INTRODUCTION:

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE AND

INTO THE HISTORY OF ISIS

Following a rapid rise and concomitant territorial conquests, the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and wa-Sham or Levant), or by its Arabic abbreviation, *Da'esh*, has for now, by default, taken operational command and leadership of the global jihadist movement, eclipsing Al Qaeda Central (AQC), which attacked the US homeland on September 11, 2001. At the time of writing, ISIS controls a wide swath of territory in Iraq and Syria, as large as the United Kingdom, with a population estimated at roughly between six million and nine million people. Additionally, ISIS controls a sectarian army numbering more than thirty thousand combatants, in part through an amalgamation of local armed insurgencies in Iraq and Syria and foreign recruits.

ISIS's military surge in Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014 was a rude awakening for regional and global powers. Despite being trained by the United States and costing anywhere between $8 billion and $25 billion,[1] the Iraqi security forces were

shattered like a house of glass in the summer of 2014 by ISIS's blitzkrieg, which was carried out by a force numbering only in the hundreds or at most the low thousands, catching neighboring states and the great powers off guard. According to the *New York Times*, an army that once counted 280,000 active-duty personnel, one of the largest in the Middle East, was now believed to have as few as 50,000 men by some estimates.[2] In June 2014, a few weeks before ISIS captured Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, with a population of almost two million people, US president Barack Obama derisively dismissed the organization as amateurish and said that it did not represent a serious threat to America's regional allies or interests: "The analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a 'j.v.' team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant. . . . I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian."[3] Although Obama is correct to say that ISIS did not pose an immediate or a strategic menace to the US homeland, critics seized on his comment as evidence of the Administration's underestimation of ISIS's strength.

From 2013 until the summer of 2014, ISIS overran Iraqi, Syrian, and Kurdish security forces and rival Islamists as well. The group's prowess was confirmed by the seizure of al-Raqqa and Deir al-Zour provinces in Syria in 2014 and the expeditious collapse of four Iraqi divisions overnight in Mosul and elsewhere in northern Iraq under the determined assault of outnumbered fighters in summer 2014.[4] ISIS's sweep of the so-called Sunni Triangle—an area of central Iraq to the west and north of Baghdad mostly populated by Sunni Muslims—and the threat to the Kurdish regional capital of Irbil alarmed the governments across the Middle East and the Western powers. US officials feared that Saudi Arabia and Jordan might be the next ISIS targets.[5]

By the end of 2014 ISIS had captured approximately a third of Syrian and Iraqi territories and had edged closer to the Iraqi–

Jordanian–Saudi Arabian frontiers, with significant networks of supporters in both Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon, ISIS is purported to possess a few hundred fighters on the Syrian-Lebanese border at Lebanon's eastern and northern front. ISIS and its network of like-minded militants have carried out spectacular suicide bombings and made multiple deadly incursions into Lebanese territory, capturing dozens of Lebanese security forces and traumatizing a society already polarized along social and sectarian lines. In addition, the organization's tentacles have spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, North Africa, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and beyond, exposing the fragility of the Arab state system and the existence of profound ideological and communal cleavages within Middle Eastern and Islamic societies.[6] To maintain their interests and prevent the collapse of the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, the United States and Russia are leading two different coalitions and waging sustained airstrikes against ISIS and other affiliated armed groups in both countries. At the time of writing, at the end of 2015, the effectiveness of the US and Russian coalitions has been limited due to the fierce rivalry between the global and regional powers. This might change, as in November 2015 ISIS allegedly exploited a security loophole at Sharm al-Sheikh Airport in Egypt and smuggled a homemade bomb on board a Russian jet, which killed 224 passengers. The group also carried out a massive operation in Paris with seven suicide bombers that killed and injured hundreds of civilians on November 13, 2015. A day earlier ISIS struck a crowded neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon, with two suicide bombers leaving a trail of blood and destruction. On December 2, 2015, two "supporters" of the group, a husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, twenty-eight, and a wife, Tashfeen Malik, twenty-nine, attacked a social services center in San Bernardino, California, in the United States, killing at least fourteen people and wounding twenty-one. Russia and the Western powers, particularly France, have begun to indirectly coordinate with one another, ratcheting up attacks against areas held by ISIS in Syria, though this coordination is still in its infancy.

President Obama said he was open to cooperating with Russia in the campaign against ISIS if President Vladimir V. Putin begins targeting the group, though the two great powers have divergent interests in Syria.[7]

ISIS represents a new step, a new wave, in jihadism. In contrast to ISIS's stunning rise, Al Qaeda Central, the previous leading group of global jihadism or Salafi-jihadism (the two terms are used interchangeably to refer to militant religious activists of the Al Qaeda variety), seems small by comparison. It possessed fewer than three thousand fighters and no territories of its own, a borderless, stateless, transnational social movement during the height of its power in the late 1990s. Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda's emir, was under the protection of the Taliban in Afghanistan, swearing fealty to its leader, Mullah Omar (pronounced dead of natural causes in 2015). In sharp contrast, ISIS's chief, Ibrahim ibn Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, better known under his nom de guerre, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, anointed himself the new caliph, or supreme ruler of Muslims worldwide, thus challenging Omar's claim to the same title. ISIS's blatant challenge of the Al Qaeda leadership and its imperial ambitions show an organization determined to impose its will as a new major player in the region and as a de facto state as well.

