

VIJAY PRASHAD

Anatomy of the Islamic State

ISLAMIC STATE

Execution of Western journalists and aid workers and a threat to the US allies in Iraqi Kurdistan brought the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) onto the concern list of the West, and subsequently to the world. That the IS had already seized the Iraqi cities of Fallujah and Ramadi and the Syrian cities of Raqqa and Deires-Zor almost a year beforehand had not sent up the amber light of caution. Already Iraq and Syria had been seriously threatened by the IS, which had captured land that straddle the two countries and had been in control of the Omar and Tanakoil fields in eastern Syria from where it had begun to accumulate its revenues. In January 2014, two ambassadors from western European countries told me that my reports had greatly exaggerated the influence of ISIS. They wanted to maintain the view that the Syrian civil war was between the forces of Freedom (the rebels) and Authoritarianism (the Syrian government). That Cold War derived framework had not been applicable to Syria at least since early 2012, when dangerous forces had inserted themselves into the emergent chaos in northern Syria. By 2014, those forces had seriously threatened not only Damascus, but the entire region, from the borders of Iran to the borders of Saudi Arabia. As his forces spread themselves across this land, the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did something audacious: he anointed himself the Caliph of Islam and dropped the geographical limitation to his organisation. The Islamic State (Arabic acronym *Daesh*) was born, with its Caliph a former Iraqi military man in his forties.

No doubt that *Daesh* is a menace to regional stability. Nor is there any doubt that the Islamic State is a serious threat to the people who live under its dominion. But the threats to the region are not authored solely by IS, nor, by any metric, could an analysis of its threats ignore the history of imperialism in the region. The temptation to measure the brutality of IS in the history of Islam is a great error. Certainly, the Islamic State takes its own inspiration from that history, one that stretches back to the revelations of *al-Quran* and in the political battles that caused the great schisms inside the world of Islam. But the emergence of IS cannot be understood as part of religious or religio-political history. Nothing in the soil of Syria or Iraq suggested its emergence prior to the massive attack on Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003, and prior to the slow and deadly civil war in Syria since 2011. Al-Baghdadi might seek to crown himself in the legacy of the caliphates, but his own existence is premised not so much on divine history as on the history of imperialism in West Asia.

ANTI-COMMUNISM

Two generations ago, the communist movement made serious gains in the swathe of land that runs from North Africa into West Asia. Sudan boasted the largest communist party in Africa, and Iraq had the most numerous party in West Asia. These parties had a substantial influence in their countries, with a leftward tilt of the dial after the 1958 coup that overthrew a British appointed monarchy in Iraq and after the communist-led 1969 coup in Sudan. Creative communist actions came alongside innovative Marxist analyses of the regional developments from Lebanon's Mahdi Amel and Sudan's Abdel KhaliqMahjub. It is precisely what sent important Islamist thinkers to study Marxism and Communism, with an assessment of Marx's *Capital I* by the Iraqi cleric MuhammadBaqir al-Sadr in his *Iqtisaduna (Our Economy, 1960)* and with a sympathetic repudiation of Marxism by the Iranian sociologist Ali Shariati in his *Insan, Islam*

va Marxism (Man, Islam and Marxism, 1974). It is no surprise that both al-Sadr and Shariati came to Marxism from their deep Shi'ite assessment of Islam and the Muslim world – the Shia working-class from southern Lebanon to the Baghdad had been organised into the communist parties. Al-Sadr's movement organised itself around the principles of a cadre party, drawing from Bolshevism its organizational architecture as well as elements of what Shariati called Islamic socialism. The idea of a classless society, *nizami-tawhidi* – appealed to the workers, as it did to these intellectuals. Adoption of socialism's idioms allowed this branch of political Islam to appear neither reactionary nor lethargic. Out of these initiatives come Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Sadr movement in Iraq.

Arab nationalism, which had taken an antagonistic position against colonialism and imperialism, might have developed alliances with their domestic communist parties against the theocrats. But this was not to be. The communists endangered the status quo as they produced struggles against the tendency of Arab nationalism to favour the domestic bourgeoisie against the needs and demands of the peasants and workers. It was this internal critique that led Arab nationalism to typically have a strained relationship with communism – both Egypt's Gamel Abdul Nasser and Iraq's Saddam Hussein filled their prisons with communist activists and Marxist thinkers. Arab nationalism of the *Ba'ath* (Renaissance) variety had a deep antipathy to Marxism and Communism. The intellectual founder of the Ba'ath movement, Michel 'Aflaq, wrote in his *Fikratuna (Our Idea, 1948)* that Marxism was alien to the Arabs. In 1958, 'Aflaq came to Baghdad from Damascus, Syria, to tell the new regime (backed by the communists) that the Ba'ath represent “the Arab spirit against materialist Communism. Communism is western and alien to everything Arab.” Faced with communist dissent for his plans to unite Egypt and Syria, Nasser went to Damascus in 1959 and accused communists of being “foreign agents who neither believe in the liberty of their land or their nation, but only do the bidding of outsiders.” A combination of the carrot (his adoption of the language of socialism) and the stick (his imprisonment of the communists) would lead the Egyptian Communist Party to liquidate itself in 1965.

