leverages the request for forces in Afghanistan and Palestine into a mandate from God. He makes no secret of his preference to wage jihad in Palestine first. However, he admits that Afghanistan would

42. Azzam, “Defense of the Muslim Lands,” 15.

43. *Ibid.*, 15.

44. *Ibid.*

be a better jihad destination for most Muslims. Many justifications for joining the Afghan theater are given, but one is of paramount significance: the goal of the Mujahideen is to build an Islamic state in Afghanistan; a state which would then be used as a springboard to liberate Palestine, and eventually reclaiming the much sought after Caliphate.

Additionally, the Afghan jihad was considered pure as compared to the Palestinian situation which “has been appropriated by a variety of people, of them sincere Muslims, communists, nationalists, and modernist Muslims. Together they have hoisted the banner of a secular state.”⁴⁵ It goes without saying that any state not under Shariah is verboten to Islamists, hence the intense focus on Afghanistan.

Azzam did a masterful job of crafting a narrative of obligatory jihad which, though defensive in name, was truly offensive due to its status as mandatory for all Muslims, in addition to the makeup of the modern international community, in which the Caliphate no longer exists and the US military and her allies reside in numerous areas throughout the Muslim world. Taking a cue from Qutb, he reminds us that “unfortunately, when we think about Islam we think nationalistically. We fail to let our vision pass beyond geographic borders that have been drawn up for us by the Kuffar.”⁴⁶

This comprehensive argument for advancing the Islamist ideology caught on like wildfire amongst the so called Afghan Arabs. Truly, Azzam’s reputation preceded him and he became the key jihadist facilitator in the Afghan jihad. Not only was he responsible for the astronomical inflow of donor funds to the Mujahideen via his reputation with Gulf Arab supporters, but his friendship with Osama bin Laden is something that truly changed the course of history. Many would argue, without much opposition, that had he not been

45. Azzam, “Defense of the Muslim Lands,” 25.

46. Ibid., 37.

assassinated in 1989, Azzam would have eclipsed Bin Laden as the titular head of the global jihadist movement. Of course, the two diverged in their targeting philosophy as the years went on (near versus far enemy strategy), yet Bin Laden revered Azzam.

According to Michael Scheuer, Bin Laden stated in a 1999 *Al-Jazirah* interview “Shaykh Abdallah Azzam, may God have mercy on his soul, is a man worth a nation.”⁴⁷ Azzam’s faithful service to the jihad and diligent dissemination of his call to jihad ensured that the anti-Soviet jihad received the attention and sacrifice it deserved.

As alluded to throughout this chapter, the Salafist-Islamist ideologues that we have examined have all contributed to the academic body of work that inspired the likes of Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and a litany of lesser known but fierce and capable warriors for Allah. That being said, analysis of Islamism would not be complete without diving into Wahhabism.

The Wahhabi Kingdom

As we have discussed the shifting sands of Islamic philosophy with regard to modernity, Western civilization, and jihad, a common theme is a return to simplicity and purity. A common thread amongst the Islamists is a society rooted in the 7th or 8th century, a lifestyle which is anachronistic and automatically breeds a ‘clash of civilizations’ due to its vehement anti-modernity stance. In this case, 18th century Arabia was certainly no stranger to such viewpoints. This is because a man named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) began a quest in 1744 in which he “launched a campaign of purification and renewal. His declared aim was to return to the pure and authentic Islam of the Founder, removing and

47. *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2002).

where necessary destroying all the later accretions and distortions.”⁴⁸

Though this puritanical expedition was quite successful, it raised the ire of the Ottoman Empire. The Wahhabi movement enjoyed the support of the al-Sauds of Najd, who were fully complicit in the domination of Karbala, the Hijaz and the two holy places of Mecca and Medina. By 1818 “the Saudi capital was occupied and the Saudi emir sent to Istanbul and decapitated.” Surprisingly, the Wahhabi-Saudi nexus was able to improvise, adapt and overcome “and from about 1823 another member of the House of Saud was able to reconstitute the Saudi principality, with its capital in Riyadh. Once again, the chieftains of the House of Saud helped and were helped by the exponents of Wahhabi doctrine.”⁴⁹

Abdul Wahab was fanatical in his opposition to the weakened Ummah, which he perceived to be caused by apostates. Specifically, “the ire of the Wahhabis as directed not primarily against outsiders but against those whom they saw as betraying and degrading Islam from within: on the one hand those who attempted any kind of modernizing reform; on the other...those whom the Wahhabis saw as corrupting and debasing the true Islamic heritage of the Prophet and his Companions.”⁵⁰ As a result of this viewpoint, non-Wahhabi Sunnis, Shia Muslims, Sufis, Pagans, Christians, Jews and anyone who had a differing belief system from the Wahhabis was targeted. It is here that we begin to see another pattern adopted by modern day Islamists: mass casualty violence and physical destruction in the name of jihad. According to Bernard Lewis, “wherever they could, they enforced their beliefs with the utmost severity and ferocity, demolishing tombs, desecrating what they called false and idolatrous holy places, and slaughtering large numbers of men, women, and children who

48. Lewis, *Crisis of Islam*, 120.

49. *Ibid.*, 121.

50. *Ibid.*, 122.

failed to meet their standards of Islamic purity and authenticity.”⁵¹

Eventually the Wahhabis would be used as a proxy force by the British Empire in their subterfuge of the Ottoman Empire. After a decade of proxy tribal warfare, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud would conquer and unite Arabia and with it Mecca and Medina. On January 8, 1926 he proclaimed himself King of the Hijaz and Sultan of Najd and its dependencies.⁵²

The Saudi Kingdom codified Wahhabi Islam as the state religion, and eventually, thanks to Standard Oil Company, the Saudis would be flooded with oil and oil money. With more money than it knew what to do with, the Kingdom found itself in an uncomfortable position. The Saudis, but realistically their Wahhabi Ulema, were the face of Islam to the world at large, by virtue of maintaining Mecca and Medina. The end result was a global proselytizing campaign in which Wahhabi mosques and madrassas proliferated, both in the Muslim world and in the West. “Even in Western countries in Europe and America, where the public educational systems are good, Wahhabi indoctrination centers may be the only form of Islamic education available to new converts and to Muslim parents who wish to give their children some grounding in their own inherited religious and cultural tradition. This indoctrination is provided in private schools, religious seminars, mosque schools, holiday camps and, increasingly, prisons.”⁵³

To put it another way: the Saudis indoctrinated their subjects with this uncompromising and violent version of Islam, and then in order to keep the peace within the Kingdom, subsidized every aspect of life in order to keep them happy. Those that were not happy were free to found and administer these education centers, which would serve to an

51. Lewis, *Crisis of Islam*, 122.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 128

entire generation of violent jihadists, both in the Arabian Peninsula and particularly within Pakistan and Afghanistan, via the Taliban.

This phenomena is described by Ghaffar Hussein as the interaction of Wahhabism with Islamism. While they may have had different strategies and tactics, they both sought a return to the glory days of Islam and the concomitant simplistic and anti-modern lifestyle. As the merger proceeded between the “ultra-conservative and puritanical understanding of Islam with the socio-political ideology of Islamism would go on to produce the most deadly concoction of all-Takfiri jihadism. This form of jihadism made no distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim or between civilian and combatant. Whoever disagreed with them was an apostate and deserved to be killed.”⁵⁴

Hussein is spot on in his analysis of the merger between these two sects of Islam. The willingness among those who practice Takfirism to engage in mass slaughters of civilians simply for disagreeing with them, is a trademark of ISIS. To be fair, this is something that was hardwired into the organization by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi through his Al Qaeda precursor to ISIS; nonetheless, it is a practice that has been increasingly carried out in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and especially in Africa by Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab.

Putting It All Together

This chapter was a deep dive into fourteen centuries of Islamic history and the resulting philosophical shifts that resulted in: the Sunni-Shia split; Islamism; the decline and destruction of the Islamic Caliphate; Wahhabism; the philosophical proponents of Salafist-Islamism and how they in turn influenced modern jihadists.

As we have learned, those who seek a return to the Caliphate are doing so through a worldview that espouses global domination, the collapse of the modern international order

54. Hussein, *Islamism*, 10.

and its nation-state system, overthrowing “apostate” regimes via mass casualty violence and insurgency, and mass cleansing on an ethnic and religious level against those who do not subscribe to this mindset.

This ideological and sectarian transformation has motivated Salafist-Islamist terrorists to engage in a jihad against the West over the last two decades which has perpetually destabilized regional and global security. By waging jihad in places such as Iraq and Syria, jihadists have been able to carve out safe zones from which they are able to recover and rearm, in the hopes of completely conquering a state or territory, an area which will usher in the spread of the Caliphate. ISIS obtained this objective in 2014, by waging a shockingly brutal blitzkrieg across Syria and Iraq. We can only defeat such an enemy by understanding what their strategic motivations or centers of gravity are. All other considerations aside, the Salafist-Islamist ideology, alongside the practice of Takfir, is the core motivation of ISIS. Without Islam and the emulation of early Islam, there would be no ISIS.

By the same token, were it not for the Kharijites, ISIS and its pre-cursor organizations would not have lived to kill Shia Muslims, in hopes of sparking an apocalyptic sectarian war. It is my hope that this chapter has been clear and informative about the ideological core of the threat we face from ISIS and associated movements. Salafist-Islamism is carried by the currents of its own momentum, but with a solid understanding of this movement future policymakers can more efficiently and effectively craft and execute favorable actions that put the odds back in our favor.

CHAPTER II

THE INFLUENCE AND LEGACY OF ABU MUSAB AL-ZARQAWI ON ISIS

For the last two plus decades, most casual observers would readily identify jihadist terrorism with Osama Bin Laden. This, of course, is quite common. In the aftermath of 9/11 with the global commons searching for answers on how this happened and who did it, a spotlight was fixed on Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri. Osama was often referred to as the world's most hunted man. All of these statements are based in fact, but reality and perception are often divergent. This divergence occurred in the immediate aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom, and from 2002-2006, the reality was as follows: Bin Laden was still the most well-known jihadist of all time, yet he became more of a figurehead for Al Qaeda and its associated movements. On the other hand, Ahmad Fadhil Nazzal al-Khalaylah was often an overlooked and shadowy figure, yet he was certainly the most dominant and popular jihadist during the peak of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Al-Khalaylah, who went by the kunya of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was in many ways an underdog in life, beaten down by circumstances and terrible life choices, who redeemed himself in the name of newfound piety via religion.

Even during the first years of the Iraq war, Zarqawi was unknown to the world except for certain intelligence agencies and his acquaintances. A man with an almost unfathomable thirst for brutality and anarchy, he not only momentarily eclipsed Bin Laden on the world stage, but also set in motion a wildfire of eschatologically inspired violence throughout the Muslim world that would posthumously create the most proficient and intimidating jihadist organization the modern world has yet seen.

How did Zarqawi rise through the jihadist ranks to become Al Qaeda's leader in Iraq?

What was it that inspired him to dedicate his adult life to jihad? Where did he come from? How did his ideology destabilize the Muslim world and directly contribute to the creation of ISIS? This chapter will focus on answering these questions by focusing on five important segments of Zarqawi's life: 1) Growing up in Zarqa until his first imprisonment in 1984; 2) Release from prison and joining the anti-Soviet/Communist jihad in Afghanistan from 1989-1992; 3) Returning to Jordan in 1993, only to begin serving a lengthy prison sentence from 1994-1999; 4) Returning to Afghanistan from 1999-2002; 5) Waging a Salafist inspired jihad in Iraq from 2002-2006.

A Thug in Zarqa

Born October 1966 in Zarqa, Jordan, Zarqawi was raised in a poor and hardnosed town by a working class Bedouin family. His father was a retired Jordanian military officer and also served as the mayor of Zarqa. Along with ten other siblings, they were part of the highly respected Bani Hassan tribe which ironically "has traditionally been a firm supporter of Jordan's Hashemite monarchy."¹ Though it is a fairly large industrial city of just under a million citizens, it is distinct for its cultivation of Salafist jihadists. According to journalist Mary Anne Weaver, "along with the cities of Irbid and Salt, it has sent the largest number of Jordanian volunteers to fight abroad, first in Afghanistan and now in Iraq."² Additionally, Zarqa is home to the infamous Al-Ruseifah Palestinian refugee camp. It has been said that Zarqa has a mosque on every street, and it is not difficult to understand how a majority Palestinian population fed up with an ostensibly duplicitous pro-Zionist Hashemite monarchy could quickly become radicalized, and in turn radicalize others. That being said, Abu Musab

1. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

2. Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2006, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>.

al-Zarqawi was anything but pious as a young man. It was only after his first incarceration that he would dedicate himself to Islam.

Speculative anecdotes abound about his childhood, but the reality is very few really know how he grew up. What we do know paints a picture of a troubled young man. Sources within Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate (GID) via off the record interviews dished out a treasure trove of background information to Mary Anne Weaver in her outstanding 2006 expose in *The Atlantic* titled "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi." In the article, the intelligence operatives provide several vignettes about the young Zarqawi. For example, he was very quick to bully and fight anyone. Also, he was allegedly "a bootlegger and a heavy drinker and even, allegedly, a pimp in Zarqa's underworld. When he was fifteen, he participated in a robbery of a relative's home, during which the relative was killed."³ He apparently had a penchant for tattoos, earning the moniker of "The Green Man" by those who knew him.⁴

However, arguably the most pivotal point of his life and certainly of his upbringing was the death of his father. In 1984 when he was seventeen years old, his father passed away. Perhaps for the only time in his life, a man so shadowy that even his closest compatriots referred to him as "the stranger,"⁵ did something perfectly normal and expected in the situation: he grieved and rebelled against the loss of his father.