ISIS marks a new peril to the regional security order at a time of fierce social and political struggle within Arab societies and creeping sectarianism fueled mainly by the geostrategic rivalry between Shia-dominated Iran and Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia. ISIS not only threatens the survival of civil-war-stricken Syria and the Iraqi state that was set up after the US-led invasion and occupation in 2003, but also the stability of neighboring Arab countries. Its ability to do so stems more from the fragility of the Arab state system than its own strength as a strategic actor. Baghdadi and his planners have recently devoted more resources and effort to local divisions that pledged their loyalty to ISIS. For example, ISIS's Egyptian affiliate, Wilayet Sinai (Sinai Province), which is active in the north Sinai re-

gion, has waged economic warfare against the state. Carrying out deadly operations against the Egyptian security forces and foreign targets in the capital and beyond, Wilayet Sinai threatens the tourist sector, a lifeline of the Egyptian economy. With its role in the crash of a Russian passenger jet in Sinai in October 2015 that killed all 224 people on board, ISIS's chapter in Egypt has shown organizational capacity and potency. United Nations and Western officials with access to intelligence reports say that of the eight affiliate groups that pledged allegiance to ISIS worldwide, they are most worried about the Libyan arm based in Surt, a port city on the Mediterranean about four hundred miles southeast of Sicily. According to a November 2015 report by a UN monitoring group examining terrorist groups in Libya, it is the only affiliate now operating under the direct centralized control of ISIS with as many as three thousand fighters, half of whom are based in Surt, and many clustered to the east, around Nawfaliya. As military pressure intensified against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Baghdadi has dispatched scores of his lieutenants to Surt as a rearguard base to fall back to if the organization is forced out of Syria.[8]

Arab countries, however, are in part responsible for the growth of armed nonstate actors such as ISIS. If the chaos in both Iraq and Syria provided ISIS with a fertile ground to implant, expand, and consolidate itself, the failure of Arab states to represent the interests of their citizens and to construct an inclusive national identity strong enough to generate social cohesion also contributed to its growth. The reliance of Arab regimes on tyranny, widespread corruption, and coercion led to the breakdown of the state-society relationship. Groups such as ISIS exploit this political tyranny and these dismal social and economic conditions by both challenging the ideology of the state and, at a practical level, presenting a subversive alternative through the reestablishment of the caliphate or the "Islamic State."

One of the defining features of ISIS's strategy that contrasts with that of Al Qaeda Central is that it, along with its

predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), has so far consistently focused on the Shia and the "near enemy" of the Iraqi and Syrian regimes and their Persian ally, rather than the "far enemy" of the United States, Israel, or other global actors. Baghdadi, like AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi before him, has a genocidal worldview, according to which Shias are viewed as infidels, a fifth column in the heart of Islam who must either convert or be exterminated. AQI and ISIS view the struggle against America, Europe, and even Israel as a distant secondary goal that must be deferred until a Sunni Islamic state is built in the heart of Arabia and ISIS consolidates its grip on the Iraqi and Syrian territories it occupies. However, as the group suffered military setbacks in Syria and Iraq in 2015, it began to target the far enemy by relying on its far-flung affiliate groups in Egypt, Libya, and limited networks of followers and stay-at-home groupies in Europe and North America. These attacks against the far enemy divert attention from ISIS's military losses in Syria and Iraq and also reinforce its narrative of invincibility and triumphalism. Despite this tactical shift in ISIS's modus operandi in attacking Western targets, Riyadh, Baghdad, and Damascus are ISIS's immediate strategic targets, not Rome, Paris, London, and Washington.[9] This disproportionate media attention to the massive attacks in Paris and California and the conspiracies in Belgium, fueled by ISIS's actions, has created widespread confusion regarding ISIS's strategy; those gruesome acts account for a tiny percentage of the deaths ISIS has perpetrated. That ISIS is much more interested in the near enemy underpins the relationships between ISIS and members of the global jihadist network, including Al Qaeda Central.[10]