The hegemony of Marxism and the slow growth of communism in this zone were not eternal. By the 1980s, communist movements in the area would be wiped out, and Marxism would be relegated to the universities (if that). In its place would come not Arab nationalism, which had its own problems with the communists, but various forms of theocracy.

PROMOTION OF ISLAMISM

None of the lessons of Shariati or al-Sadr would influence anxieties in the Arabian Peninsula. The sultans of Arabia feared the communists who had inserted themselves in the outer reaches of the peninsula. Inkling of communist rebellion in Iraq and Lebanon in 1958 as well as the growth of communism in Sudan came alongside the fiery republican nationalism of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Strike activity in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia amongst oil workers threatened the kingdom's treasury. In 1953, the US embassy in Saudi Arabia worried that “Communist involvement in a manner and degree not now ascertainable is a distinct possibility.” Their spies worried about “Red stimulation,” something that bothered the sultans. A combination of Arab nationalism and communism threatened the sultans and their US backers. In 1956, adoring crowds greeted Nasser when he visited Saudi Arabia's oil-lands in Dhahran; but when Faisal went to the same town that year he was met with demonstrations. Civil society had to be molded away from these secular icons. The kingdom summoned god to the task.

In 1962, the Saudi regime created the World Muslim League (*Rabita al-Alam al-Islami*), the WML. The reason was communicated to the US government by Saudi Prince (soon to be King) Faisal's brother in law Kamal Adham – the US embassy note summarized it simply, “The Saudis feel that Islam forms a significant bulwark against communism.” Inside Saudi Arabia, the Prince proposed a list of reforms, most of which were far too vague to mean anything (to “raise the nation's social level”). The one reform, number five, had real meaning –to propagate Islam. The Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Elimination of Sin sent out its religious police, the *mutawiyin* (the pious) on the instructions of the royal

family to maintain order. They were keen to condemn both folklore and rationalism – apostasies of the past and the present. In the chamber of the *mutawiyin* lay files to traduce the republicans and the communists.

The *mutawiyin* and their small religious cells provided comfort to the Saudi regime that order would be maintained inside their kingdom. The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 that already provided a security umbrella around the kingdom, making it safe from external attack. Three years later, US Treasury secretary Robert Anderson said, “Middle East oil was as essential to mutual security as atomic warheads.” The US had come to rely upon Arabian oil for its newly expanding carbon-based social order. Saudi intelligence and its military forces had provoked uprisings in Oman and in Yemen to push petty claims for land – but found that in both of these venues, the communists had asserted themselves. The Dhofar uprising in Oman was contained (and then defeated in 1976), but in South Yemen the communists were able to seize power. Insulation came through the buffer state of North Yemen, but this was not sufficient. Saudi Arabia would continue to try and overthrow the Marxist government in South Yemen, financing one *jihad* after the other to cleanse the peninsula of the red vermin.

The WML played only a modest role here. Its work was elsewhere. The WML fought to “combat the serious plots by which the enemies of Islam are trying to draw Muslims away from their religion and to destroy their unity and brotherhood.” The main targets were republicanism (Nasser’s influence) and communism. The idea that these anti-monarchical ideologies were *shu’ubi* (anti-Arab) had to be pushed hard – it meant that to be Arab is to be tribal and Muslim, the two pillars of the Saudi ideology. WML missionaries went after Muslims in the communist bloc and in the lands of the newly assertive post-colonial states. No WML project took its missionaries into the capitalist lands, where Muslims suffered forms of discrimination and found their faith under attack. WML had an explicit political agenda, and not a theological one. It was to uproot the menace of communism and republican nationalism.

Cold War allegiances played a hefty role in the creation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1969. It was designed to directly provide a counter-weight to the more left-leaning Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), created in 1961. The OIC’s main countries were all pro-US in their orientation: Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Pakistan at this time was the state with the largest number of Muslims (it would lose this standing when Bangladesh won its independence in 1971). Intellectual leadership of the OIC came from the Pakistani scholar Sayyid Abu-AlaMawdudi, who had become very influential as well in the WML. The general thrust of the OIC was to undermine the NAM, whose founders – Egypt, India, Indonesia – were seen not only as geopolitical enemies of the pro-West bloc, but also as regional adversaries (Nasser’s Egypt against Saudi Arabia, India against Pakistan, and Sukarno’s Indonesia against Suharto’s Indonesia).