Unfortunately, he went down a very dark path that would certainly contribute to his

3. Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2006, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>.

4. Anthony Celso, *Al Qaeda's Post 9/11 Devolution: The Failed Jihadist Struggle Against The Near and Far Enemy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), Kindle.

5. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

destiny as a hard core Salafist-Jihadist. According to former CIA analyst and now Brookings Institute scholar Bruce Riedel, Zarqawi soon dropped out of school and spent most of his time at the Al-Ruseifah refugee camp, which as noted above was a petri dish of danger for troubled and violent prone young men. Riedel states “turning to alcohol, drugs, and violence, he became a petty criminal and a thug. Soon he was arrested and jailed for drug possession and sexual assault. In prison he found Islam.”⁶

Prison turned out to be both a positive and negative experience for Zarqawi. It was positive in that at least momentarily, he was genuinely trying to straighten his life out. This was a man who, according to testimony of Huthaifa Azzam (son of legendary jihadist Abdullah Azzam), had nearly forty pending criminal charges against him. “It was the Tablighi Jamaat [a proselytizing missionary group spread across the Muslim world] who convinced him...that it was time to cleanse himself.”⁷ This is an interesting statement because the Tablighi Jamaat could be considered akin to any run of the mill religious organization in American correctional facilities; this is to say that it is considered innocuous and in no way tied to extremist elements. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger provide an excellent description of Tablighi Jamaat: “it aims at creating better Muslims through ‘spiritual jihad’--good deeds, contemplation and proselytizing.”⁸

Even Azzam (who facilitated Zarqawi’ first trip to Afghanistan) readily admits that “he also wasn’t very religious during that time. In fact, he’d only ‘returned’ to Islam three

6. Ibid.

7. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

8. Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Ecco, 2015), Kindle.

months before coming to Afghanistan.”⁹ At first glance, we only see a picture of a young man beaten down by life, making penance for his mistakes and trying to start a new, better life. Yet as we will see throughout the remainder of his life, everything with him was a dichotomy.

While he may have found religion while incarcerated, he also found trouble. Riedel states “like many an inmate, Zarqawi became a more clever and dangerous criminal while in jail. He attracted a gang around him and became well known for his brutality, which made him an easy convert to extremist jihadism.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, he served his sentence and by 1988 was a free man again. So, what does an allegedly reformed man do with his fresh start? Well, let’s be honest for a moment and state the obvious: he didn’t have a lot of prospects going for him. Another vignette in Weaver’s article suggests that he was even fired from a video tape rental store.¹¹ So, he got married and made arrangements to join the ongoing anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. We will now turn our attention to the significant milestone that was his first experience as a jihadist.

Becoming an Arab Afghan

Accounts vary on specific dates and times, but we do know that by December 1989 Zarqawi was on an aircraft bound for Peshawar, Pakistan. Peshawar was the nexus of external Muslim support for the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, with many Muslim non-governmental organizations providing the gamut of services to the constant wave of new volunteers for the jihad. He soon made his way to Khost, Afghanistan where he would befriend his future brother-in-law, Salah al-Hami. Although Khost was host to bitter fighting

9. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

10. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

11. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

between the various factions vying for power in the wake of Soviet withdrawal, it was not combat that Zarqawi initially experienced. According to al-Hami, he had “not been a fighter but had tried his hand at being a journalist” working for a publication called “*Al-Bonian al Marsous*.”¹² Al-Hami was also a journalist for a different publication, but his firsthand experience with Zarqawi is telling. While he would go on to be renowned and reviled for his animalistic brutality, the experience using mass media paid dividends for him and future organizations he led. As we will discuss later, his skillful use of mass media as a form of information operations was groundbreaking in Iraq and is a frightening and powerful legacy bequeathed to ISIS.

Perhaps his most important achievement was, to use an overused phrase, “win friends and influence people.”¹³ It would seem that at least early on, Zarqawi was a likeable person. The picture painted by those who knew him loosely resembles someone in the mold of the fictional mob boss Tony Soprano in the hit American television series *The Sopranos*. This is to say that though he ended up rubbing elbows with the elites of the jihadist world, Zarqawi was a simple if brutish person. Though he seemed to certainly place a lot of loyalty with those he did care about. He reportedly even moved his mother temporarily to Peshawar, before she became too frail for the conditions.¹⁴ Regardless, he built a network of friendships with several Al Qaeda associates and facilitators. Testimony from a Jordanian intelligence official suggests that Zarqawi attended an Al Qaeda training camp run by military chief

12. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

13. This is a reference to the 1936 self-help book by Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

14. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

Mohammed Atef in Sada, Afghanistan.¹⁵

Aside from gaining valuable basic military training at the camp, he befriended some very powerful friends along the way. Huthaifa Azzam alleged that “his primary friendships were with the Saudi fighters and others from the Gulf...some of them were millionaires. There were even a couple of billionaires.”¹⁶ Of course, wealthy Gulf sheikhs are notorious for their witting and allegedly unwitting financial support of jihadist terrorist groups and key leaders within said groups. As with any paramilitary organization, training, equipping, planning and operating cannot happen without adequate financial resources.

Though he may not have attained a high level of formal education, Zarqawi was cunning and intelligent enough to understand that he would need a network of allies and facilitators if he was going to last in the dangerous world he had recently entered.

Financial resources aside, hands down the most important friendship he would develop was with fellow Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. An ethnic Palestinian, Maqdisi had ties all over the Arab world by virtue of his family’s relocations. Born in Jordan, as a child the family made the exodus to Kuwait in order to earn more money and build a better life. He went on to earn a secular degree from Mosul University where, according to Bruce Riedel, “he was introduced to some Islamic clerics and radical circles.”¹⁷ He would eventually make his way to Afghanistan as well, where he and Zarqawi struck up a relationship. In an ironic twist, Maqdisi’s family was expelled from Kuwait in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm in 1991 (along with the other ethnic Palestinians) and relocated to the Al-Ruseifah refugee camp, where in a sense it all started for Zarqawi. Thus things had

15. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

16. Ibid.

17. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

come full circle.

Maqdisi was, in the vernacular of our times, a “heavy hitter” in the Salafist-Jihadist world. He devoted his life to Salafist scholarship, authoring several publications along the way. His most popular and monumental work was published in the 1980s and titled *The Creed of Abraham*, considered “the single most important source of teachings for Salafist movements around the world.”¹⁸ In particular, Maqdisi “developed the doctrine of *loyalty* and *renunciation* which called the Muslim faithful to rebel against any government not based on Sharia.”¹⁹ Maqdisi enlightened his friend about the supremacy of Salafism, mutually fueling a desire to take the jihad back to Jordan. Both men loathed the Jordanian monarchy, and had eventually formed their own jihadist organization in Afghanistan. Specifically, Maqdisi and Zarqawi viewed the Jordanian kingdom as a Zionist puppet, willing to secretly do Israel’s dirty work in the Levant. With that, they and their small group of followers grew bored with life in Afghanistan returned to Jordan in 1993.

Fighting the Near Enemy

Wasting no time upon returning to Jordan, both men hit the ground running in order to set the stage for overthrowing the Hashemite monarchy. A fellow friend and jihadist named Abu Muntassir Bilah Muhammad claimed that Maqdisi toured the mosque circuit in order to spread the Salafist ideology and develop new fighters for the coming jihad. He claims Zarqawi asked for tutoring on the Quran. Eventually Abu Muntassir would also be a “plank owner” in their new terrorist group. He stated “the idea was there, but it had no leadership and no name. First we called it al-Tawhid, then changed the name to Bayat al-Imam [Allegiance to the Imam]. We were small but enthusiastic--a dozen or so men. Our

18. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

19. Celso, *Al Qaeda’s Post 9/11 Devolution*.

primary objective, of course, was to overthrow the monarchy and establish an Islamic government.”²⁰

Unfortunately for them, the group was an operational failure. Moreover, even though he had quite the criminal background, it turns out Zarqawi was a terrible terrorist mastermind at the time. A vignette attributed to a Jordanian intelligence official describes their first mission in 1993. As legend has it, Zarqawi dispatched a suicide bomber to destroy an adult theater during peak business hours. According to the official, the “bomber became so distracted by what was happening on the screen that he forgot about his bomb. It exploded and blew off his legs.”²¹

Not long after, Jordanian security forces began to pay attention to Bayat al-Imam due to Zarqawi’s public denouncements of the monarchy. In another interesting vignette, Bruce Riedel details the circumstances that prematurely ended the Jordanian jihad for Zarqawi and Maqdisi. “In March 1994 the GID raided his home and discovered an arms cache. Found in his bed, Zarqawi pulled a pistol from under his pillow and tried to kill the arresting officer but failed, then tried to kill himself but failed there too.”²² Unfortunately for the rest of the world, Zarqawi would live to fight another day.

Shortly thereafter Zarqawi and Maqdisi (allegedly the cache belonged to him) were sentenced to 15 years in Jordan’s Swaqa prison. In a 2007 report, Human Rights Watch claimed Swaqa prison was notorious for extreme abuse of inmates. One example in particular is very compelling: the day after Human Rights Watch interviewed select inmates, “prison security staff beat all or nearly all of the more than 2,100 prisoners there. They also shaved

20. Celso, *Al Qaeda’s Post 9/11 Devolution*.

21. Ibid.

22. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

the beards and heads of all inmates, including religious men whose beliefs require them to keep a beard.”²³ One can only imagine that in the mid to late 1990s, the facility was just as bad if not worse. One thing is certain: Zarqawi and his friend Maqdisi were not headed to summer camp.

Though Maqdisi may have needed some time to acclimate to the surroundings, by all accounts Zarqawi absolutely thrived in Swaqa. They allegedly formed a group in the image of Bayat al-Imam in the facility, just as any gang member or criminal worth his salt would. As one would expect, Zarqawi psychologically and physically dominated the other inmates. This was a pivotal turning point for him in his development as a jihadist. Here he would develop the same leadership skills that he used to wage war against seemingly everyone during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Bruce Riedel refers to him as a prison “enforcer...he imposed strict rules on his Islamist inmates, forcing them to dress in Afghan style and wear beards, pre-approving the books they could read, and forbidding contact with the other prisoners.”²⁴ Former inmates at the facility corroborated this to Mary Anne Weaver, stating “Islamists flocked to him. He attracted recruits; some joined him out of fascination, others out of curiosity, and still others out of fear.”²⁵

Not one to rest on their laurels, the deadly duo went to work spreading their message of jihad outside of the facility as well. Foreshadowing what was to come in Iraq, they used the internet to post sermons online. They were able to accomplish this by using sympathetic correctional officers to smuggle the sermons to the infamous and well-connected Sheikh Abu

23. “Jordan: Rampant Beatings in Prisons Go Unpunished,” Human Rights Watch, August 30, 2007, accessed June 29, 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2007/08/29/jordan-rampant-beatings-prisons-go-unpunished>.

24. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

25. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

Qatadah, “who posted them on the websites of Salafists and jihadists throughout Europe, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.”²⁶ Again this is a prime example of both men leveraging a network of well-connected friends to complete the objective. The synergy between the scholar and the brawler was dynamic and frightening.

Though Maqdisi had far more legitimacy in eyes of jihadist elites, inside the prison walls the tables had turned. Though Maqdisi was very much respected by all, Zarqawi’s lead from the front mentality had, at least in the eyes of his followers, placed him atop the leadership chart. Allegedly, some of the smuggled sermons caught the attention of one Osama bin Laden, who never met nor heard of Zarqawi during his first stint in Afghanistan.²⁷ This was corroborated by senior Al Qaeda facilitator Seif al-Adel, who stated that “the al Qaeda leadership had paid close attention to Zarqawi’s court case and trial in Jordan.”²⁸

In a stroke of good fortune, both Maqdisi and Zarqawi would be released from prison a decade ahead of schedule. This occurred via a general amnesty issued by King Abdullah II upon taking the throne. The King proclaimed the amnesty with the intent that many of the inmates would reform their lives with the gesture of goodwill. Unfortunately, this was not the case with Zarqawi. He quickly made his way to Afghanistan again, via Pakistan.

Afghanistan Redux

Zarqawi entered Afghanistan in December 1999 with a letter of introduction from Abu Qatada, the same cleric who posted smuggled sermons on the internet for Maqdisi and Zarqawi. He made his way to Kandahar, the heart and soul of the Taliban movement, for a face to face meeting with Bin Laden. The meeting was generally successful, with Al Qaeda’s

26. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

27. Ibid.

28. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

top leaders, along with the Taliban's Mullah Omar agreeing to set up his own autonomous terrorist training camp in Herat, near the Iranian border. Reportedly Mullah Omar gave it his blessing with the caveat that "Zarqawi would be in charge of both the camp and its group, whose nucleus consisted of Jordanians and Palestinians from Zarqa."²⁹ Zarqawi christened the nascent group as the Army of Greater Syria, later changing it to Monotheism and Jihad.³⁰ The dynamics of this meeting were allegedly quite contentious and worth delving into.