Although ISIS is an extension of the global jihadist movement in its ideology and worldview, its social origins are rooted in a specific Iraqi context, and, to a lesser extent, the Syrian war that has raged since 2011. Its strategic use of sectarian clashes between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims in Iraq and Syria greatly benefited the group and shaped its activities. While most Salafi-jihadists are nourished on an anti-Shia, anti-Iranian pro-

paganda diet, Al Qaeda Central prioritized the far enemy, specifically America and its European allies. From the mid-1990s until the present, Al Qaeda Central has waged a transnational jihad against the United States, trying to bog it down in a total war against the Islamic world.[11] Only afterward would bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQC's current leader, level the playing field with the near enemy (local rulers) and then seize power in their native lands, a strategy that has certainly failed.[12] In contrast, ISIS's primary strategic target is the consolidation and expansion of the lands and authority of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and other neighboring Muslim countries. ISIS wants to destroy the colonial borders in the Fertile Crescent, or Levant, which were drawn by the European powers at the end of World War One. In doing so, the group seeks to replace the "apostate" regimes with an Islamic state, a caliphate. Baghdadi, who anointed himself as the new caliph, invested his local political ambitions with transnational symbolism and utopia. The formal entrance of the United States into the war against ISIS in August 2014, and Russia's entrance, together with other Western powers at the end of 2015, partially collapsed these distinctions between the near enemy and the far enemy. In a way, ISIS turned the tables on Al Qaeda Central, laying claim to the leadership of the global jihadist movement. Nonetheless, it would be foolish to lose sight of ISIS's core strategy of statehood in the Levant, a factor that continues to affect the group's activities and actions.

The rise of ISIS shows the urgent need to understand what has happened within Arab societies and the international relations of the Middle East. ISIS is a symptom of the broken politics of the Middle East, of the fraying and delegitimization of state institutions as well as of the spreading of civil wars in Iraq, Syria, and beyond. The cause of the group's development and rise is located in the severe social and political conditions in Arab societies as well as in regional and global rivalries. The sustained crisis of governance and the political economy, decades old, is a key factor. This book will thus trace the journey

of this *takfiri*[13] organization from inception and consolidation to the military surge that allowed it to settle and expand, first in Iraq, then in Syria and beyond. The text focuses on four key factors in ISIS's rebirth. The first is that ISIS can be seen as an extension of AQI, which was itself a creature of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. By destroying state institutions, the invasion reinforced popular divisions along ethnic and religious rather than national lines, creating an environment that was particularly favorable for the implantation and expansion of groups such as AQI and ISIS. Second, the fragmentation of the post–Saddam Hussein political establishment and its incapacity to articulate policies that emphasized the country's national identity further nourished intercommunal distrust, thus deepening and widening the Sunni-Shia divide. Thirdly, the breakdown of state institutions in Syria and the country's descent into a full-blown war is a significant factor in the revitalization of ISIS. Finally, ISIS could not have consolidated the gains it made with the Syrian war without the derailment of the Arab Spring uprisings and the consequent spreading fires in neighboring Arab countries.

THE US-LED INVASION AND OCCUPATION OF IRAQ: REPERCUSSIONS

The US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, combined with the subsequent social turmoil and prolonged and costly armed resistance, led to the dismantling of state institutions and the establishment of a political system based on *muhasasa*, or the distribution of the spoils of power along communal, ethnic, and tribal lines.[14] Iraqi national identity has been in flux, gradually transformed as local sectarian and ethnic identities supersede the collective identity adopted by the Baath ruling party, one premised on Arabism and nationalism. By exposing the failure of the postindependence, postcolonial state to build an inclusive national identity, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq caused a social rupture. The present sectarian-based political system and the dominant forces within it are

largely a product of the US occupation and the destruction of the state. Separate sectarian identities do not and cannot represent a viable alternative for a new Iraq. ISIS succeeded in trading on the political system's failure, but doing so does not make it a repository of Sunni aspirations. Nevertheless, the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq and the Syrian civil war were a defining moment in the reconstruction of a potent pan-Sunni identity in both countries and the wider region. Even though ISIS would not have done as well as it has without backing by an important Sunni segment, it is doubtful whether this pan-Islamism sentiment can now be seen as an enduring identity for Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis.

We know very little about the complex relationship between ISIS and the population under its control, and most of the reports are fragmentary and offer contradictory synopses of life under the caliphate. On balance and for their own separate reasons, the Shias and Kurds felt that the supra-state identity endorsed by the Iraqi regime favored Sunni Arabs at their own expense. In this sense, the dismantling of state institutions in 2003 and the setting up of a sectarian-based system triggered and intensified a clash of identities, a struggle that has almost wrecked modern Iraq.[15]

ISIS's viciousness reflects the bitter inheritance of decades of Baathist rule that tore apart Iraq's social fabric and left deep wounds that are still festering. In a sense, ISIS internalized the brutal tactics of the Baathist regime and Iraq's blood-drenched modern history. Although Baghdadi and Hussein come from two different ideological poles, both sought to build a tyrannical regime that tolerates no dissent and uses terror to silence the opposition. Baghdadi surrounds himself with junior and senior officers of Hussein's army and police, many of them former enforcers of Baathism's brutal rule. This does not imply that ISIS's Salafi-jihadism is synonymous with Baathism, a relatively secular nationalist ideology, as some observes claim. (Chapter 5 fleshes out this argument further.) Former Baathists did not hijack ISIS but, rather, the latter converted many Baathists to its cause. It is important to distinguish between