Fortune favoured the sultans. Petro-dollars flooded the Arabian Peninsula. Muslim Brotherhood professionals exiled by the Arab nationalist regimes in the 1960s and 1970s brought their technical skills to develop the kingdom and the emirates. They converted the peninsula into a technocratic landscape. Among their lot came MuhammedQutb, younger brother of Muslim Brotherhood ideologue SayyidQutb who had been executed by the Egyptian state in 1966. The incipient republicanism of the Muslim Brothers frightened the Saudis. Worry that the money and the amenities as well as the influence of the Brothers would create a call for political change, King Faisal passed an Order in 1971 to deepen social control through the religious police, and to dole out the oil wealth as patronage not as income. What threat came from the Muslim Brothers had been squashed. It would later assert itself not as an internal problem but as a geo-political one, as the Muslim Brotherhood’s main patrons – Turkey and Qatar – would pose regional challenges to Saudi Arabia.

CONTRADICTIONS INSIDE ISLAM

The Iranian revolution of 1979 posed a serious threat to the regime in Saudi Arabia on two counts. First, a Muslim monarch (the Shah) had been overthrown. The Iranians dug deep into the well of Islamic thought

to create an alternative model of Islamic governance – *Vilayat-e Faqih* (the Guardianship of the Jurists). This was not the republicanism of Nasserism or the nationalism of the Ba'ath, both decidedly secular. The Iranians had created an *Islamic* form of republicanism. A Muslim polity, they claimed, no longer required a monarchy. Second, and related to this, the Iranian Revolution strengthened the otherwise subdued Shia populations in the Arab world. It certainly gave a boost to the attempts by Lebanon's Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (and Musa al-Sadr) to move a political agenda along Shia lines – which would eventually create Hezbollah (the Army of God). It also provoked an uprising in Qatif in late 1979 under the standard of the Organisation for the Promotion of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, led by Hassan al-Saffar, alongside the Communists. That this was the oil-land of Arabia terrified the monarchy. It had to be crushed, as it was.

Danger came into the heart of the kingdom when Juhayman al-Otaybi's *sal-Jamaa al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba* (Salafi Group that Commands Right and Forbids Wrong) seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979. Al-Otaybi was closely linked to the influential cleric Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtani, who claimed to be the *Mahdi*. The Saudi regime crushed this uprising, beheading the ringleaders and suppressing this affront to its authority.

Not long after, the Saudi regime used its massive oil wealth to fashion answers to these two pressing problems – the Islamic Republic of Iran and the internal growth of true believers in the ways of the *salaf* (ancestors). On August 5, 1980, Iraq's Saddam Hussein came to Riyadh, sat with the King and his cabinet and – for a price – pledged to contain Iran. The pious that would come for the *hajj* in October worried the King's cabinet; any return to the instability of Qatif and al-Qahtani had to be avoided. Saddam Hussein's vast armies invaded Iran in September – using Saudi airspace when it was of use, and drawing liberally from the Saudi coffers (\$1 billion per month in the early years of the war). The Saudis closely coordinated with the Kuwaitis to increase their oil production to offset any reduction from Iran and Iraq, and to raise funds to pay Iraq for its services to Arabia. Saudi aircraft patrolled the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. The scared little emirates along the waters (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE) hastily joined Saudi Arabia in the Gulf Cooperation Council, set up in February 1981 at the urging of the British and French.

To deal with the unrest of the true believers within, the Saudis hastily opened a pipeline to Afghanistan to embroil these men in the *jihād* against the Soviets. The Palestinian scholar Abdullah Azzam delivered a fatwa after the Soviets entered Afghanistan in December 1979, *Defense of the Muslim Lands, the First Obligation after Faith*. Azzam called upon Muslims to come to the defense of Afghanistan, a call that was welcomed by Pakistani intelligence (General Hamid Gul was waiting to receive the “first Islamic international brigade” with open arms). General Gul would work closely with Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, an Afghan cleric and fighter who was trusted by the Saudi royal family and became their main conduit into Afghanistan. Sayyaf's Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan became the main receptacle for the Afghan Arabs who brought their frustrations with the King overseas to Afghanistan. Among them would be Osama Bin Laden.