The first impression Zarqawi gave Bin Laden could not have gone worse. According to Mary Anne Weaver, Bin Laden thought Zarqawi was highly suspect and most likely a mole for Jordanian intelligence. "He also disliked al-Zarqawi's swagger and the green tattoos on his left hand, which he reportedly considered un-Islamic. Al-Zarqawi came across to bin Laden as aggressively ambitious, abrasive, and overbearing. His hatred of Shiites also seemed to bin Laden to be potentially divisive--which, of course, it was."³¹

As if that wasn't bad enough, Zarqawi was abrasively unapologetic about his statements and even had the nerve to suggest Bin Laden's support of the Taliban was un-Islamic.³² It was Saif al-Adel, according to Weaver, who salvaged the meeting for Zarqawi. He allegedly interceded with the Bin Laden a Mullah Omar, cementing the details listed above.³³

While the events of the meeting may have grown a bit apocryphal, the essence provides fantastic foreshadowing of the cleavages that would erupt between Zarqawi and Al

29. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

30. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

31. Weaver, "Zarqawi."

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

Qaeda's senior leaders during his time in Iraq. The same brash, in-your-face attitude reported above was certainly the same one Zarqawi displayed publicly and privately in Iraq. Of course, as we will discover later, this attitude went a long way toward catalyzing what would become ISIS. Even so, at the end of the day, Zarqawi walked away with his camp and status as an associate of Al Qaeda. This was more or less his tryout for the big leagues of jihad, and he was reportedly given somewhere between \$5,000 and \$200,000 in loans to jumpstart his new venture.³⁴

Zarqawi exceeded the admittedly low expectations set for him in Afghanistan. He ran a vibrant and successful camp, growing from a few dozen fighters in the beginning to "some 2,000 to 3,000" by September 11, 2001.³⁵ During his time at Herat, Zarqawi's Monotheism and Jihad group was given a chance to excel by Al Qaeda. As part of the infamous Millennium Bombing Plot set to occur on New Year's Eve of 1999, the group was tasked with multiple targets inside Jordan. Monotheism and Jihad already had sleeper cells inside Jordan, according to Bruce Riedel, "that collected an arsenal of weapons and explosives for simultaneous attacks on a large number of targets on the eve of the millennium, one being the Radisson Hotel in Amman."³⁶ They were reportedly tasked with also attacking the location where John the Baptist baptized Jesus Christ and a Byzantine church on Mount Nebo.³⁷ Though the operation was neutralized before it could happen, Zarqawi would be relatively unscathed though he was convicted in absentia by a Jordanian court in 2002.

According to Weaver, Osama Bin Laden requested Zarqawi take the oath of loyalty

34. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

35. Weaver, "Zarqawi."

36. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

37. Ibid.

(bayat) on “at least five occasions...he also did not believe that either bin Laden or the Taliban was serious enough about jihad.”³⁸ Though Zarqawi was often a defiant thorn in Bin Laden’s side, he stood with him when it counted. After the 9/11 attacks, Zarqawi remained in Herat with his fighters.

Once Operation Enduring Freedom commenced, Monotheism and Jihad stood their ground against the Northern Alliance ground forces and American bombing strikes. Eventually Zarqawi would sustain a chest wound courtesy of a US Air Force bomb. He would subsequently round up his troops and head for the relative safety of Iran. He would eventually make his way to Northern Iraq, where he would soon prepare the way for one of the most horrific and sustained displays of savagery and brutality in modern times.

Iraq: From Obscurity to Sheikh of the Slaughterers

Zarqawi’s activities post-Herat are a source of contention for the US government. Though accounts vary, we do know that by May 2002 Zarqawi had recuperated in Iran with the assistance of Saif al Adel, who had made Iran his area of operations. Some would argue that Zarqawi conspired with the Iranians and their proxies in Syria to attack the Americans. Certainly there is a degree of truth in this, but the significance of what would be his final phase in life begins in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The US government would later allege, while making a case for invading Iraq, that Zarqawi was invited to Iraq by Saddam Hussein. Secretary of State Colin Powell would allege during his February 5, 2003 speech before the UN Security Council that Zarqawi had joined Kurdish terrorist group Ansar al-Islam in order to produce ricin for future attacks. Moreover, Secretary Powell alleged that Zarqawi was the kingpin of a global terrorist network “operating from Iraq with links in several European countries” for the purpose of

38. Weaver, “Zarqawi.”

producing and distributing chemical and biological weapons.³⁹ The reality was quite different. Contrary to the insistence of neoconservative political operatives, Saddam Hussein had absolutely nothing to do with Zarqawi. One could almost guarantee that had he been able to find and fix his location, Saddam's intelligence apparatus would have quickly neutralized him. Moreover, the ties with Ansar al Islam were spurious at best. "Later analysis has shown few ties with this group or its base camp in Kurdistan. The group never mentions him in its own propaganda, and his main base of activity was in the Sunni strongholds of Iraq, namely, Baghdad and Anbar province."⁴⁰

Unfortunately, the attempt to use Zarqawi as a scapegoat became a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the time the allegations were made, the general public had no idea who this man was. In reality, he was a low level albeit well connected associate of Al Qaeda, conducting independent operations with his own fighters. A Jordanian intelligence officer provides a compelling illustration: "The Americans have been patently stupid in all of this. They've blown Zarqawi so out of proportion that, of course, his prestige has grown. And as a result, sleeper cells from all over Europe are coming to join him now."⁴¹

What the Americans were oblivious to was the tactical brilliance Zarqawi possessed. While the Bush administration spent many months checking all of the politically palatable boxes and telegraphing the punch way before it was thrown, Zarqawi was doing something that was instrumental to the carnage soon to be unleashed. At its core, he was conducting what would be referred to in military terms as Advance Force Operations (AFO).

In Joint Publication 3-05, AFO is defined as "operations conducted to refine the

39. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*

40. Ibid.

41. Weaver, "Zarqawi"

location of specific, identified targets and further develop the operational environment for near-term missions.”⁴² Typically AFO is conducted via clandestine means in order to keep a low profile and blend in with the surrounding population. This is a skill set that is taught to military personnel in certain career fields, but would be almost unheard of, particularly in 2002 for someone like Zarqawi to employ it.

He skillfully crafted an insidious and deadly trap for US forces and practically all Iraqis. Zarqawi went about this, according to Bruce Riedel, in the following manner: “safe houses were identified, arms and explosives cached, and intelligence networks built for the day after the Americans defeated the Baathist enemy. And a network of outside supporters was put together in the Arab world and the Muslim diaspora in Western Europe to provide money and martyrs for the battle.”⁴³ In a very significant development, Riedel alleges that Zarqawi traveled back to Iran “either just before or during the US attack...to meet with his established contact, Seif al-Adl...and arrange for the entry of al Qaeda operatives into Iraq through Syria.”⁴⁴ Please, let us take a moment to understand just how pivotal this was. Once the Americans invaded Iraq and overthrew the Hussein regime, jihadists flocked there to kill infidel soldiers. The primary line of communication, or path of travel, was directly from Syria through the Iraqi border. By virtue of Syria’s status as an Iranian proxy, one would assess that al-Adel used his contacts with the Iranian regime to finalize the witting support of Bashar al-Assad. The flood of fighters from Syria into Iraq resulted in thousands of US and Coalition deaths and injuries.

42. “Joint Publication 3-05 Special Operations,” Federation of American Scientists, July 16, 2014, accessed June 29, 2015.

43. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

44. Ibid.

Even more startling, as we will discover later, once the Americans left Iraq in 2011, these rat lines from Syria were still operating. Once the Arab Spring caught on in Syria, bi-directional traffic to and from Iraq and Syria enabled ISIS to shatter and embarrass the Iraqi army. This is just one of the many painful legacies from Zarqawi's time in Iraq.

So, what was the result of such thorough operational preparation of the battlespace? Well, it turns out Zarqawi had quite the devious trap set. Specifically, it was a two-step concept of operations triggered to execute after the initial invasion. "First, he sought to isolate the Americans by driving out all other foreign forces. This was done with systematic terrorist attacks, most notably the bombing of the UN headquarters and the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad in the summer of 2003."⁴⁵ This initial prong of the operation plan was very successful. Not only did the UN and practically every other non-governmental organization exit stage right, but sadly the UN special envoy to Iraq, Sergio Veiria de Mello was also killed in the attack.⁴⁶ While every conflict zone is full of courageous volunteers, both military and civilian, who risk everything to serve others, it is fair to say that the death of Sergio put a chilling effect on the pool of potential civilian volunteers.

In the second prong of the plan, "Zarqawi targeted the fault line in Iraqi political society--the Sunni-Shia divide--in order to provoke a civil war among the Iraqi people. His goal was clearly to isolate America, then destabilize Iraq and turn it into a quagmire."⁴⁷

In the end, he achieved just what he had set out to do. To prove his determination, ten days after the attack on the UN facility, his organization executed an utterly devastating attack on the Shia community. Zarqawi's sent his father-in-law to the Shia shrine in Najaf

45. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

46. Ibid.

47. Weaver, "Zarqawi."

with a car bomb, where Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, along with over 100 Shia worshippers died in the attack.⁴⁸ Hakim's death was so significant because he was the senior leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), an Iranian backed Shia political organization that was heavily oppressed by Saddam Hussein.

Zarqawi was relentless in his attacks on the Shia community. He would go on to attack "Shia shrines in Najaf and Baghdad in March 2004, in Najaf and Karbala in December 2004, and in Samarra in February 2006; the Samarra shrine was then struck again in May 2007."⁴⁹ As Zarqawi desired and expected, the Shia sought retribution via private militias and the new Iraqi Security Forces which was stacked heavily with Shiite officers. Through this two pronged plan, Monotheism and Jihad unleashed absolute carnage on the US-led coalition and the Iraqi Shia on a jarring scale. Yet, Zarqawi wasn't done yet with his display of savagery. In May 2004, the terrorist hostage paradigm was violently shifted via the videotaped beheading of American contractor Nick Berg.

In the video, Berg is seated on the floor, wearing an orange prison jumpsuit (a symbolic ode to the Abu Ghraib scandal) with his arms restrained behind his back. Five terrorists with firearms stand behind Berg, while the central figure dressed in solid black reads from a prepared statement. The figure, who would become the executioner, had a large knife sheathed in his waist band. After rambling on for a few minutes and threatening President Bush and the United States, the executioner (allegedly Zarqawi himself) brandishes the knife while the other terrorists hold a writhing Nick Berg on the floor. The video quality is (thankfully) quite poor, yet a chilling scream is unleashed by Berg just before Zarqawi slashes his throat. He does not stop sawing until Berg's head is completely removed from the

48. Weaver, "Zarqawi."

49. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

body, at which point the terrorists rejoice and scream “Allahu Akbar” and “Takbir.” The video ends with a close-up of Berg’s corpse, the head laying on the back of his prone and still restrained body.

Prior to this event, hostage taking was primarily used as a source of revenue by the multitude of insurgent organizations in Iraq. However, Zarqawi did something unheard of: he posted the video of Berg’s beheading on the internet. It went viral almost instantly, with heavily censored snippets making the headline news around the world. Aside from brutally murdering an American, the execution was meant as a symbolic message to the US.

The message was based on a dangerous new Salafist ideologue named Abu Bakr Naji. In 2004, he posted a manual on the internet titled *The Management of Savagery*. Three stages of action are prescribed by Naji: 1) Disruption and Exhaustion; 2) Management of Savagery; 3) Empowerment. The first stage focuses on destroying enemy centers of gravity, and in particular to “damage the economy of enemy powers and demoralize their populations.”⁵⁰ The second stage focuses on “carrying out acts of highly visible violence, intended to send a message to both allies and enemies.”⁵¹ The third stage focuses on using leveraging security vacuums into Islamic states, eventually creating a Caliphate.⁵²

Specifically, Naji focused on using the media as a tool to further the message of jihad and Sharia. He deemed the stage of savagery one that, if applied properly, would lead directly to the long desired Caliphate. However, “if we fail--we seek refuge with God from that--it does not mean an end of the matter. Rather, this failure will lead to an increase in

50. Stern and Berger, *ISIS*.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

savagery.”⁵³ In short, Zarqawi was sending a symbolic message via Nick Berg that this brutality was just the tip of the iceberg. After saturating the internet and news with the beheading, he was standing by for positive atmospherics. If for some reason he didn’t perceive a positive result from what was essentially a classic information operation, he would find another American to murder even more brutally, until the US capitulated to Zarqawi and his followers. In short, he wanted to beat America into utter paranoia and fear via savagery.

Nick Berg would not be the only victim to such savagery. There were ultimately many others who met their end at the hands of Zarqawi. Bruce Riedel describes the impact of such violence: “because of his machinations, thousands of innocent Iraqis lost their lives simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Within the movement, his extreme views gained him the name *al Gharib*, ‘the stranger’, while one Al Qaeda piece dubbed him ‘the Sheikh of the Slaughterers.’ For the moment, this savagery worked. It made Zarqawi famous and intimidated many in Iraq, especially in the Sunni community. But it would also sow the seeds of al Qaeda’s undoing in Iraq.”⁵⁴

The Beginning of the End

Since the start of the war in Iraq, Zarqawi had rapidly climbed the jihadist ladder of success. Though in the beginning he was only on the periphery of Al Qaeda, he would eventually become a company man, so to speak. As noted above, Jund al Sham would become Monotheism and Jihad, responsible for the most brutal of Zarqawi’s attacks on civilians and the Shia. Though the violence was detested even by many of his fellow Salafists, it served a higher purpose for Al Qaeda. With such notoriety, success and massive

53. Lawrence Wright, “The Master Plan,” *New Yorker*, September 11, 2006, accessed June 30, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/the-master-plan>.

54. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

numbers of dedicated recruits, Bin Laden thought it high time to reward Zarqawi. So, on October 17, 2004 pledged bayat to Bin Laden and Al Qaeda and in return he was officially named the leader of Al Qaeda's first franchise organization: Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia.⁵⁵

It wasn't long before Zarqawi fell out of the good graces of Bin Laden and Zawahiri. In 2005, a letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Zarqawi was intercepted by American intelligence operatives and released by the Director of National Intelligence. The letter was a tactful scolding of Zarqawi over his seemingly unquenchable thirst for death and destruction. The online beheading videos was a particular source of contention. Even Zarqawi's former compatriot Maqdisi publicly aired his disgust of the rampant use of suicide bombings and hostage executions.⁵⁶

Zarqawi took a hit in popularity after a 2005 car bombing of the Radisson hotel in Amman, Jordan. It just so happened that the majority of victims were attending a wedding reception. This infuriated not only the Jordanians, but Al Qaeda's senior leaders as well. Additionally, the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite al Askari mosque in Samarra would "unleash a wave of back-and-forth sectarian violence...the attack was widely seen as precipitating a full-on civil war that threatened the entire nation, portending massive bloodshed to come."⁵⁷

Eventually, Zarqawi's time came to an end. According to Anthony Celso, his "alienation of the Shia, Kurds, Christians, and Iraqi Sunnis contributed to his death."⁵⁸ In short, he was a wanted man with a \$25 million price on his head, and someone dropped a

55. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

56. Stern and Berger, *ISIS*.

57. Ibid.

58. Celso, *Al Qaeda's Post 9/11 Devolution*.

dime on him in order to collect the cash. As a result, on June 7, 2006 two US Air Force F-16's dropped two 500 pound bombs on his safe house, where his death was confirmed by US Special Operations Forces. His death was celebrated by the US government, and his life was eulogized by a coterie of elite jihadists. Yet, the organization he built did not die. It was bloodied and nearly destroyed thanks to the Arab Awakening and US Surge, but Al Qaeda in Iraq would evolve into the Islamic State of Iraq, which would transform into its current iteration of ISIS.

A Legacy of Destruction

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi revolutionized the modern approach to Salafist inspired jihad. He introduced a new level of brutality and savagery, in order to intimidate opponents in all corners of the globe. He incorporated the latest in modern mass communications, resulting in the “emergence of a virtual jihadesphere linking internet videos, chat rooms, Facebook and YouTube activity.”⁵⁹ Moreover, he ingrained an intense hatred of Shiites, non-Muslims, and those who disagree with the *Management of Savagery* inspired Salafist brand of warfare.

All of these items, combined with the impressive network of allies and associates he cultivated during his life as a jihadist, ensured that ISI and in turn ISIS inherited a turnkey terrorist organization capable of simultaneous mass casualties, impressive tactical combat skills, and a frightening professional level information operations skillset. The fact that ISIS has become a recruiting powerhouse is a direct reflection of the trail that Zarqawi blazed in Iraq. In turn, Zarqawi has become an ideological figurehead for ISIS. Specifically, their primary apocalyptic quote is attributed to Zarqawi. In September 2004, he reportedly said the following in an audio speech: “the spark has been lit here in Iraq and its heat will continue to

59. Celso, *Al Qaeda's Post 9/11 Devolution*.

intensify, until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq.”⁶⁰

Even in death, Zarqawi has ensured that the spark he referred to will keep burning, catalyzing bloodshed and destruction throughout the Muslim world, and even right here in the United States of America. Defeating ISIS not only requires understanding the religious undercurrents identified in Chapter I, but also the man who is singularly responsible for the success and brutality of Baghdadi and company. Once we begin to understand how he viewed the world, perhaps this can be applied to ISIS’ centers of gravity. Of course, many critical errors occurred in the execution and aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom which allowed the precursors to ISIS to survive, incubate and replicate like a deadly virus.

60. “Why Islamic State Chose Town of Dabiq for Propaganda,” BBC News, November 17, 2014, accessed June 30, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30083303>.

CHAPTER III

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM: PANDORA'S BOX

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the general American public was petrified of what was to come. Everyone went to bed on September 10, 2001 thinking that all in all, life was good. After all, President Clinton had performed budgetary magic before he left the White House, leaving the Federal checking account, as it were, in pretty good shape. All President George W. Bush had to do was put the country on auto-pilot and make sure the American dream was still attainable. Yet we soon forget that Osama Bin Laden relentlessly ramped up his war against American in the late 1990's, culminating in 9/11.

As is our cultural heritage, Americans wanted bloody retribution against Bin Laden and his lackeys for what they did to 2,977 men and women who were simply going about their daily routines. Once it was executed, Operation Enduring Freedom was a smashing success, at least up until the Bush administration decided to make an example out of the Baathist regime in Baghdad. Many theories abound about what might have been a smashing success in Afghanistan, had the US not pulled so many resources away from the fight. Bruce Riedel provides a blunt and compelling illustration: "The organization [Al Qaeda] was clearly dealt a staggering blow by Operation Enduring Freedom. The imperative in 2002 was to finish the job and destroy al Qaeda and the Taliban while they were on the ropes. America would be a much safer place today had President George W. Bush continued to relentlessly hunt down Osama, Ayman, and Omar."¹

Of course, Osama would not be brought to justice until May 2011, and Ayman al-Zawahiri and ostensibly Mullah Omar are still enjoying safe haven somewhere in Pakistan.

1. Riedel, *The Search for Al Qaeda*.

Yet the United States did indeed rout Saddam Hussein's army in record time, displace his regime, and eventually capture him. At first glance it sounds like a classic success story. As it turned out, the decision to overthrow Saddam's regime was the equivalent of knocking over a hornet's nest. As painful as it is to admit, the blood and treasure expended by America's best and brightest throughout Iraq was all for naught. We managed to, as the popular saying goes, snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. As a result of the strategic blunder that the Iraq war was, America not only managed to essentially shatter the last secure vestiges of an already failing state, but to slice open the scars of a 1,400 year old grudge between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Thus, we will now examine the fallout from the invasion and how it left breathing room for the remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq to reconstitute itself, paving the way for transformation into ISIS.

The Threat That Wasn't a Threat

Great strides have been made throughout the US government, in the aftermath of 9/11, to streamline bureaucratic organization and process in the name of collaboration and unity of effort. Today, even though bureaucracy still abounds, the relationship between the Department of Defense and the litany of potential and persistent inter-agency partners is quite good. Personnel exchanges, information sharing and thorough planning are more or less the norm. Sadly, in the run-up to the Iraq war nothing of the sort happened. Petty personal grudges between bureaucratic leaders, military officers and political operatives formed a negative synergy in concert with agency-specific information hoarding, often referred to as a stovepipe.

The Bush administration was saturated with neo-conservative policy wonks, many who had served President Bush's father during his years in the White House. The problem with this is simple: blinded by ideology, many of these admittedly brilliant scholars and

pundits refused to see the blunt reality of social dynamics in Iraq. In a sea of myopic advisors, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith were undoubtedly the two senior advisors most responsible for persuading President Bush to invade Iraq. Wolfowitz was the Deputy Secretary of Defense at the time of the invasion, and the information he passed in the public domain is painful to comprehend but provides a very sobering picture of what was happening in Washington.

For example, he is on record as having stated the following: “It’s hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself.”² He is also known to have said “The oil revenue of that country [Iraq] could bring between 50 and 100 billion dollars over the course of the next two or three years. We’re dealing with a country that could really finance its own reconstruction, and relatively soon.”³ These statements illustrate the lunacy of, with all due respect, having a man with no military experience attempting to orchestrate operational and strategic military planning. It is sheer folly to think that we could destroy the infrastructure and government organs of a place like Iraq and have zero negative consequences.

Feith also served in the Pentagon as the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. He too was a scholar with no military experience, but was widely respected in neocon circles. He was praised by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who referred to Feith as “one of the most brilliant individuals in government.”⁴ He is also largely blamed for crafting the

2. Hayes Brown, “The People Who Broke Iraq Have a Lot of Ideas about Fixing It Now,” ThinkProgress RSS, June 16, 2014, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/06/16/3449243/iraq-planners-today/>.

3. Ibid.

4. “Feith: Iraq Attack Was Preemptive,” CBS News, April 6, 2008, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/feith-iraq-attack-was-preemptive/>.

narrative of Saddam's infamous weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program being an imminent threat to US national security. When questioned about it a decade later, he shifted the blame to the CIA and their reportedly erroneous intelligence sources.⁵

As an aside, I find the entire argument of "bad intelligence" to be interesting. As someone who sat on a Cold War-era watch floor for nearly four years and scoured intelligence reporting of all sorts, it seems disingenuous to say that we just got it wrong. Specific details certainly take years to cultivate, depending on location, security environment, and source placement. Yet the big picture items that can be detected via national assets are not a mystery, yet somehow we flubbed it up on Iraq.

Nonetheless, it would seem that the decision to invade Iraq was made before the evidence was analyzed. In short, the Bush administration was in the position of running a sort of political campaign to sell the war, not only to the American public but also to the international community whose support in the aftermath of the war would have paid immense dividends for the Iraqi people. In September 2003, journalist Mark Danner wrote an excellent analytical assessment of the origins and fallout of the war in *The New York Review of Books*.

Of the many useful nuggets of information, one of the most vital details the basis for invading. In what was considered a bit of "Inside Baseball", Danner provided three potential triggers for executing the invasion, based on comments of administration officials. Specifically, "The Bush administration launched its war for three broad reasons: 1) Weapons of Mass Destruction; 2) National Security; 3) Regional Transformation."⁶ With regard to the

5. "Feith: Iraq Attack Was Preemptive."

6. Mark Danner, "Iraq: The New War," *New York Review Of Books*, September 25, 2003, accessed July 1, 2015.

WMD, the idea to be sold was straightforward: Saddam allegedly had some sort of WMD program which posed an imminent threat to US national security, thus the program had to go.

When it comes to the National Security argument, Danner makes a bold and compelling assessment. Specifically, he suggests the basis for war could be to “remove Iraq as a threat to American dominance of the Persian Gulf and to Israel, and make it America’s central ally and base in the region” in order to essentially terminate the bilateral security relationship we had with Saudi Arabia.⁷ Certainly this assessment has much truth to it. Let us not forget that 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudis, and aside from the oil they pump out, the relationship is fruitless. In essence, the US military is the muscle that guarantees survival of the monarchy, in return for the oil the keeps the global economy humming along. Nonetheless, the Regional Transformation is also thought provoking. He quotes then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice who infamously quipped that only when Iraq became a democracy would the region no longer “produce ideologies of hatred that lead men to fly airplanes into buildings in Washington and New York.”⁸

We must also remember that the decision to invade did not happen in a vacuum; rather it was codified in the 2002 *National Security Strategy* and infamously referred to as the “Bush Doctrine.” In short, the doctrine is widely labeled as a strategy of pre-emptive war, but in this case that is incorrect. Pre-emptive war occurs only when circumstances dictate an immediate military response to head off destruction of vital centers of gravity, with one example being a potential nuclear first strike against another nuclear armed adversary, when the opposing state is actively planning to strike. In the case of Iraq, it was a preventive war. A preventive war is waged on perceptions of danger, rather than true danger. Much like when

7. Danner, “Iraq: The New War.”

8. Ibid.

law enforcement officers are put in the gut wrenching position of shooting what turns out to be an unarmed perpetrator, it often occurs in the midst of crisis without knowing the full details. In short, it is a frantic attempt to save one's life or civilization, based on the perception an adversary emanates, yet not always based in fact or reality.

That being said, the Bush Doctrine contains three main triggers: "First, with the diffusion of advanced technologies, tyrants are acquiring weapons of mass destruction at a perilously rapid rate and, with their help, so will terrorist groups like Al Qaeda; Second, tyrants and especially terrorists view mass destruction technologies as weapons of choice rather than as weapons of last resort; Third, the old, reactive strategies of containment and deterrence are therefore less likely to succeed."⁹

This is a curious basis for national security policy. Sure, it throws around the core vernacular of the security studies realm, but we must examine fact: Does Al Qaeda and groups like it engage in mass casualty attacks? Yes, but what are their tactics? Most often it is either a car bomb, suicide bomber, or simply a small arms attack on a soft target, resulting in mass casualties.

In the last two decades, the only terrorist group to successfully deploy WMD was the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo, who used Sarin gas on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Even then, due to operator error, the death count was quite low, given the potential for mass deaths. Yet when we close the loop on the public campaign for war in 2002-2003, Paul Wolfowitz provides a sobering account of why the world was sold on the WMD hypothesis. It boils down to bureaucracy "because it was the one reason everybody could agree on,"¹⁰

9. Ivo H. Daalder, "Policy Implications of the Bush Doctrine on Preemption," Council on Foreign Relations, November 16, 2002, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/international-law/policy-implications-bush-doctrine-preemption/p5251>.

10. Ibid.

hence just as Paul Revere sounded the alarm about the advancing British Redcoats, the alarm was sounded in America that Saddam or Al Qaeda was about to use Iraqi nuclear missiles to rain down hellfire and brimstone on the continental United States.

As we discovered once the regime was overthrown, the Iraqi WMD program was in disarray, if it still existed at all. It was alleged early on that Saddam gave Bashar Assad all of his chemical and biological weapons for safekeeping. It is possible that this is true, but Saddam Hussein was paranoid, arrogant and proud. He would never hand over his trump card against, ironically, invasion. The reality is, he was using the WMD card to counter any aggressive designs from Iran. After all, from 1980-88 the two states fought a brutal war to a stalemate. In the end, the world was convinced that the threat from Iraq was credible. Based on his very long history of violating UN Security Council Resolutions, the general consensus was that Saddam's WMD program had to go.