ISIS's vicious tactics, which resemble those of the old Baath ruling party, and revolutionary Islamist ideology and those of the Baath's nationalism. This has also been a point of contention between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra—another Salafi-jihadist armed group in Syria and the official arm of Al Qaeda Central there, formally established in the war-torn country in 2012—as members of each group often accuse their rivals of having been former Baathists, attempting to delegitimize them in the eyes of the Islamist base. For example, a prominent scholar of Salafi-jihadism, Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, who backs al-Nusra against ISIS, explained the brutal ways of Baghdadi and his associates by asserting that "they have just discovered Islam, and were until recently Baathists slaughtering Muslims."[16] Of course, Maqdisi's blame of Baathists is designed to absolve Salafi-jihadists, his cohorts, of responsibility for the massive shedding of civilian blood.

The causes of ISIS's unrestrained violence lie in (1) its origins in AQI and its founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who represents a post–Al Qaeda generation of Salafi-jihadism focusing on identity and communal politics; (2) its Iraqization through the instrumentalization of Baathist tools of repression as well as the country's bitter legacy of violence; and (3) the ruralization of ISIS's rank and file.[17]

Whereas the two previous jihadist waves of the 1970s–1990s had leaders from the social elite and their bases were mainly composed of middle-class and lower-middle-class university graduates, ISIS's cadre is rural and agrarian, lacking in both theological and intellectual accomplishment. While the majority of ISIS's combatants tend to be poor, the leadership is solidly middle class and lower middle class; this might spell trouble for the group if and when its military fortunes decline, because the foot soldiers are not as versed in or even committed to the Salafi-jihadist ideology as the top echelons are. These poor combatants could easily shed their ISIS affiliation and be reintegrated into their communities.[18] The current wave of Salafi-jihadists is facilitated by its rural and tribal social origins, providing a deep sense of victimhood and religious in-

evitability of victory as well as of *isti'la'* (superiority) over Shia Muslims, who are, historically, a marginalized community in Iraq and neighboring Arab countries. Social profiles of mid-level commanders of ISIS and its Islamist rival, al-Nusra, show a background of manual labor and blue-collar jobs as mechanics, vegetable and fruit vendors, farmers, construction workers, shopkeepers, and low-level workers in restaurants. ISIS thrives among poor, disenfranchised Sunni communities, including those in the Fallujah, Tikrit, and Anbar regions in Iraq; the al-Raqqa province and Deir al-Zour in Syria; Akkar, Tripoli, and the Bekka Valley in Lebanon; and Maan and Zarqa in Jordan. The lower-class background of ISIS's combatants explains why the organization justifies its actions as a defense of the poor and disfranchised as well as why it targets areas with natural and raw resources.[19] In contrast to the typical recruits joining ISIS from within the Middle East, many of the foreign fighters who have migrated to ISIS from around the world, especially those from Europe and North America, are reportedly educated and middle class, an inconsistency that calls for further exploration.

By 2010, AQI, the forerunner of ISIS, suffered military defeat and was socially besieged; yet, in less than four years, it has reconstituted its cells and has expanded far beyond the Iraqi Sunni Triangle, threatening the state system in the Fertile Crescent. Although objective material conditions in Iraq and Syria fueled ISIS's emergence, its ideology appealed to radicalized religious activists and a small segment of young men and women worldwide; these volunteers and recruits want to be part of the resurrection of the caliphate—a romantic, utopian metanarrative that has increasing allure in a broken Middle East dominated by repressive, illegitimate, minority-based regimes.

IRAQ'S BROKEN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The social turmoil caused by the US-led invasion, particularly the destruction of state institutions, triggered a deep sectarian divide between Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims and propelled

the rise of ISIS from an inconsequential nonstate actor to an Islamic state. Filling an ideational and institutional void, ISIS stepped in and offered aggrieved Sunnis a potent pan-Sunni (sectarian-Islamist) identity that transcends nationality, ethnicity, and borders. Baghdadi and his cohorts attempt to reconstruct Iraq's supra-state identity (Arabism and nationalism) along sectarian terms (pan-Sunni), challenging the very foundation of the separate nation-state as well as the norms and rules that underpin international society. Sectarianism is the fuel that powers ISIS, and it is fueled by ISIS in return, an essential dynamic at work that requires further exploration of the reconstruction and redefinition of Sunni Arab identity and should not be assumed to be a fait accompli. Since 2003 Iraq has descended into a sustained crisis, inflaming the grievances of the Sunni population over their disempowerment under the new Shia ascendancy and preponderant Iranian influence (for developments in Iraq after 2003, see chapter 3). Although Sunnis have protested the discrimination they face for some time, their protests fell on deaf ears in Baghdad and Washington. The disintegration of the social fabric in this manner created an opening for ISIS to step in and take advantage of the wrongs felt by Iraq's Sunnis and depict itself as their "defender" and "protector." In addition to its strategic manipulation of sectarian divisions, ISIS and its predecessors, AQI and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), managed to gain support through their anti-US rhetoric, which appealed to the Sunni youth who felt that the country had been humiliated and colonized by the United States with Iran's backing. Iraq's dysfunctional and broken political system, which suffered from increasing factionalism, provided ISIS with ideological nourishment.