By 1988, both pillars of Saudi strategy began to shake. Exhausted Iraq sued for peace with Iran, and then turned to the Gulf Arabs for help with the recovery of its economy. A fight with Kuwait over oil revenues ran through 1989 and into the summer of 1990 – when Saddam Hussein sent in his armies to sack Kuwait to recover payment for his services against Iran. This was the trigger for US military action against Saddam Hussein, a close ally through the 1980s. In February 1982, a secret Saudi-American Military Committee was formed; the next month, the US Pentagon noted, “Whatever the circumstances, we should be prepared to introduce American forces into the region should it appear [that our] security of access to the Persian Gulf oil is threatened.” Based on the 1979 Carter Doctrine – the security of Saudi Arabia is equivalent to the security of the US – the Pentagon had already drawn up plans for swift action. This would become Gulf War 1, and lead seamlessly into the long drawn out sanctions regime that lasted till 2003.

Meanwhile, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. Abdullah Azzam wrote an influential essay asking for the maintenance of a “pioneering vanguard” of fighters who would be the base (*qaeda*) for the Muslim world. More and more disaffected Muslims, frustrated with their lives in Arabia or in the other parts of the world, would turn up at the camps set up with Saudi money and Pakistani intelligence assistance. Inside Afghanistan festered the most dangerous and uncompromising tendencies of extremism. They would form the leadership and the fighters of al-Qaeda’s tentacles, once Bin Laden formed that group in 1989. Worried that the Saudi monarch would allow US troops into Arabia to eject Saddam Hussein’s army, Bin Laden recommended that these al-Qaeda fighters do the job instead. The holy lands should not be soiled by foreign troops, Bin Laden told the King, who would most likely have smirked and laughed at the overblown folly of Bin Laden. The King’s refusal set Bin Laden onto a course of permanent war against both the Near Enemy (the Arab leaders) and the Far Enemy (the United States).

One of the temptations of analysis is to reduce these complex geopolitical and regional dynamics into theological categories – as if this was all a battle of Sunni and Shia, the schism that opens up in the 7th century amongst the believers. Of course, for the deeply pious who believe that the Shia and other “schismatic sects” are heretics, this is precisely how the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia appears. Amongst many fighters who join sectarian militias of one side or the other, they might view this battle as a defense of the faith. Hezbollah fighters go into battle in Syria with the view that they must protect the Damascus shrine of Imam Ali’s oldest daughter, Zaynab, with the chant, *LabaykayaZaynab* (“We are with you Zaynab”); although they also go because they are deeply disciplined, and they believe that their task is to defend Lebanon from those who would like to annihilate them. In the same way, the *jihadis* that swim along the current of al-Qaeda see the Shia as *kafirs* (infidels), who must be put to the sword – hence these *jihadis* are often called *takfiris*, those who seek out the infidels to kill. However real the Sunni-Shia divide is, it does not drive the political turmoil in the region. The author of that is a Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is rooted in ideas of political legitimacy and regional control. To reduce this Cold War to sectarianism is to miss the longer history of machinations in West Asia.

BUSH’S WAR

When it suited him, US President George W. Bush donned the mantle of Freedom with the promise to vanquish Authoritarianism in West Asia and North Africa. But, in fact, Bush’s messianic dream was far more modest. In 2003, he had no desire to topple the sultans of Arabia or the dictatorships of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt or Syria. They were all safe. He had already sent “unlawful enemy combatants” for “enhanced interrogation” to the “black sites” from Tripoli (Libya) to Damascus (Syria). Bush’s eyes were focused on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. His war on aggression against that country and then the violation of the responsibility of an occupying power afterwards created immense chaos in the region. Operation Rapid Dominance (Shock and Awe) in 2003 broke the back of the Iraqi state, destroying its already weakened infrastructure and making a mockery of its command and control security establishment. Once it seized Iraq, the US cashiered any state employee with a Ba’ath party affiliation (de-Ba’athification); the military lost its officer corps.

No people give up without a fight. Saddam Hussein had recruited his crack detachments from the cities of the Tigris such as Mosul and Tikrit. The insurgency campaign against the US invasion began in these cities, led by Saddam Hussein’s deputy Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri. In Diyala province, east of Mosul, al-Duri’s detachments formed the Army of the Men of the Order of the Naqshbandi (JRTN), drawing in frustrated Ba’athists and soldiers ejected by the US occupation (whose de-Ba’athification policy left many professional bureaucrats and soldiers without a job, and therefore able to turn their skills over to al-Duri). The JRTN are nominally Sufis, although Sufism in Iraq does not share the heterodoxy that one used to see amongst the Sufis of Syria (and of course South Asia). This Naqshbandi Army formed part of the Supreme Command for Jihad and Liberation – marked no longer by secular Ba’athism but by a strange mutation of Islamic Ba’athism. Al-Duri read the tea leaves well. Anbar Province became home a

jihadi organisations that flourished new banners – al-Ansar al-Islam, Aseebahl el-Iraq, al-Jaish al-Islamifil-Iraq, Jaish al-Mujahideen, Jaish Muhammad, Jam’at al-Tawhidwal-Jihad, Jam’atAnsar al-Sunna. A strange mix of “salafi nationalists” and “Islamist Ba’athists” emerged to combat the US occupation, and in different degrees to incubate ideas of theocracy and global *jihad*.