Kicking the Hornet's Nest

Throughout 2002 and early 2003 US military personnel were staging in Kuwait, preparing for the green light to go across the border into Iraq. On February 21, 2002 only one month before the war would start, the National Defense University hosted an interagency conference to address post-invasion security issues. While the military concept of operations had been hashed out for quite some time, life after Saddam was given short shrift. The conference was headed by LTG (Ret.) Jay Garner, the man initially tapped to rebuild Iraq after the initial invasion. To his dismay, "the group uncovered 'tons of problems' including gaps in planning, coordination and anticipation of such mission-threatening problems as looting and civil unrest."¹¹

11. Mark Fineman, Robin Wright, and Doyle McManus, "Preparing for War, Stumbling to Peace," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2003, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jul/18/nation/na-postwar18>.

As it turns out, the State Department was originally tasked with the post-war security planning. At the same time, the Defense Department began crafting its own post-war plans. Yet, the DoD made two critical errors in the planning: “one was that American and British would inherit a fully functioning modern state, with government ministries, police forces and public utilities in working order--a ‘plug and play’ occupation. The second was that the resistance would end quickly.”¹²

The military was more focused on testing out a light, rapid invasion strategy based on the 4th generation of the Revolution in Military Affairs. Essentially Secretary Rumsfeld wanted a blitzkrieg style assault on the Iraqi army. “It shortened the war, probably prevented many of the disasters the Pentagon had been planning for and saved lives during the takeover of Iraq.”¹³ Yet even CENTCOM commander General Tommy Franks admitted the mobility-based plan resulted in “catastrophic success.”¹⁴

After only three weeks of combat, US forces had routed the Iraqi army and ostensibly secured the country. However, this was just the beginning of what would contribute to a brutal sectarian insurgency, the political equivalent of knocking over the hornet’s nest. The lack of post-war planning was abysmal. “It left large areas of the country and millions of Iraqis under no more than nominal allied control, with a force considerably smaller than some experts inside and outside the military had warned would be needed to stabilize and occupy the country.”¹⁵

Unbeknownst to US officials, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi wasn’t the only one that set a

12. Fineman, Wright, and McManus, “Preparing for War.”

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

trap in Iraq for the US military. In fact, Saddam Hussein had left instructions to initiate a state of chaos and anarchy in the event of invasion. Iraqi's were ordered to engage in looting and destruction of government facilities, even burning them to the ground.

This was in addition to ordering the “secret police to sabotage power plants, assassinate imams, buy stolen weapons from citizens, and generally create mayhem.”¹⁶ Time was of the essence and American policy makers were squandering opportunities to shape the battlefield and curry favor with the Iraqi population.

From a purely conventional military standpoint, the Pentagon did a fantastic job of creating a plan to defeat the Iraqi military. However, the social dynamics of Iraq were overlooked, not to mention the fact that by invading the epicenter of Muslim history and culture, Muslims were obligated to engage in a defensive jihad against the US, ironically creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of Iraq being a terrorist state. Nonetheless, the strategic disconnect in Washington was infecting our efforts in Baghdad. Aside from the previously mentioned Iraqi plan for sabotage and anarchy, the Iraqi people had limited patience for the security vacuum ushered in by the war. Just when conditions would necessitate a massive occupation force, Washington was planning to essentially go home now that the war was ostensibly over. According to PBS Frontline's documentary titled *Losing Iraq*, “more than 110,000 troops were told to prepare to leave. A division, about 30,000, would handle Iraq.”¹⁷

Though the lack of troops was a serious strategic error, the man who would essentially serve as Washington's colonial master in Iraq, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, authorized the catalyst for the Sunni insurgency. As head of the nascent Coalition Provisional

16. Scott C. Johnson, “Still Fighting Saddam,” *Newsweek*, July 20, 2003, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/still-fighting-saddam-139251>.

17. “Losing Iraq,” *PBS Frontline*, accessed July 1, 2015.

Authority, Bremer was responsible for running the country in the absence of an Iraqi government. His role was to rebuild Iraq, nurture a new Iraqi government, and once they were ready to take the training wheels off, let them have complete autonomy. Except, it didn't turn out that way. Before leaving Washington, Bremer independently drafted two CPA orders that would absolutely destroy the last vestiges of Iraq as we knew it. The order dissolved the Ba'ath Party, and as a result, anyone deemed to be a member of the party would be considered a criminal and banned from working for the new Iraqi government. This included "the top three layers of management in every national government ministry, affiliated corporations and other government institutions."¹⁸ In short, all of the experienced government administrators who could have kept Iraq from essentially dissolving, were blacklisted. The Americans had no clue what they were doing, and the Iraqi people were shorted out of a new start.

Bremer was warned that CPA order 1 would "drive 30,000 to 50,000 Ba'athists underground overnight" but he was steadfast in his decision.¹⁹ Colonel Thomas Gross was an advocate of keeping the Baath party around, and for good reason. "One, the only folks who have experience running the government [Ba'athists], so we needed to keep them. Number two, the Sunnis need to have a voice. And if you don't give people a voice, they have relatively few options. And what the Middle Eastern history and Middle East--what it tells you is their next option is violence."²⁰ And with that, order number one was the law of the land. However, Bremer still wasn't finished destroying Iraq.

18. L. Paul Bremer, "Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 1," May 16, 2003, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAE/NSAE418/docs/9a-CoalitionProvisionalAuthorityOrderNo1-5-16-03.pdf>.

19. *Frontline*, "Losing Iraq."

20. *Ibid.*

It was CPA order number 2 that was the knockout punch. It dissolved the following organizations: The Ministries of Defense, Information, Military Affairs; Iraqi Intelligence Service; National Security Bureau; Saddam's Special Guard; Iraqi Army, Air Force, Navy, Air Defence Force, Republican Guard, Directorate of Military Intelligence; Saddam Fedayeen militia; Ba'ath Party militia.²¹ The end result: at least half a million angry men with combat experience and combat training were without a purpose in life.

The CPA orders were particularly unfortunate because they were based on our experience in Japan and Germany during World War II. Thus, Ba'athists were equivalent to Nazi's and Japanese Imperialists. According to Colonel Gross, "within 72 hours after the decision was made, the first major attack from the airport road took place...and it's been downhill from there."²² And with that, the insurgency was in full motion.

Cultivating Terrorism

As discussed in Chapter II, by August 2003, the elaborate trap planned by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had been sprung with the triad of car bombings throughout Baghdad. The Sunnis in particular were incensed at losing their status in Iraq. Though they are a demographic minority, Saddam ensured that the Ba'ath party was stacked with fellow Sunnis, particularly those that hailed from his stomping grounds near Tikrit, in the Sunni Triangle. Every day, the frequency and intensity of attacks against US forces increased. "By launching paramilitary attacks almost daily, the opponents hope to force the Americans to adopt increasingly aggressive and intrusive tactics that will further alienate a citizenry already frustrated by their

21. L. Paul Bremer, "Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 2," August 23, 2003, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEABB/NSAEABB418/docs/9b-CoalitionProvisionalAuthorityOrderNo2-8-23-03.pdf>.

22. *Frontline*, "Losing Iraq."

failure to bring order to the country.”²³ The blind use of force created even more insurgents, resulting in a cauldron of terrorism. Eventually the US military engaged in mass arrests of any suspicious looking military aged males in order to gather intelligence. They were initially housed at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. According to Thomas Ricks, “the single biggest mistake tactical mistake was to stuff Abu Ghraib with tens of thousands of Iraqis, who may have been neutral about the Americans when they went in, but weren’t when they came out.”²⁴ Eventually, prisoners would be stockpiled at Camp Bucca, near the Kuwait border. It was at Camp Bucca that a deadly nexus between hardline Islamists and experienced Ba’athist soldiers and spies would combine to form the seeds of ISIS.

Even though Saddam would be captured by the end of 2003, the insurgency would continue to pick up speed. The US Marines would engage in the most violent urban combat since Vietnam in Fallujah, not once but twice. As a result, Anbar province would be a magnet for foreign fighters streaming in from Syria and Saudi Arabia. Once the Salafists spread their tentacles throughout the province, particularly in Fallujah and Ramadi, they would never let go.

Simultaneously, Zarqawi’s master plan to create a sectarian war against the Shiites had 2nd and 3rd order effects that would upset the balance between the Shia and Americans. Iran was providing covert support to Moqtada al-Sadr and his Shiite militia in Najaf, the Mahdi Army. The US military and Mahdi Army fought an epic battle at Najaf’s Holy Mosque in 2004, “dropping bombs literally right next to the shrine and just kind of wiping out the Mahdi Army.”²⁵ Instead of neutralizing Sadr and putting down the nascent Shiite

23. Danner, “The New War.”

24. *Frontline*, “Losing Iraq.”

25. *Ibid.*

insurgency, the Bush administration capitulated to US and Iraqi political concerns, just as he had done in Fallujah. Allegedly General George Casey paid off Sadr to stop fighting, to the tune of some “\$1.2 million buying back some weapons and \$330 million more in what were called ‘reconstruction funds.’ ”²⁶ The US had managed to simultaneously foster a sectarian insurgency with their aggressive and timid reactions to the Sunni and Shiite insurgencies, respectively. By coming out swinging, only to back off due to public opinion, the US military was shown to be a paper tiger of sorts. The American forces were fierce fighters, but their political masters would muzzle them just as they hit their stride.

The US found itself caught in the middle of a sectarian war 1,400 years in the making. Unfortunately, nobody realized this. Even worse, instead of either acquiring the resources necessary to crush the insurgency, or alternatively to exit completely, the Americans did something even worse: nothing. Rumsfeld ordered Casey to use a “light footprint” and this resulted in “war tourism, units based on big, forward operating bases, FOBs, going out and doing patrols from Humvees, and then coming back to their base.”²⁷

As both Sunnis and Shiites massacred each other, Washington realized things were falling apart. The metrics for what victory would look like changed, just as the justification for continuing the war changed. Scrapping WMDs for democratic revolution, commanders on the ground began to realize they could not simply kill their way out of this disastrous scenario. Unfortunately, the average Iraqi was living without basic utilities such as consistent electricity, running water and garbage disposal, in addition to a total lack of security. Militias on each side rose up to protect neighborhoods and tribes. Just as though it seemed the war was unwinnable, the tide turned. As noted in Chapter II, Zarqawi’s brutality would blow up

26. *Frontline*, “Losing Iraq.”

27. *Ibid.*

in his face. Eventually, the Sunni Arab tribes in Anbar province would grow tired of living under the thumb of Salafist-Jihadists who were interrupting their livelihoods and violating their woman. Soon, with the arrival of General David Petraeus, the Sunni tribes would combine efforts with a surge of US forces in Baghdad.

Until then, bodies would continue to stack up all over Iraq. Thousands of US military were killed and maimed trying to put a stop to the sectarian violence. However, it was too little, too late. By invading Iraq, Washington had opened Pandora's Box and catalyzed a bloody war between Sunni and Shia in a failed state. This war would ebb and flow, but as we will examine in Chapter IV, historical Sunni-Shia cleavages endemic to Iraq would be exacerbated by a paranoid, inexperienced and stubborn Prime Minister named Nouri al-Maliki.

CHAPTER IV

FROM DEFEAT TO CALIPHATE

The story of ISIS really starts around 2005-2006. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was incorporated as a franchise of Al Qaeda central, subsequent to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi pledging bayat to Osama Bin Laden in October 2004 (see Chapter II). Prior to that, Zarqawi's Monotheism and Jihad organization really ran the table on the US-led coalition and Shiites throughout Iraq beginning in August 2003. As a result, the Sunni-Shia civil war that Zarqawi so dearly desired became a reality and by 2005-2006 it appeared that the US was in danger of losing Iraq in every sense of the meaning to AQI. Just as hopelessness pervaded Iraq, a political gamble which coincided with the Sunni Arab "Awakening" resulted in what appeared to be a happy and victorious ending. How was it possible for Iraq to fall apart so quickly once America pulled out? How did AQI manage to survive near extinction, only to come back stronger and deadlier than ever as ISIS?

This chapter will begin with an examination of the beginning of the end for Operation Iraqi Freedom, specifically beginning with the selection of Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister of Iraq as well as the subsequent political Hail Mary that became known as "The Surge." As time elapses and conditions seemingly improve in Iraq it paved the way for the Obama administration to essentially take a knee and run the clock out on the war in 2011. Yet as one war ends, it spells the beginning of the birth of ISIS.

This chapter will also focus on the political and security dynamics in Iraq and external factors, specifically in Syria, that ushered in an era of oppression and ruthlessness reminiscent of the Ba'athist regime. As the Maliki administration began to lose legitimacy, a security vacuum developed which provided much needed breathing room for ISIS to regroup

and ultimately to smash the Iraqi Security Forces and completely embarrass Maliki just three years later in the summer of 2014.

A New Iraq and a New Strategy

Aside from the sectarian war taking place across Iraq, a political war between the two sects was also taking place. As previously noted, the Sunnis in Iraq are the demographic minority, but until Saddam Hussein was overthrown, they had a stranglehold on political power. Once the Ba'athist regime and its military forces were dissolved via CPA directive, it was the Shiites who were initially in favor of the occupation. Having been a primary target of Hussein's oppressive intelligence service for so long, the Shia community sensed that now was their chance to take control of the circumstances and change their destiny.

Since Washington was in need of a relatively quick political victory, Paul Bremer and his CPA were working on a truncated timeline, and on June 30, 2004 "sovereignty" (and I use the term very loosely) was handed over to an interim Iraqi caretaker government, with national parliamentary elections being held in January 2005. Feeling collectively marginalized after Fallujah was effectively flattened after the second battle, by and large the Sunni population boycotted participating in the elections. Clearly this was not the proper course of action if they were looking to use the political process to recoup their status as political hegemon. It goes without saying that the Shiites dominated the elections.