Like their predecessors, the Baathists, the new ruling elite in Iraq failed to construct an inclusive national identity and rebuild state institutions on more solid legal foundations. The post-Hussein elite are accountable for the misfortunes that have befallen Iraq after 2003. Although the US-led invasion is responsible for causing a rupture in state and society, Iraq's

new leaders could have ameliorated dismal social conditions and strengthened national unity. For most of the eight years of Nuri al-Maliki's premiership (May 20, 2006–September 8, 2014), Sunnis felt disenfranchised by what they viewed as sectarian-based policies, leading to their decision to organize themselves communally. Maliki's reluctance to support the Sahwa forces, tribal Sunni councils organized and financed by the US occupation authorities, only further deepened the rift with the Sunni community, and the intensification of identity politics led to a vicious cycle of polarization between Sunnis and Shias. Also, his conflicted relationship with some high-profile Shia figures, combined with the inefficiency of the government and its widespread corruption, left the Shia community divided. From 2010 on, Maliki's increasing hold over the state apparatus and its institutions did not foster confidence in the government, and his heavy repression of the Arab Spring protests provoked anger and resistance. As armed groups infiltrated the sit-ins, it became more and more difficult to distinguish peaceful protesters from violent militias. Social and ideological cleavages weakened Iraq, thus enabling Baghdadi and his planners to infiltrate the country's fragile body politic.

Baghdadi presented ISIS as the sole defender of *Ahl al-Sunna* (the Sunni community), the voice and champion of Sunni Arabs who feel excluded and persecuted by the Shia-dominated regime in Baghdad and the Alawite-led regime in Damascus.[20] Unlike his notorious predecessor and the founder of AQI, Zarqawi, Baghdadi cultivated a powerful social constituency that provided ISIS with a steady supply of skilled fighters as well as a territorial and political safe haven. This point requires further explanation: thousands of embittered Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis fight under ISIS's banner, even though many do not subscribe to its extremist Islamist ideology. The group has successfully inserted itself in an unfolding mini civil war in Iraq and blended with the local Sunni community. In a way, there is nothing mysterious about the spectacular rise of ISIS. It is worth stressing that there is no credible evidence to show that ISIS's ideology

of Sunni pan-Islamism is the adopted identity in Sunni areas in Iraq and Syria, though this hypothesis is presented by writers with little empirical evidence to substantiate it. According to Sunni Iraqis in Mosul, Tikrit, and other Iraqi cities to whom I talked, Sunni rebels and tribes played a pivotal role in facilitating ISIS's takeover of the Sunni Triangle only to have the group turn against them after the cities had fallen. Additionally, during conversations I have had with Iraqi tribal leaders, many acknowledged that their sons initially joined the ISIS caravan not because of its Islamist ideology but as a means of resistance against the sectarian-based central authority in Baghdad and its regional patron, Iran. Increasing evidence now shows that Iraqi Sunnis are divided between those who back ISIS as an effective weapon against their Shia tormentors and others who express regrets about having supported the organization and are turning against it because of its brutal tactics and tyrannical rule.

According to reports from the Sunni Triangle, more and more tribes are distancing themselves from ISIS and denying taking part in its mass crimes,[21] though the tide has not turned against the group yet. For the moment, ISIS still maintains *hadanah sha'biyya* (a social base), which has allowed it to withstand punishing attacks by the US-led coalition and the Iraqi and Syrian armies and Kurdish and Shia militias. The group greatly benefited from abuses and violations of Sunnis by Shia militias in Iraq and Syria as well as a widespread perception among Sunnis that airstrikes by the United States and its allies unjustly target their coreligionists while turning a blind eye to Shia radicals. However, ISIS has not offered Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis a positive political and socioeconomic vision that addresses the severe challenges facing their community. Jihadists of all colors and stripes, past and present, lack a political imagination, the result of a structurally flawed decision-making process, argued a well-known Al Qaeda theorist, Abdullah Bin Mohamed, in a recent memo called "The Problem in the Jihadist Decision Making." As long as clerics and preachers dominate

the jihadist movement, Bin Mohamed concludes, jihadists will be unable to translate their military gains on the battle-field into political capital.[22]