US military commanders found themselves on the back foot. Dogged Iraqi fighters along the Tigris, in Anbar Province (Ramadi and Fallujah mainly) and in large parts of Baghdad seemed hell-bent upon the liberation of their country. Grotesque human rights violations by US prison guards in Abu Ghraib prison during the early phase of the insurgency show how frustrated the US intelligence officials became – they could not learn enough to break the back of what was fated to become a full-scale uprising against the occupation. When Muqtada al-Sadr’s largely Shia Mahdi Army sent supplies to Fallujah and when Sadr City’s Shia population donated blood for the Fallujah fighters in solidarity, this indicated that the uprising might be rooted in a reconstructed Iraqi nationalism. Writing in *Time* (2006), Tony Karon noted that the insurrection of Fallujah and Sadr City combined with the harsh US response “has even had an iconic nation-building effect, as the plight of the besieged city [Fallujah] has become an anti-American rallying point across Iraq’s traditional Sunni-Shia divide.” Portraits of al-Sadr could be seen in the hands of protestors in the largely Sunni towns of Anbar Province.

Such unity posed a serious threat to US war aims. US money sloshed around from one sectarian group to another, seeking fissures between Shia and Sunni that could be easily exploited. The potential of a reconstructed Iraqi nationalism was smothered in the sectarian war that was harnessed by the occupation in 2006-07.

IRAQ’S LONG NIGHT

The US occupation and the emergence of sectarianism oxygenated the growth of al-Qaeda in Iraq. It was unthinkable during the twentieth century that the ideology of *Wahhâbiyyah* would find fertile soil in Iraq. Iraqi society had embraced its complexity during the period of Arab nationalism, adopting secular ideas for its political world at the same time as it incubated deeply held religious traditions in its society. Now with the insurgency underway, al-Qaeda operatives led by the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, entered Iraq and set up an organization in Tal Afar. Brutal anti-Shia violence marked their entry, with Osama Bin Laden cautioning al-Zarqawi to be more moderate. Al-Zarqawi’s brutality set the tone for al-Qaeda, and later for the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006. ISI, *Dawlat al-‘Iraq al-Islamiyah*, was formed at the zenith of Iraqi sectarianism, with its new insurgents swearing an oath not only to free Iraq from US occupation but also to crack down on the Shia population.

Iraq’s politics since 2007 have been mired in sectarianism. Iraq’s Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki since 2006 spoke expansively about Iraqi unity, but the reality was worse. To quell the insurgency, the US financed Sunni tribal leaders in the “Sunni Awakening,” drew fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq to their side in what became a war against al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army. These fighters had no investment in al-Maliki’s Iraqi unity or in the US project. The Awakening was an opportunity to get US funds, equipment and training to go after their adversaries. When US funds dried up, these fighters went back to ISI and its assorted allies. Sectarian violence reached horrific proportions in 2006-07. Not a month went by since then that the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq has not recorded at least a few hundred deaths as a result of this violence. In December 2013, for instance, the violence resulted in 759 deaths and 1,345 injuries. Almost nine thousand people died in 2013 alone. The UN’s Special Representative NickolayMladenov said then, “The level of indiscriminate violence in Iraq is unacceptable and I call on the Iraqi leaders to take the necessary steps to prevent terrorist groups to fuel the sectarian tensions, which contribute to weaken the social fabric of society.” Al-Maliki had no agenda to address the root cause of sectarianism. He was not its sole author, but his policies certainly contributed to deepen the alienation of sections of the Sunni public.

Bomb blasts and sniper fire became normal in Baghdad. The Iraqi government noted that the number of car bombs in the past few years had increased from an average of 10 a month to close to 70 a month. The bombs, many of them set by the ISIS and its related outfits, target Shia areas and Sunni politicians who work with the government. The 2013 Christmas bombings took place in largely Christian areas, a community that the ISIS has repeatedly threatened not only in Iraq but also in Syria. The T-Walls and Green Zone offer a measure of the dangers. Baghdadis talk of *min zaman* (once upon a time), the old days before the threats.