Anthony Cordesman sums up the situation by stating "we'd elected a government that divided the country...beneath this political structure, there was a virtual vacuum."¹ In the end, two sign cant events occurred that turned the political tide.

The first was the election of Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister in May 2006. The second was the decision to send 20,000 additional troops to Iraq in 2007, as part of "The

1. *Frontline*, "Losing Iraq."

Surge” to protect the population from attack.² General David Petraeus summed up his strategy as “we are going to take away from Al Qaeda, Sunni insurgents on one hand, and then Shia militia extremists on the others, in the areas in which they operate. We are going to fight them.”³

The fighting and friendly casualties would spike upward before improving. Domestic and international political spotlights shone on the Bush administration. Soon, Bush’s National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, received some troubling intelligence about Prime Minister Maliki. Soon, he drafted a report detailing Maliki’s use of sectarian politics as a tactic to gain power. “Reports of nondelivery of services to Sunni areas, removal of Iraq’s most effective commanders on a sectarian basis and efforts to ensure Shia majorities in all ministries, all suggest a campaign to consolidate Shia power in Baghdad.”⁴ Sectarian partisanship would ultimately be the downfall of Maliki and the façade that was the Iraqi Security Forces, but not until 2014. Until then, Washington and in particular President Bush gave Maliki a renewed vote of confidence.⁵

While the Surge was certainly an important factor in turning around the security situation in Iraq, the casual observer often makes a mistake by assuming that the US military single handedly crushed AQI and the other insurgent groups independently. To be sure, the US military engaged in very intense combat, bolstered by a streamlined, experienced and improved intelligence fusion process across the theater. However, the most important factor in turning around Iraq was the so called Sunni Awakening. Over 103,000 Sunni tribal

2. *Frontline*, “Losing Iraq.”

3. *Ibid*

4. *Ibid*.

5. *Ibid*.

fighters, dubbed the ‘Sons of Iraq’ were responsible for decreasing insurgent attacks by 90 percent.⁶

General (Ret.) Jack Keane, known as the man who suggested the Surge policy to President Bush, had a very favorable perception of the dividends paid by the Surge. “By the end of 2008, clearly, the al Qaeda and Sunni insurgency had been relatively stabilized. And in the al Qaeda’s mind, they were defeated. They actually said that in many of their transmissions that we were able to pick up. And the Shia militia, largely those trained by the Iranians in Basra and also in Sadr City, had been defeated.”⁷ Before leaving office in 2008, President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki agreed to keep US forces in Iraq until 2011, with the option for President Obama to extend them even further.

In a hurry to fulfill campaign promises and put a contentious and often brutal guerilla war behind him, President Obama began to downsize the footprint in Iraq, with an eye toward leaving Iraq by 2011. In early 2009 at in a speech at Camp Lejeune, NC, President Obama announced that the US would have a zero troop level in Iraq at the end of 2011.⁸ In the course of the drawdown, the Obama administration became very much detached from day to day developments in Iraq. According to General Keane, “we were no longer attempting to shape and guide their political maturation. Huge mistake.”⁹ Much like a child left unsupervised by a parental authority figure, Prime Minister Maliki began to do whatever he pleased, as long as it gave him personal and political benefit.

Maliki began to cannibalize the military and intelligence services, replacing the

6. *Frontline*, “Losing Iraq.”

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

professionals with his Shiite partisans. It would appear, according to Thomas Ricks, “as if he’s more worried about a coup than he is in having an effective military because what good is an effective military if it’s against you.”¹⁰ The paranoia and fear of being overthrown harken back to the reign of Saddam Hussein. Then again, modern Iraqi political leaders tend to get displaced quite easily, unless they employ brutally oppressive security forces to keep any potential challengers out of the picture. Additionally, Maliki began to turn on the Sunni Awakening fighters. Originally promised a paycheck and a place in the military by Petraeus, Maliki began to renege on the deal once the Americans began to take their eye off the ball. “He began to take exception to the Sons of Iraq, which all came from the Sunni tribes. He stopped paying them. Not only that, he began to purge some of them and actually attacked and killed some of them.”¹¹

Eventually the clock would strike midnight on the proposed 2011 withdrawal date. Perceived to be dragging his feet on the situation, Obama and Maliki got down to brass tacks but could not come to an agreement on a post-2011 troop presence. Thus, on December 14, 2011 “after nearly nine years, over 4,000 Americans killed, more than 30,000 wounded and an estimated cost of \$2 trillion, the last US troops left Iraq.”¹² Physically and politically isolated, Maliki took his reorganized and Shiite dominated military and began an oppressive campaign against the Sunni population. Yet again, he was acting more and more like the dictator the Americans had sacrificed so much to get rid of.

The Many Faces of Al-Qaeda

Iraqi politicians weren’t the only ones transforming themselves in the new Iraq. Even

10. *Frontline*, “Losing Iraq.”

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

before the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI was also in a perpetual state of transition. According to terrorism expert Charles Lister of the Brookings Institute, “AQI’s sustained prominence continued to attract the support--whether ideological or pragmatic--of other Iraq-based insurgent groups.”¹³ On January 15, 2006 AQI announced that it was merging with five other jihadist organizations to form what was known as the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), alternatively known as the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM).¹⁴ Not long after Zarqawi was killed in an airstrike in June 2006, the MSC/MSM would transform yet again.

Five days after Zarqawi’s death, according to Lister, “AQI appointed Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri) as its new leader, and four months later the MSM announced the establishment of...the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), with a fully structured cabinet. Then, on November 10, Masri pledged *bay’a* (allegiance) to ISI leader Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi (Abu Omar al-Baghdadi).”¹⁵ This passage is loaded with items of utmost importance for the future. First, we see for the first time the public transformation of AQI from a ‘terrorist group’ to a self-professed Islamic State. It’s important to understand why this happened. First, even while he was being publicly reprimanded by Zawahiri, Zarqawi was instructed to carve out a safe zone in order to serve as an emirate or state from which to create a Caliphate. Second, this is also in line with Abu Bakr Naji’s policy playbook in *The Management of Savagery*. Taking advantage of the security vacuum, AQI/ISI began to carve out spheres of influence to serve as future safe havens.

13. Charles Lister, “Profiling The Islamic State,” Brookings Institute, November 1, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling_islamic_state_lister/en_web_lister.pdf.

14. Ibid., 8.

15. Lister, “Profiling The Islamic State,” 8.

Another item of extreme importance in the above passage is the reference to bayat. As discussed in Chapter II, Zarqawi adamantly refused on at least five occasions to pledge bayat to Bin Laden while in Afghanistan. It was only in 2004 that he did so, in return for being named emir of AQI. However, when Zarqawi passed away, so did the loyalty his organization vowed to provide Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. According to Charles Lister, “Masri’s pledge of allegiance to ISI combined with the lack of any formal ISI pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda catalyzed a gradual divorce between the two entities. Through the late 2000s, al-Qaeda remained determined that ISI continue as its subordinate by ordering it to attack specific targets, but by 2010-2011, the relationship had eroded significantly.”¹⁶ As such, ISI was free from the ideological constructs of Al Qaeda central, and would eventually choose to go its own way.

Lister alerts us to more significant changes to go along with the pronouncement of ISI. Since it was now, nominally and subjectively, a state in the Westphalian sense it needed a professional military and a governing body.

It had even accumulated a very successful treasury by 2006, “raising \$70-200 million per year through a combination of ransoms, extortion, and oil smuggling.”¹⁷ Unfortunately for ISI, the experiment in governing was not as successful as their entrepreneurial activities. “ISI proved unwilling to compromise its absolutist ideology. Where it attempted to govern, communities ended up opposing their presence. Put simply, ISI overestimated its capacity to engender Sunni support and overstretched its forces, leaving them vulnerable to what was coming.”¹⁸

16. Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 9.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

When the Sunni Arab tribes rose up as part of the Sunni Awakening or Sahwa, it created a big problem for ISI. Threatened by the US-backed Sunni fighters, ISI ramped up the violence by slaughtering over 800 Yazidi villagers on August 14, 2007.¹⁹ They also managed to kill the tribal leader of the Sunni Awakening, though it had no significant operational impact on the tribal fighters. If anything, it simply motivated them to work harder to eradicate ISI.²⁰ According to Lister, “the proliferation of ISI enemies meant that by 2008 the group was under extreme pressure in Iraq. Many of its foreign fighters left the country and sectarian violence decreased measurably.”²¹

Complementary to an extremely high ops tempo of American Special Operations Forces raids against ISI leaders and fighters, the Sons of Iraq managed to keep ISI off balance and largely out of the fight. The general consensus appeared to be that ISI was nearly wiped from the Earth’s face.

However, ISI had a will to survive and leadership began to transition to a defensive posture. Lister alleges that even by “early 2008, ISI began--with impressive speed--extensive structural reforms whereby it ‘devolved’ back into a typical ‘terrorist’ group.”²² With this devolution, we can begin to recognize patterns and developments that are quite familiar, because they are still used by ISIS today. As Lister tells us, “one particularly significant decision was to shift ISI’s headquarters to the northern city of Mosul, where existing Arab-Kurdish tensions could be exploited.”²³ In Mosul, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and two deputies

19. Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 9.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 10.

23. Ibid.

managed the Iraq-wide insurgency, and governors in each province responsible for “operational planning and an enhanced focus on income generation.”²⁴ Again, this structure is one that endures to current times for ISIS.

Not one to let a good crisis go to waste, ISI capitalized on Maliki’s growing sectarianism and paranoia to poach Sunni tribal fighters from the Sons of Iraq. According to Lister, “by mid-2010 ISI was offering larger salaries than the government and recruiting Sahwa members.”²⁵ Although ISI was on the comeback trail, killing nearly 400 people in a three month stretch of 2009 in Baghdad, the organization took another uppercut to the chin.²⁶ On April 18, 2010 a joint US-Iraqi raid killed both Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri.²⁷ The man who took the helm after their deaths, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would put the finishing touches on the powerhouse that was to become ISIS.

After he took charge, ISI became, according to Charles Lister, much more Iraqi-centric. “ISI had become far more Iraqi in terms of its membership. This improved its social grounding, and operations at the provincial and local levels were designed with community dynamics in mind. It also gave ISI an enhanced ability to acquire intelligence sources within the Iraqi security apparatus--something it has since exploited extensively.”²⁸ Just as we saw Zarqawi conduct Advance Force Operations in order to shape the battlefield and prep target sites prior to the initiation of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Baghdadi and company were shaping the battlefield via enhanced intelligence collection, information operations and key leader

24. Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 10.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” 11.

engagements. This was a military formation preparing to assault an objective, or several objectives.

Another Civil War?

The sectarian powder keg Maliki was sitting atop finally exploded in 2012. According to Sinan Adnan and Aaron Reese from the Institute for the Study of War, “Sunni popular resentment finally boiled over on December 20, 2012, after Prime Minister Maliki arrested the bodyguards of Sunni Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi in a targeted move meant to sideline Maliki’s political rivals.”²⁹ In a matter of “weeks, large-scale protests had spread across the Sunni-dominated provinces of Anbar, Salah ad-Din, Ninewa, Kirkuk, and Diyala, as well as in Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad.”³⁰ The protests spawned large camps in which the protestors congregated. One of those camps was located in Hawija, near Kirkuk. On April 23, 2013, “Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) stormed a protest camp and opened fire, killing 20 Sunni protestors and wounding over 100 others.”³¹ The Sunni population revolted against Maliki and his ISF, paving the way for Sunni and Shia militias that were prevalent at the height of Operation Iraqi Freedom, to re-activate and defend their respective populations from the anticipated sectarian war.

Aside from Maliki’s draconian use of his praetorian guard to massacre Sunni protestors, we must also note another important dynamic that was instrumental in the formation of ISIS: the Syrian Civil War. In early 2011, the alleged Arab Spring that was taking the Middle East by storm had impacted nearly every state in the region, with the

29. Sinan Adnan and Aaron Reese, “Middle East Security Report 24: Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency,” Institute for the Study of War, October 1, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Sunni Insurgency in Iraq.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Sunni%20Insurgency%20in%20Iraq.pdf).

30. Ibid., 10.

31. Adnan and Reese, “Middle East Security Report.”

exception of Syria. However, by mid-March 2011, Syria would be under siege. It all started on March 15, 2011, when a minor protest in Daraa was put down violently by the Assad regime. In response, practically all of Syria experienced anti-regime protests and riots, which catalyzed a war between the protestors and the regime.³² In the midst of civil chaos, radical Islamists from around the Muslim world made their way to Syria in order to overthrow the Assad regime.

As mentioned in previous chapters, Zarqawi had paved the way, via Seif al Adl's Iranian connections, to open dedicated transit routes or lines of communication from Syria through Iraq in preparation for the anti-American/anti-Shiite jihad. Additionally, according to Charles Lister, it has been estimated that "85-90% of foreign fighters in Iraq had come via Syria."³³

Interestingly enough, despite the long-standing logistical ties to Syria, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi thought the war in Syria was a "distraction from its Iraq-centric campaign and they forbade even their Syrian followers from joining the rebellion."³⁴

Eventually in mid-2011 Baghdadi eased up and permitted Ninewa operations chief Abu Mohammad al Golani to start a franchise or affiliate of ISIS inside Syria.³⁵ The decision to send Golani to Syria had monumental consequences in the jihadist world, resulting in a

32. William Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad," *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2013, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/>.