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Another key factor in the resurgence of ISIS is the breakdown of state institutions in Syria and the country's descent into all-out war after 2011. Not unlike Arab protesters in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen, tens of thousands of Syrians revolted against *al-istibdad* (repression) and *al-tahmeesh* (exclusion). Bread, freedom, social justice, and *al-karama* (human dignity) were the rallying cries that echoed from Syria's *mayadeen* (squares), reflecting political and economic vulnerabilities, not sectarian and parochial concerns. Only later did the uprising become militarized, taking on a sectarian façade. The nature of civil-military relations in Syria was radically different from that of relations in Tunisia and Egypt, other sites of Arab Spring up-risings; the Syrian security forces recognized that their survival in their current form depended heavily on the survival of the Assad regime. As Bashar al-Assad's security services violently clamped down on peaceful protesters and depicted antiregime social mobilization in sectarian terms, the revolt rapidly mu-tated, militarized, and eventually radicalized. Nationalist-based protests increasingly acquired religious symbols and references, with armed Islamist groups and militias in rural villages tak-ing advantage of the tumult to advance their ultraconservative Salafist ideology and agenda.

What started as a progressive call for social and political re-forms turned into a sectarian clash and war of all against all. In a repeat of the Iraqi scenario, Islamist armed groups and the Islamist rhetoric of jihad were empowered, their existence be-coming somewhat justified in the eyes of a significant pro-portion of Syrians due to the regime's violent crackdown on civilians. Islamist groups in Syria portrayed themselves, and were often perceived, as the defenders of the persecuted Sunni

community. Similar to the case of Iraq, where the Islamic Republic of Iran's support of the Shia community increased sectarian tensions, Iran's unwavering support of the House of Assad reinforces the sectarian narrative. In late 2011 Baghdadi and his commanders had the political foresight to send a contingent of their men led by two trusted lieutenants, Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and Mullah Fawzi al-Dulaimi, to supposedly battle the Assad regime and establish an operational base in the country.[23] In less than a year Joulani's al-Nusra, as an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq, built an effective network in Syria that included thousands of local and foreign fighters who gained notoriety on the battlefield against Assad's forces. According to subsequent testimonies by top jihadists, from the start a decision was made to keep the real identity of al-Nusra secret and blend in with the local population in a bid to avoid alerting the Americans to Al Qaeda's presence in Syria.[24] This move allowed al-Nusra to expand and build coalitions with various Islamist factions. By the time Baghdadi publicly divulged the connection between the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Nusra in April 2013, stating that al-Nusra's strategic goal was to establish an Islamic state in Syria,[25] he had already gained strategic depth and baptized his fighters with blood and fire, a stroke of evil genius. (For context and analysis about the ISI–al-Nusra connection, see chapter 5 on Syria.) Unilaterally dissolving both the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Nusra, Baghdadi announced a merger, a new entity called the Islamic State of Iraq and wa-Sham,[26] an initiative swiftly rejected by Joulani, which triggered an internal jihadist civil war.[27] Although al-Nusra, together with other armed groups, launched a preemptive strike against ISIS, in the end the group prevailed over al-Nusra and its allies and captured major cities, including al-Raqqa, which became the seat of its capital.

Feeding upon each other, Iraq and Syria were vital to the resurgence of ISIS, which defined the struggle in both countries through the framework of identity. It developed a distinct pan-Sunni sectarian identity, a deliberate contrast to the pan-Shia identity represented by the sectarian-dominated, Iran-backed

regimes in Damascus and Baghdad. Of all variables empowering ISIS, the anti-Shia, anti-Iranian factor tops the list. ISIS has developed a narrative—rooted in a pan-Sunni identity that is intrinsically opposed to what it portrays as a pan-Shia, aggressive, expansionist ideology—that has infiltrated and is taking over the Islamic world. ISIS's anti-Shia, anti-Iranian program is the most effective card it has played in Iraq and Syria, and it has so far proved to be a powerful recruiting tool. The organization has tapped into the communal rift that grew after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. This dispute spiraled out of control after the Arab Spring was aborted and after Syria and Iraq descended into war and chaos. It is this clash of sub-Islamic identities, a mini intra-Islamic war, that has fueled ISIS's spectacular growth. After the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and the declaration of the Islamic State, time and again the organization's spokespeople have asserted their leadership of the *umma* (the global Muslim community) and Ahl al-Sunna and dismissed existing and potential rivals to this honor as pretenders.