During the May 2014 elections, over sixty per cent of the eligible voters came to the polls and gave al-Maliki's bloc a third of the parliament's seats. He was easily elected to his third term as Prime Minister. In Anbar Province, meanwhile, his writ did not run. That was already ISIS territory. They had dug themselves into Ramadi and Fallujah, preparing for their thrust into Baghdad. When it came in June, what surprised the population of Iraq was the collapse of their armed forces in Mosul. It was not the attack that shocked people. It was their lack of defenses.

After its re-election, al-Maliki's government put up billboards across Baghdad to celebrate Iraqi unity and the strong central government. Evidence for both are lacking. ISIS had a firm grip on Anbar Province, and had seriously threatened the border posts to Syria – namely at Rutbah and Qa'im. In Diyala and Ninevah provinces, ISIS deepened its older ties with deposed Ba'athists and cashiered Iraqi military officers and soldiers. Al-Baghdadi recognized that this alliance of ISIS with people like al-Duri of the Naqshbandi Army was crucial. It would allow ISIS to traffic in the old Ba'athist anger at the new Iraq. ISIS targeted the centers of the old "Sunni insurgency," taking Mosul in June and then in quick succession the cities along the River Tigris – from Tikrit to Samarra. By late June, with Anbar and Ninevah provinces in ISIS hands and with Diyala province threatened, ISIS held the northern entrances toward Baghdad. The billboards in Baghdad are a rebuke to the country – a joke in the summer sun as the sounds of gunfire and heavy artillery creep closer to the city.

The UN reports that over two thousand Iraqis lost their lives in June 2014. Over a million have fled the zone now held by ISIS. They left for good reason. ISIS hastened to put its social agenda in place – no room for minorities of any kind, no pleasures of tobacco and music to be permitted, and harsh rules set in place for the social interactions of men and women. Human Rights Watch ratified that the summary executions of hundreds of Iraqi soldiers took place as ISIS took Mosul. The smell of blood and fear is part of their modus operandi. Al-Baghdadi's alliance with al-Duri's Ba'athists has not moderated their conduct. ISIS leaders are not interested in compromise. Victory is before them, either on earth or in heaven.

An ISIS fighter in Mosul sat under a sign that read, "The Iraqi Army is a Thorn in the Eyes of Terrorism." That army vanished. In its place came various Shia militias, such as the *Asa'ibAhl al-Haq* (AAH), a breakaway from al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and given a long license by al-Maliki. Its leader QayisKhazali was expelled from the Mahdi Army because he is a loose cannon. His group has been active across the region, accused of supplanting the security services and being some of the most ruthless fighters around the shrine of SayidaZainab in Damascus, Syria. Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters complain that the AAH fighters in Syria had to be taken in hand and trained to calm down. Iraq's senior Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani issued a fatwa calling upon "all able-bodied Iraqis" to defend Iraq from ISIS. He roused up the AAH and its offshoots. Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, shrugged off his clerical uniform and put on military fatigues. This is the character of the fight – deep into the sectarian trough.

In February 2014, al-Sadr had warned that Iraq "is ruled by wolves, thirty for blood, souls that are eager for wealth, leaving their nation in suffering, in fear, in water puddles, in dark night, lightened only by moonlight or a candle, swamped by assassinations based on differences or ridiculous disagreements." His loyal troops conducted a show of strength across Iraq on June 21. They now stand guard before Baghdad. Sistani echoed al-Sadr's interest in the revival of Iraqi nationalism; the first step was for a unity government to come to Baghdad. Al-Maliki stepped down. His dourness had run its course. In his place

came another member of al-Maliki's *Dawa* Party, Haider al-Abadi. Al-Abadi had been the party's spokesperson. He is more jovial than al-Maliki. This is more a change of the guard than a change of the order. The politics are fraught. These are fractured countries, broken by war. Syrians and Iraqis are prisoners in a burning prison. There are no easy, unbarred exits.

SYRIAN WAR

When the Syrian uprising morphed into a civil war, the emir of the Islamic State of Iraq – Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – set up Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front) as the al-Qaeda front in that battle. Al-Nusra joined a variety of *jihadi* groups that had already begun to suffocate the civil rebellion of 2011 and the anemic Free Syrian Army (made up of defectors from the Syrian armed forces). The *jihadis* brought a tenacious energy to the fight. They did not need frontlines and heavy artillery required by the Soviet training received by the Syrian armed forces and their defectors. These were fighters who knew close combat and relied upon fast moving Toyota trucks to move swiftly across Syria's uneven topography. Al-Nusra made some rapid gains, first with orchestrated bombings in Syria's cities and then with seizure of territory (as in the eastern city of Deirez-Zor in May 2012). The calling card of al-Qaeda's outfits was to conduct mass executions and to exert stiff sanctions for anything they deemed to be against their laws.