33. Lister, "Profiling The Islamic State," 12.

34. Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," The Soufan Group, November 1, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

35. Lister, "Profiling The Islamic State," 13.

bitter clash between Al Qaeda and ISI.

Divorcing Al-Qaeda and Breaking the Walls

Golani's nascent organization, Jabhat-al-Nusra (also referred to as JN or the Al Nusra Front), was ostensibly an arm of ISI but in reality was totally autonomous. Nusra had a rocky start due to its initial focus on killing civilians, but once it recalibrated and solely focused on targeting regime forces, it made impressive strides. "By mid-January 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra had led the seizure of two major military facilities in Northern Syria...and cemented its reputation as a valued member in the fight against the government."³⁶ As Richard Barrett of The Soufan Group points out, JN and the war in Syria "went viral, attracting thousands of fighters from around the globe and completely eclipsing the insurgency in Iraq."³⁷ The publicity was too much for Baghdadi, who announced on April 9, 2013 the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), of which Nusra was now a subordinate organ.³⁸ Golani quickly denied the annexation and proclaimed his independence. Each side continued to ignore the proclamations of the other. Eventually Golani sent it up the jihadist chain of command for arbitration by the one and only Ayman al-Zawahiri, now the head of Al Qaeda after the death of Bin Laden.

This appellate process would create bad blood between Al Qaeda and ISIS. In a circumstance reminiscent of the 2005 letters of admonishment from Zawahiri to Bin Laden, Zawahiri repeatedly ordered Baghdadi to back off and let the Nusra Front operate in Syria independently. Each time Baghdadi, much like Zarqawi would have done, completely ignored the guidance from Zawahiri. This forced his hand, and in February 2014, Zawahiri

36. Lister, "Profiling The Islamic State," 13.

37. Barrett, "The Islamic State," 12.

38. Lister, "Profiling The Islamic State," 13.

essentially excommunicated ISIS from Al Qaeda.³⁹ In a fit of spiteful rage, Baghdadi created a new ISIS affiliate in Syria from Nusra fighters that he poached from Golani. According to Charles Lister, “this new Syria-based ISIS force began aggressively expanding across northern and eastern Syria. This quickly prompted opposition; while Jabhat al-Nusra shared power and governance, ISIS demanded complete control over society.”⁴⁰ The Syria branch of ISIS would go on to engage in a battle royal against practically every rebel group in Northern Syria, in addition to regime forces. Having suffered moderately heavy losses from the infighting, ISIS dropped anchor in Raqqa, Syria where it would establish its headquarters.⁴¹

In the meantime, ISIS launched two extremely effective and creative military operations against the Iraqi Security Forces. The first mission, designed to last 12 months, commenced in July 2012 and was called Breaking the Walls because it was a campaign designed to literally break prison walls and rescue skilled fighters who were often on death row. According to Charles Lister, “ISI launched eight major attacks on Iraqi prisons over the following year. The September 2012 attack on Tikrit’s Tasfirat Prison liberated 47 senior ISI leaders from death row. The campaign’s finale was an assault on Abu Ghraib prison on July 21, 2013 that enabled approximately 500 prisoners to escape.”⁴²

The second mission was called Soldier’s Harvest and was supposed to run 12 months as well. In a brutal display of leveraging clandestine intelligence collection to conduct sensitive kinetic action, it “aimed to undermine the capacity and confidence of security forces through targeted attacks and intimidation. It entailed a 150% increase in ‘close-quarters

39. Barrett, “The Islamic State,” 12–13.

40. Lister, “Profiling The Islamic State,” 13.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

assassinations' of security personnel and threats directed at individual commanders, soldiers, and police, including the bombing of their homes, drive-by shootings against their checkpoints and personal vehicles, and similar targeted attacks.”⁴³

The two 12-month campaigns in Iraq were particularly effective at gaining skilled personnel and destroying the will of the Iraqi Security Forces to fight. With a pool of committed and battle-experienced jihadists, the neutralization of security personnel would also provide a buffer for ISIS to expand its area of operations. Moreover, consolidating and maintaining a headquarters at Raqqa was a brilliant move. With an Iraqi headquarters in Mosul and a Syrian headquarters in Raqqa, ISIS could effectively neutralize the border separating Syria and Iraq, setting the stage for a declaration of Caliphate.

Taking advantage of the Sunni uprising in Iraq, ISIS was able to completely overrun Fallujah in January 2014, in addition to partially taking Ramadi at the same time.⁴⁴ Afterwards, Deir Ezzour, Syria was the site of an anti-rebel ISIS campaign, largely taken in order to get retribution over al Nusra and various other groups that attacked ISIS in the early days of Syria. “ISIS’s operations in Iraq and Syria were becoming increasingly interrelated, with funds, fighters and weapons crossing borders more frequently. It was under this emerging reality that led the rapid seizure of Mosul on June 10, thereby inflaming the wider Sunni armed uprising across Iraq.”⁴⁵

Caliphate

The conquering of Mosul was particularly impressive. During the PBS Frontline documentary *Rise of ISIS*, host Martin Smith remarked that it “only took 800 ISIS militants,

43. Lister, “Profiling The Islamic State,” 13.

44. Ibid., 14.

45. Lister, “Profiling The Islamic State,” 14.

with the help of local Baathist military cadres, to secure a city of 1.8 million people. Even ISIS was surprised.”⁴⁶ Mosul was a particularly lucrative target due to all of the US-supplied military hardware that was recovered from the Iraqi military. Former US envoy in Iraq, Ali Khedery, makes a very compelling argument about the impact of Mosul: “I don’t think Bin Laden could’ve ever dreamt that elements even more radical than his own al Qaeda would be armed with American M1-A1 tanks or 155-millimeter artillery or up-armored Humvees or MRAPS.”⁴⁷ Indeed, ISIS had better military resources than many nation-states in the aftermath of the 2014 Mosul offensive.

On June 29, 2014 an announcement coinciding with the start of Ramadan proclaimed the creation of the Caliphate on behalf of ISIS. They also used a bulldozer to destroy the defensive berm between Syria and Iraq, thus proclaiming “the end of Sykes-Picot” and the borders and states demarcated under the terms of Sykes-Picot.⁴⁸ On July 4, 2014 at the Grand Mosque of al Nuri in Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi preached a sermon and publicly declared the establishment of the Caliphate, dropping Iraq and Syria from the organization’s name, now known simply as the Islamic State.⁴⁹

This was a bold move, provoking yet another conflict with Al Qaeda and its supporters. Since Al Qaeda has traditionally pledged bayat to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, who proclaimed himself *Amir al Mu’minin* or Commander of the Faithful, in the late 1990s, it was clear that they would take issue with the proclamation of Caliphate. Moreover, in his role as Caliph Ibrahim I, Baghdadi was obligated to declare all

46. *Frontline*, “Rise of ISIS.”

47. *Ibid.*

48. Lister, “Profiling The Islamic State,” 14.

49. Barrett, “The Islamic State,” 13.

rival jihadist groups and nation-states null and void. He also encouraged Muslims with technical and administrative skills to come to the Islamic State in order to assist in governing the citizens of the Caliphate. In the example of Ibn Taymiyya, Baghdadi was making very bold moves in order to establish and solidify the Caliphate.

ISIS continued to press its offensive throughout Northern Iraq and Syria in 2014. Due to the unique composition of ISIS, that is to say part-Baathist soldier and part-Salafist-jihadist, the group is a formidable opponent on the battlefield, particularly as it continues to acquire hardware from the hapless Iraqi Security Forces. As ISIS battled Kurdish forces on both sides of the border to a stalemate, particularly around the wheat-laden town of Kobane, it appeared more likely that the United States would need to get involved militarily.

By August 2014, ISIS initiated a brutal information operations campaign in which American and British hostages were beheaded on videotape and posted on the internet, just as Zarqawi had done a decade earlier.

The videos coincided with the commencement of Operation Inherent Resolve, an open ended air campaign led by the US that seeks to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS, in collaboration with Iraqi and Kurdish ground force movements. Additionally, the US began to deploy special operators and Marines to Iraq in order to re-train the Iraqi military and volunteer militias to in an advise and assist training mission.

Is It Too Late?

Nouri al-Maliki is (thankfully) no longer Prime Minister. He was replaced by fellow Shiite Haider al-Abadi. Unfortunately, regardless of how much Abadi improves over Maliki, he cannot overcome the social cleavages inherent in society and government. Additionally, the war against ISIS has turned into a sectarian battle in large part due to the collapse of the Iraqi military. The Iraqi forces were perceived as Shia puppets for Iran anyway, but with

their public and embarrassing collapse in seemingly every battle, the Iranian's have activated their Shia militias to protect shrines, mosques and population centers. They have also been co-opted as an unofficial arm of the Iraqi Security Forces, simply because they are the only entity, other than the Kurds, with the capability and resources to actually fight and defeat ISIS on the ground.

US airstrikes have been vital in assisting Kurdish ground campaigns, particularly in the case of Mosul Dam and Kobane, where ISIS took heavy losses. Yet with the assaults launched ostensibly by fronts for the Iranian Qods Force, we are seeing history repeat itself; Shia militias are seeking retribution for ISIS massacres of Shiite towns, and in turn are committing their own human rights violations. All of this culminated in the much talked about Battle for Tikrit this spring. The Iranians bragged that it would be a cake walk, but they took extremely heavy casualties and much longer than anticipated to quell Tikrit. The US military refused to assist with launching airstrikes, due to Qods Force commander General Qassem Soleimani leading the operation in Tikrit. By all accounts the Iranians/ISF won the battle, but it was a lackluster preview of what to expect if and when Mosul, Fallujah and Ramadi are ever liberated.

What Next?

ISIS achieved a shocking military and political victory out of thin air. This chapter highlighted the events and circumstances that allowed them to do so. We know that ISIS would succumb to a full scale military assault from the US military. Yet, we also know that this would very much exacerbate Islamic anger towards the US, thereby boosting recruiting and anti-US terrorist attacks. We also know that the Obama administration is quite content to focus on striking via the air, occasionally authorizing special operations missions. Keeping all of this in mind, we look to Chapter V to discover what exactly makes ISIS tick, and how

we can exploit it to defeat or at least contain them.

CHAPTER V

DEFEAT, CONTAINMENT OR SETTLING?

Throughout this thesis, we have consistently seen familiar themes such as: the role of Salafism in inspiring religious violence (against sects and infidels); the cult of personality build around Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; the hit parade of strategic and operational mistakes that American and Iraqi politicians made throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom; and finally, we have seen how the Sunni-Shia divide within Iraq against a backdrop of oppression has ignited a regional war based around an ostensibly resurrected Caliphate.

So, where do we go from here? First, this chapter will examine the key centers of gravity for ISIS. These key centers are as follows: Ideology; Leadership; Information Operations; Recruitment. Once these key areas have been examined, then we will examine potential courses of action that will either defeat ISIS, contain ISIS, or do nothing of the sort and simply settle for the fact that we can do nothing about this powerhouse throwback to the 7th century.

Ideology

As indicated in earlier chapters, ISIS is motivated in large part by Salafist-Jihadism. In particular, it is directly tied to the ideology espoused by Ibn Taymiyya, which as we now know had a large influence on Islamism throughout modern times. Yet, ISIS is a very special creation with regard to ideology. As former FBI Special Agent Ali Soufan has pointed out, ISIS subscribes to a synergistic yet very extreme ideology that was incubated for several years at the notorious prison camp at Camp Bucca, Iraq. Specifically, “IS now a chimera of Ba’athist and *takfiri* ideologies, with the organizational skills of the former helping channel the motivational fervor of the latter. The result is an extremist group unlike any other. It’s the

merging of Usama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, with the strengths of one helping negate the weaknesses of the other.”¹ That is a sobering and frightening assessment, but very much true. The merging of Ba’athist soldier with Salafist extremist has 2nd and 3rd order effects that provide ISIS with great depth in manning, leadership, strategy and tactics, and resilience.

Further, Brookings Institute scholar Cole Bunzel indicated that even the US military’s best and brightest admittedly do not, even after all of this time, understand what make’s ISIS tick. Specifically, Major General Mike Nagata, the Commander of Centcom’s Theater Special Operations Command Component (SOCCENT), “confessed in late December 2014: ‘We do not understand the movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it...We have not defeated the idea, we do not even understand the idea.’”²

Bunzel provides an absolutely eye-opening comparison of ISIS’s ideology, when contrasted with Al Qaeda: “If jihadism were to be placed on a political spectrum, al-Qaeda would be its left and the Islamic State its right. In contrast with al Qaeda, it is absolutely uncompromising on doctrinal matters, prioritizing the promotion of an unforgiving strain of Salafi thought.”³ In short, ISIS is driven to ensure the world belongs to their brand of Salafist-Jihadism. Eventually the Caliphate, in their view, will run the world.

Leadership

Ibrahim ibn ‘Awwad ibn Muhammad al-Badri, known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,

1. “From Bucca to Kobani: The Hybrid Ideology of the Islamic State,” The Soufan Group, October 14, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-from-bucca-to-kobani-the-hybrid-ideology-of-the-islamic-state/>.

2. Cole Bunzel, “From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State,” Brookings Institute, March 1, 2015, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>.