Although Iraq is ISIS's original home, its expansion to neighboring Syria provided it with strategic depth and significant economic resources. Syria is the location of ISIS's capital, al-Raqqa, and its major sources of income, including the oil trade, taxation, wheat and fertile agricultural lands, and criminal activities, and, according to US intelligence officials, more than two-thirds of its fighters are deployed in the country (though this might be changing for operational reasons as military pressure takes its toll on ISIS in Syria). In addition, the disintegration of the country's social fabric and political system and its transformation into a battlefield for regional wars by proxies also offer motivation and inspiration for potential recruits to ISIS and similar groups like al-Nusra. As long as Syria's conflicts rage, ISIS will continue to entrench itself in the midst of the chaos that defines the war-torn country today. However, at the time of writing, at the end of 2015, ISIS is squeezed by Syrian Kurdish insurgents backed by the United States, and other opposition factions, prodded by their regional patrons, which have also pressurized ISIS, diminishing the group's

prospects considerably in Syria. ISIS's grip on Syria is not as strong as that of Iraq. Nevertheless, ISIS's successful comeback in Iraq was greatly bolstered by its power consolidation in Syria. Following its takeover of important Syrian cities in 2014, ISIS dissolved the international border that separated the two countries. By doing so, it affirmed its supremacy at the head of the global jihadist network, proving that its tactic of *kasr al-hudud* (breaking down borders) had worked. ISIS used its achievements in Iraq and Syria to taunt other neighboring countries, which in turn only increased its popularity across the region.

THE ARAB SPRING

Finally, ISIS could not have surged without the derailment of the Arab Spring uprisings and the sabotage of the aspirations of millions of citizens who called for a more just social contract and a bill of rights. The Arab Spring did not occur in a vacuum. Millions of Arabs reached a breaking point because of decades of developmental failure and repressive rule. It was an emancipatory moment that could have progressively transformed the Arab Middle East had it not been derailed by an unholy alliance of internal and external counterrevolutionary forces. This included a multitude of actors, such as autocratic rulers backed by regional allies, the military-security apparatus, *al-fulul* (elements of the old regime), and ISIS, whose interests converged in blocking peaceful political change. (Chapter 7 develops this argument further.) ISIS could not have surged without the grand collusion between authoritarian Arab rulers and their regional and global patrons to maintain the status quo at all costs. Although bitter regional rivals, both Saudi Arabia and Iran acted as counterrevolutionary powers, trying to stem the tide of political change at home and in the neighborhood and to consolidate their influence.

As the Arab uprisings gathered steam, Saudi Arabia spent more than US$100 billion at home in an effort to keep domestic peace and buy the loyalty of its citizens. The Saudi kingdom also invested billions of dollars in Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, Yemen,

Morocco, and Jordan to prevent revolutionary change and keep its conservative Arab allies in control.[28] Saudi Arabia, together with the United Arab Emirates, even deployed two thousand troops to Bahrain to allow its Gulf ally to crush the opposition. Although initially the United States did not accept the official Saudi and Bahraini claims that Iran had fomented the protests in the tiny Gulf sheikdom, it reversed course and implicitly acquiesced to Saudi military intervention, suggesting that pro-Iranian elements might attempt to hijack the popular will. Bahrain became a flash point, a casualty of the US-Iranian rivalry and American economic and strategic interests with Gulf Arab countries.[29] While US policy makers backed regulated change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, they were reluctant to do so in the Gulf because the stakes were much higher for American national interests there.

Similarly, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which prides itself as a revolutionary state, has fought tooth and nail to sustain the Assad regime. Iran also backed Maliki, whose divisive sectarian policies brought ruin to Iraq, and did not distance itself from Maliki until after the powerful Iraqi Shia religious establishment had done so. Ironically, at the beginning of the Arab uprisings in February 2011 and before the storm had wrecked Syria, Iranian leaders sought to take credit for events in their neighborhood. The Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, called the Arab Spring a "natural enlargement of Iran's Islamic revolution of 1979" and credited his country for being the catalyst of this "Islamic awakening."[30] But as the "Islamic awakening" reached Syria and Iraq, the premature jubilation of Iranian leaders darkened and their closest Arab partners, Maliki and Assad, fought for their political future and literally their political lives. Iran threw a lifeline to rescue the two drowning men, pouring gasoline on a raging sectarian fire in Iraq, Syria, and beyond. In its efforts to prevent the collapse of the Assad regime, Iran found a natural ally in Russia. In September 2015 President Putin intervened directly in the Syrian conflict and launched airstrikes in support of the Assad regime. In a way, Syria has also become the location of a global war

by proxy between the Western powers and Russia, which has invested considerable diplomatic and military capital to thwart Western intervention in the war-torn country.