The pipeline of funds that is familiar to the world of al-Qaeda – including individual donations from Gulf sheikhs – lubricated al-Nusra and the Islamic State. Hatred for Bashar al-Assad in the world of the Gulf Arabs was refracted through their political fear of Iran's influence in the region. Islamic State fighters freely spoke of their support from Saudi Arabia, even as they maligned the kingdom for its corruption. In 2006, Zarqawi said enigmatically of his support, "While it was the poor citizens of Iraq who financed this struggle, I have the support of the richest people of earth." He could only have meant the Gulf Arabs. On March 8, before the Mosul blitzkrieg, Iraqi premier al-Maliki cautioned Saudi Arabia and Qatar to cease their support to the Islamic State. He would repeat these allegations in June. Both times the Saudi government feigned outrage. Both are correct. It is unlikely that official Saudi channels have financed the Islamic States. Private Kuwaiti, Qatari and Saudi funds are a more likely source. Taxation regimes in Anbar Province (Iraq) helped the Islamic State; as they took territory in Syria, this taxation system was expanded. The spluttering oil fields of eastern Syria added to their coffers, as did their sale of stolen antiquities from both Syria and Iraq. Money never seemed to be a problem. The Toyota trucks always seemed to appear, new models with glistening white paint. Their media team had the best cameras and their social media team was always prepared to get their high quality propaganda videos on-line. It was no surprise that ISIS would produce a glossy annual report that resembled that of any corporation or that it would launch a twitter app.

Al-Nusra and the Islamic State had no problem in recruiting fighters. From 2011 onwards, Assad has opened his prison doors to release many who had *jihadi* backgrounds. The civic rebellion was overrun by these *jihadis*, who were more adept at organisation and armed struggle. These talented and hardened men provided the backbone of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State and other Islamist groups. On July 21, 2013, the Islamic State blew its way into the Abu Ghraib prison and freed five hundred of their confederates. These prisoners were joined by *jihadis* from across the world who heeded al-Baghdadi's call to come and create an emirate. When NATO became the air force for the *jihadis* in Libya in 2011, they provided such battle-hardened veterans with a new confidence (and new equipment). The Turkish government looked the other way as these fighters of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and its offshoots took flights from Libya to Turkey's eastern city of Mardin. They would go across the border to al-Hasakah and join the Islamic State and al-Nusra convoys that drifted in their safe zone between Raqqah and Ramadi. Even when the Islamic State struck inside Turkey (such as in May 2013 in Reyhanli in Hatay), the Turkish government did not close down the channel. It remains open to this day. Reasonable estimates of the Islamic State's fighting force stand at 30,000. It is perhaps higher, and higher still with the addition of the fighters of Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist brigades.

A fraternal struggle opened up in 2013 when al-Baghdadi changed the name of his group to ISIS, including Syria in his dominion and telling his al-Nusra acolyte, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, to work under him. Al-Nusra and ISIS had slightly different goals, with the latter less interested in the fight against Assad alone and more interested in the creation of an emirate. When al-Qaeda went against al-Qaeda in northern Syria, Assad and his allies moved to clear the road that links Damascus with the coastline. A weakened Free Syrian Army and a disorganized set of Islamic groups were no match for Assad's surge. Meanwhile, al-Nusra and ISIS sidelined many of the other Islamic groups in the north. Even as these two al-Qaeda units battled each other in this or that area, they would collaborate in other regions of Syria. The complexity of the politics allowed ISIS to assert its control along the road from Raqqa to Iraq, maintaining control over the Syrian oil fields. These battles in Syria raised the confidence of the fighters, drew in more fighters and groups to their standard and pushed them to make serious inroads to the Turkish border. In November 2013, the pro-rebellion Syrian Observatory of Human Rights' Rami Abdul Rahman said, "ISIS is the strongest group in Northern Syria – 100% — and anyone who tells you anything else is lying."

AMERICA BOMBS

After the Islamic State seized Mosul, and threatened Irbil and Baghdad, the US began to bomb its forward positions. These strikes came to protect US clients, Iraqi Kurdistan and the Iraqi government in Baghdad. It would be a great repudiation of US policy if the Islamic State were able to seize all of Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan is also oil-rich and therefore of great interest to the West.