3. Ibid., 9.

lends significant credibility and weight to the ranks of ISIS. According to lead ideologue of ISIS, Turki al-Binali, Baghdadi is a direct descendant of the Quraysh, thus a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.⁴ This is very significant (if it is true) in and of itself, due to the fact that apocalyptic prophecy always posits that a descendent of the Quraysh will return to lead the Caliphate into the end times. He reportedly has a PhD in Islamic jurisprudence, speaks eloquent classical Arabic, and even more importantly, he served time as a prisoner at Camp Bucca from 2004-2006, where he became friendly with several of the former Ba'athist military and intelligence officers that would come to form the operational core of ISIS. "In 2006 he joined ISI as a judge and member of it's Sharia councils."⁵ Of course, after the leadership of ISI was decapitated by the joint Iraqi-US raid in April 2010, he was nominated largely via his ties to the Ba'athist members of the organization. In short, Baghdadi has checked all of the boxes, so to speak, for being a credible and authentic leader. He has the educational and family background that Zarqawi never had.

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani is the second most powerful leadership center of gravity. He is a Syrian jihadist that "gave bay'a to Zarqawi before the US occupation of Iraq."⁶ He did indeed fight in Iraq, but he was incarcerated for six years at a US prison camp. He too, is allegedly an Islamic scholar, "having taught theology and law at jihadi training camps."⁷ Adnani is exceedingly dangerous due to his status as spokesman for ISIS. When he speaks, the ever increasing pool of foreign fighters/new converts to Islam take notice and some will do his bidding.

4 Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate," 9.

5 Ibid.

6. Ibid., 24.

7. Ibid.

An example of his danger is the September 22, 2014 public call for Lone Wolf attacks. He implored jihadists to “kill a disbelieving American or European...or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war...and kill him in any manner or way however it may be.”⁸ The most recent example of this was the foiled attack at a Garland, Texas anti-Islam rally. Though Baghdadi and Adnani are certainly not the only two important personalities within ISIS, they are the most significant and valuable. If either were to die or be displaced, ISIS would still march on. However, it would have a significant degradation on operations, recruitment and planning

Information Operations

ISIS is well known in the public eye for its glossy, English language magazine titled *Dabiq*, after the prophetic location in Syria where the final battle between Muslims and the West will occur, after which Jesus Christ will allegedly descend from Heaven to destroy Christianity and evil. This prophetic revelation is relayed through various vignettes and scripture references in every issue of the publication. According to Terrence McCoy, “understanding the allure of that message, is key to understanding the incredible recruiting successes of the Islamic State, which is estimated to have drawn at least 12,000 foreign fighters from at least 74 countries.”⁹ Each issue of the magazine begins with the infamously attributed nod to Zarqawi and his “Spark” speech. A key theme of the magazine is the “us versus them” mentality of ISIS, where the world is divided into two spheres: Muslims and

8. “A Call to Terror: Inspiration-Driven Wolf Packs,” The Soufan Group, December 5, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-a-call-to-terror-inspiration-driven-wolf-packs/>.

9. Terrence McCoy, “The Apocalyptic Magazine the Islamic State Uses to Recruit and Radicalize Foreigners,” *Washington Post*, September 16, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/16/the-apocalyptic-magazine-the-islamic-state-uses-to-recruit-and-radicalize-foreigners/>.

non-Muslims. A choice has to be made on which camp to choose, and there is only one true way. Choosing the wrong one will damn you to hell and, by the way, may get you beheaded. Choosing the right one will make you a servant of Allah, give you a purpose, and a new life in the Caliphate.

According to McCoy, “more than two thirds of people in Tunisia” answered favorably towards the ISIS message in a recent Pew Poll, and quite alarmingly, “72 percent of Iraqis responded that they would see the return of the messiah.”¹⁰ This magazine is a massive force multiplier for ISIS, and a propaganda piece that the US is having a very difficult time countering.

With regard to video messaging, the ‘Message to America’ series that debuted globally in August 2014 was particularly damaging yet effective. In the debut video on 19 August 2014, American hostage James Foley was beheaded, much like Nick Berg in 2004, in order to seek retribution for US airstrikes in defense of Kurds in Erbil, “with a warning to the US to interfere no further.”¹¹ Subsequent videos were released with the same result, undermining US efforts to counter ISIS. Additionally, in concert with the Soldiers Harvest campaign in Iraq in 2012, a series titled “Clanging of the Swords” is largely credited for scaring the Iraqi Security Forces into submission.

In short, the information operations campaign waged by ISIS is, aside from ideology, the most significant center of gravity, and one that will be extremely difficult to counter, particularly with regard to America’s abysmal track record with countering enemy propaganda.

10. McCoy, “The Apocalyptic Magazine.”

11. Barrett, “The Islamic State”

Recruitment

As of 2014, according to Richard Barrett of The Soufan Group, “12,000 fighters from at least 81 countries have joined the civil war in Syria, and the numbers continue to grow.”¹² Often between 18-29 years old and overwhelmingly Western, J.M. Berger and Jessica Stern point out that “beyond age and gender, there are few consistent patterns and no reliable profile of who is likely to be a foreign fighter, but among Western recruits, a disproportionate number of converts can typically be found.”¹³

As with similar conflicts, the problem with an influx of foreign fighters is its ability to be a force multiplier for groups like ISIS. In a Darwinian twist, those fighters who engage in combat, become further radicalized, and return home have the potential to return to their mosques and spread their virulent ideology, potentially inspiring many others to make the voyage to the battlefield and, according to Thomas Hegghammer, “they help kind of radicalize the conflict--make it more brutal. They probably also make the conflict more intractable, because the people who come as foreign fighters are, on average, more ideological than the typical Syrian rebel.” Additionally, Hegghammer tells us that foreign fighters are “overrepresented...among the perpetrators of the Islamic State’s worst acts.”¹⁴

Thus, the recruitment of foreign fighters is the culmination of the other centers of gravity (ideology, information operations, leadership) in that, as state above, it is a force multiplier for foreign jihadists. In addition, particularly for the most radical who move their

12. Richard Barrett, “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” The Soufan Group, June 2, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>.

13. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, “ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon,” *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2015, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166/>.

14. Stern and Berger, “ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon.”

families with them to the Caliphate, they run the risk of permanently radicalizing their children. In fact, children of ISIS foreign fighters are very quickly becoming a lost generation of sorts, due to the atrocities and indoctrination they are constantly exposed to. The next generation of jihadists will be even more uncompromising, violent, dedicated and tactically and technically savvy. In short, unless we come up with a sound strategy to neutralize ISIS soon, the world will become a far more dangerous place for the foreseeable future.

Current Status

The more things change, the more they stay the same. As of October 2014, The Soufan Group assessed that “the self-declared ‘Caliphate’...was in control of territory from north of Aleppo to south of Baghdad and including the cities of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. About six million people on either side of the Syria Iraq border were living under its rule.”¹⁵

Though ISIS has certainly come under increased pressure via US airstrikes, Iranian-supported and led Shia militias as well as pockets of tribes that have not been ethnically cleansed for standing up, ISIS keeps coming back to negate the gains. Additionally, the *Financial Times*’ most recent assessment stated the following: “after stunning the world when it swept through Iraq’s second city of Mosul last year, ISIS looked on backfoot under US-led coalition strikes earlier in 2015. But in the days leading up to the anniversary of Mosul’s June 10 fall, it surged forward again. As the coalition revamps its strategy, the crisis is not only threatening the borders between Syria and Iraq, but their continued existence as states.”¹⁶

15. Barrett, “The Islamic State,” 8.

16. “Interactive Map: Isis’ Advance through Iraq and Syria,” *Financial Times*, June 23, 2015, accessed July 2, 2015. <http://www.ft.com/ig/sites/2014/isis-map/>.

Although, it is certainly worth noting that with the recent loss of Tal Abyad to Kurdish forces in Syria, “Kurdish rebel forces are only 50 kilometers” from their headquarters in Raqqa.¹⁷ However, since Raqqa is the physical and geographical symbol of ISIS, one can assess that a siege mentality would quickly become the norm around the city in order to project an image of invincibility and favor in the eyes of Allah.

What Is The Strategy?

Simply put, the US strategy is in a state of disarray. In the wake of multiple ISIS beheadings of American hostages, President Obama gave an address on September 10, 2014. In the speech, he first acknowledged the threat posed by ISIS to the Middle East and to the United States. According to the President, “our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately, destroy ISIL, through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”¹⁸ He continued to lay out the strategy as follows: “First, we will conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists. Second, we will increase our support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground. Third, we will continue to draw on our substantial counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL attacks. Fourth, we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by this terrorist organization.”¹⁹

While this plan sounds good on paper, it is ineffective. ISIS quickly adapted their tactics, techniques and procedures to the airstrikes. Also, the only consistently successful

17. “The Islamic State’s Capital Under Threat,” The Soufan Group, June 24, 2015, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-states-capital-under-threat/>.

18. “Statement by the President on ISIL,” The White House, September 10, 2014, accessed July 2, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

19. Ibid.

fighters we support via airstrikes are the Kurds. The Iraqi Security Forces are still in poor shape, after having been gutted by Maliki in favor of Shiite partisanship. Though we ostensibly accidentally support the Iranian proxies via airstrike, even they have been blooded in battles against ISIS, particularly in Tikrit and Ramadi. Without a robust US troop presence on the ground to actually take the fight to the enemy, at best the airstrikes will manage to take out troop formations and vehicles. At worst, it will be an expensive and myopic half measure in the name of saying “we did something” about ISIS.

Recently, President Obama admitted that “we don’t have, yet, a complete strategy” to combat ISIS.²⁰ Not long after outlining the above strategy, President Obama admitted that he had overestimated the ability of the ISF to defend Iraq.²¹ In May of this year, after Ramadi fell to ISIS, the President was quoted as saying “If they are not willing to fight for the security of their country, we cannot do that for them.”²² Just last month, he also admitted that the much publicized training of both new ISF troops, Sunni tribal fighters, and a hodgepodge of Syrian rebels, “has not been happening as fast as it needs to be” but he still maintains that ISIS will be “driven out of Iraq and, ultimately it is going to be defeated.”²³

The reason that our strategy is no longer a working strategy is quite simple: nobody in Washington pays attention to significant dynamics. To begin with, if we are going to drive ISIS from Iraq, we must also drive them from Syria. This is a monumental undertaking that

20. Shreeya Sinha, “Obama’s Evolution on ISIS,” *New York Times*, June 8, 2015, accessed July 2, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/09/world/middleeast/obama-isis-strategy.html?_r=0.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Sinha. “Obama’s Evolution on ISIS.”

will require much more than a few thousand rebels with Kalashnikovs, a dozen airstrikes a day, and a quarterly special operations raid. It requires a mature and honest political leader in Iraq to stand up and stop persecuting the Sunni population. At the same time, he must also protect the Shiites from revenge attacks on behalf of the Sunni. Even if we wake up tomorrow and ISIS is turned into dust, another version will replicate based solely on these social issues endemic to Iraq. Furthermore, as long as Bashar Assad clings to power like a wet cat clings to a bathtub, ISIS will exist. Forcing Assad to step down and finding a suitable replacement will also require major amounts of strategic military and political maneuvering. However, as long as Iran and Russia support Assad, nothing will change. Particularly for the Iranians, Syria is the crown jewel of their Shia Crescent hegemony in the region.

Recently, LTG (Ret.) Michael Flynn, former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), made the case against the Washington strategy. The General first states that the US must provide more direct combat support, such as intelligence and communications support.²⁴ Additionally, he states “to defeat an enemy, you must first admit they exist, and this we have not done.”²⁵ Flynn provides three strategic objectives necessary to defeat ISIS: “First, we have to energize every element of national power in a cohesive synchronized manner...to effectively resource what will likely be a multi-generational struggle. Second, we must engage the violent Islamists wherever they are, drive them from their safe havens and kill them. There can be no quarter and no accommodation. Third, we must decisively confront the state and non-state supporters and enablers of the violent Islamist ideology and

24. Michael T. Flynn, “Why the Iraq Offensive Will Fail,” *Politico Magazine*, February 20, 2015, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/02/why-the-iraq-offensive-will-fail-115356.html#.VZVGqmYpCAw>.

25. Flynn, “Why the Iraq Offensive Will Fail.”

compel them to end their support to our enemies or be prepared to remove their capacity to do so.”²⁶

In my assessment, General Flynn’s policy prescription is the best out there. I would only add the following: whether or not Haider al-Abadi is the right man for Iraq, we must use every amount of credibility in our military, intelligence and diplomatic channels to nurture and coach him, much like George W. Bush attempted to do with Maliki. We must not leave the Iraqi political establishment to their own devices. Until we can shape the environment to be amenable for a politician to grant equal protection to both Sunni and Shia, we must resign ourselves to two possibilities: 1) more of the same sectarian violence, but only worse; 2) the return of a strongman in the image of Saddam Hussein, who uses absolutely draconian measures to hold down all of the nefarious actors in society, in the name of security and stability.

Additionally, we must come to a compromise with the Iranians over Bashar al-Assad. Short of direct military action in Syria, the US can only hope to shape Syria into the most secure environment possible, given the vital importance attached to Syria for their virtual empire.

Finally, in addition to the mass killing of ISIS that General Flynn suggested, we must use every computer network operation resource possible to find, fix and finish the vital information nodes ISIS depends on to disseminate their virulent ideology to the masses. By degrading or destroying their digital networks, we can begin to take back the electronic battlespace.

Unless some or all of these things happen, expect ISIS to continue what they are doing, until the Saudi’s or the Iranians grows tired of their games and unloads on them

26. Ibid.

without regard for collateral damage, public opinion, or Western social norms and mores. In short, a case of total war, vice limited war. Make no mistake, there is no hope in simply degrading, containing or settling with ISIS. They must be stopped. As more time elapses, more innocent lives are forever altered or pointlessly ended.

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