This new cold war between the leader of Arabian Sunni Islam, Saudi Arabia, and the leader of Shia Islam, (Persian) Iran, has played out on the streets of weaker and more tumultuous Arab countries, particularly Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. It diverted the struggle from social and political emancipation in Arab countries and toward geostrategic and sectarian rivalry. Syria and Iraq, together with other countries, have become battlegrounds for regional wars by proxies in which Saudi Arabia and Iran, together with Turkey and Qatar and others, vie for influence and hegemony by arming and financing warring camps. Firmly rooted in power politics as well as the politics of identity (Sunni versus Shia) and the construction of rival national identities (Arab versus Persian), this regional war by proxy is a godsend for ISIS and other Al Qaeda local factions in general. At the beginning of hostilities in Syria and Iraq, al-Nusra and ISIS obtained funds, arms, and a religious cover from neighboring Sunni states, precious social and material capital that proved decisive. ISIS's rebirth was facilitated by this geostrategic and geosectarian rivalry between Sunni-dominated states and Shia-led Iran. The fragility of the Arab state system triggered a free-for-all struggle for competitive advantage by pivotal regional powers. As a nonstate actor, ISIS initially climbed on the shoulders of key regional states that battled each other for influence and supremacy in the heart of Arabia. Not unlike Al Qaeda Central, which emerged out of the US-Soviet violent rivalry over Afghanistan in the 1980s, ISIS is also a creature of the geostrategic and geosectarian conflict, as well as of the foreign intervention in the Arab Middle East.

ISIS AND THE STORY OF BAGHDADI

As this book explores the history of ISIS through the framework of identity and sectarian politics, chapter 4 provides a portrait of Baghdadi by reconstructing his journey from invisibil-

ity to infamy. His story is pieced together from recollections of contemporary witnesses who had known him before he joined AQI, as well as others who spent time with him before and after he was detained by the Americans in Camp Bucca, near Umm Qasr in southern Iraq, in February 2004 on charges of being a Sunni "foot-soldier."[31] When he assumed the leadership of AQI in 2010, the group was on the brink of collapse, bereft of its social and territorial base in the Sunni Triangle. This was mainly due to an internal civil war between AQI and the Sunni community in Iraq, which had initially provided refuge to the group. Baghdadi and his inner circle patiently and systemically rebuilt their social network and expanded its constituency among disfranchised Sunnis in Iraq and then Syria after the political uprising there escalated into all-out war. At the time, Baghdadi cleverly reorganized AQI's military apparatus, relying on the operational expertise of former Iraqi army and police officers and skilled Chechen trainers in Syria, turning it into a professional fighting force capable of waging urban and conventional warfare. With years of combat experience and training and a long history of fighting that included participation in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Kuwait in 1990–1991, the counterinsurgency in the 1980s and 1990s, and resistance against the Americans from 2003 until 2010, these skilled Sunni officers of the disbanded army transformed Baghdadi's ragtag bands and networks into a potent guerrilla force, likened to a mini sectarian army, capable of carrying out large-scale offensives and vanquishing Iraqi and Syrian military brigades.

Concerning ISIS's rapid surge, many questions surrounding Baghdadi still have yet to be answered. Specifically, how did Baghdadi, a man with no previous military background who is neither a political theorist nor a religious preacher, transform ISIS into the world's leading Salafi-jihadist organization, which controls a contiguous "nation" across the Syrian-Iraqi border with a force of more than thirty thousand fighters? How did he manage to fill its coffers with up to $2 billion annually (by 2015 ISIS's annual budget has plummeted to about $1 billion) and

turn it into one of the wealthiest nonstate actors, now a proto-state with the aspiration of being a state, through a diversified war economy? To what extent is Baghdadi helped by the fraying state institutions in Iraq and Syria and by rival regional powers' fostering of sectarian mobilization and polarization? We cannot be confined to Baghdadi's personal experiences or a focused study in leadership or the great man himself. Baghdadi's rise to power coincided with increasing political and communal tensions in Iraq, where central government policies were widely seen as marginalizing and undermining the Sunni community. The chaos in Iraq and then Syria has inadvertently empowered Baghdadi's jihadist caravan.

ISIS is tied to the raging sectarian fires in Iraq and Syria and the clash of identities that is ravaging Arab countries, and, should ISIS be defeated, there is always the risk of another like-minded militant group, such as al-Nusra, filling a power vacuum in the region. If ISIS is a manifestation of the breakdown of state institutions, then the fragile authoritarian state system must be rebuilt on a more solid, legitimate foundation. This requires a transparent, inclusive, and representative government that delivers public goods, including jobs, and gives millions of young men and women, who feel forsaken, a stake in the future of their countries. A more complex challenge is to confront ISIS's Salafi-jihadist ideology and worldview. By portraying itself as the only alternative to a broken and corrupt political system, ISIS is trying to hijack agency from the people, yet in many ways, it uses the same tactics of the authoritarian regimes that it seeks to replace. The challenge is to provide hope to the millions of men and women who called for justice, freedom, and a life with dignity, as we saw during the Arab Spring uprisings, while simultaneously convincing them that there are nonviolent options that can bring about meaningful and substantive political change. Until we do, the menace of the "Islamic State" and similar Salafi-jihadist groups will remain a problem both for the Arab-Islamic world and for the international community.