The IS retaliated with two beheadings. These are not the first killings of this kind by the IS, which has used this technique against Iraqi and Syrian fighters who have opposed them. Al-Zarqawi's group had beheaded at least two US nationals in 2004 – Nicholas Berg, Owen Armstrong – while several other nationals had been killed in this manner at that time (Bulgaria, Japan, Nepal, South Korea, Turkey and the United Kingdom). Then the revulsion was not so widespread. Over ninety per cent of the US public believes that the Islamic State poses a direct threat to their lives. This is an exaggeration built up by the nature of the executions and the spread of the videos. It is precisely what the Islamic State had wanted, to boost its own notoriety as against the other fighters in the region.

Public atrocities by the Islamic State are a curious business. Brutality by the IS has been commonplace. They have used YouTube videos of mass executions to cower their enemies into surrender or flight. This is precisely what happened in Mosul, when the Iraqi troops fled in fear of the consequences of capture. But the beheadings of the Western journalists and aid workers are of a different quality. These are not to scare the Iraqi troops or the other Syrian rebels. The new killings are a message to the West. Osama Bin Laden's attack on the US on 9/11 had been calculated to draw the West to Afghanistan. That is the reason why al-Qaeda assassinated the Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud the day before the 9/11 attacks. But this time, IS knows that the US will not send massive troop deployments into Syria. IS has signaled that it simply does not care about international norms and Western reaction. It recognizes that the West has its hands tied. It will bomb from the air, but this is as likely as not to bring recruits to the side of the Islamic State. Amongst the *takfiri* fighters the animosity to the US is great. By staking out a position as the preeminent group that stands against the West, the IS might be trying to draw in fighters from other groups. Such prestige might bring it other militant groups that dislike the West on civilizational grounds. The Islamic State would like to be the main Islamist outfit in the region. The US reaction to the beheadings has allowed it to make that claim.

The United States – with its Gulf Arab allies – began to bomb positions in northern Syria. It struck the city of Raqqa, capital of the Islamic State, and Aleppo, where it targeted Jabhat al-Nusra's Khorasan Group (set up for external, namely in the West, operations). Neither of these operations has changed the balance of forces on the ground. IS had abandoned its buildings in Raqqa. Those strikes had been largely symbolic. The danger of the Khorasan Group had been questioned only a few days before the US strikes –

which suggests it was more pretext than target. Why Obama fired on Syria might have more to do with domestic politics than the facts on the ground.

Obama's strategy in Syria is fraught. Since the US will not bring troops into the Syrian theatre, it would have to rely upon local fighters. Unlike in Iraq, where the Iraqi *peshmerga*, the militias and the military, are on offer, nothing like this clarity is available in Syria. The Free Syrian Army is a shadow of what it had been and would need to be to tackle the IS. The US has therefore proposed to build a new "moderate" fighting force – under Saudi tutelage – with \$500 million. It is a miserable proposition given the immoderate nature of the tutor.

Jordan has promised to protect its long border with the IS, but it will not deploy any troops over the border. Jordanian intelligence is already at work inside the country, searching for IS sympathizers. The presence of IS inside Jordan scares the royal regime. This is the limit of their worry. Lebanon, like Jordan, is desperately trying to manage its own security situation – with its borders still weak as a consequence of the cross-border activity of the IS/Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, the Free Syrian Army and Hezbollah. Iraq has enough on its hands to worry about to promise help against IS in Syria. These neighbours of Syria can do little.

In Syria, IS faces three adversaries: Kurdish fighters, the Syrian government and an assortment of the Syrian opposition. Of these three, the US will not overtly cooperate with the first two. Obama's commitment to the overthrow of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad means that he has rejected the calls from Damascus for a coordinated strategy against the Islamic State. Assad has mainly ignored the IS, allowing it to fester in the northern reaches as he had recalled his armies to defend Damascus and the western coastline. With the Syrian army tied down with the defense of Syria's heartland, the IS has been able to concentrate its firepower against the other rebels.

The most capable force to tackle the IS have been the Kurdish fighters of the YPG (Syria) and the PKK (Turkey), the latter considered by the US and Turkey as a terrorist organisation. Turkey is loathe to join the US mission in Syria for two reasons. First, the anti-IS campaign would strengthen the prestige of the PKK and the YPG. Inside Turkey, the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has conducted negotiations with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan; but this "Imrali Process" has not provided sufficient confidence to allow the PKK free run in Syria. Second, Turkey's government remains committed to the overthrow of Assad. Erdogan's pan-Islamism is in line with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, who also rejected the Obama plan unless "the first bullet is directed at Assad's head." Turkey is loathed to close its border. *Jihadis* continue to stream across the border, while injured IS fighters rush to hospitals in Urfa (Turkey) for free medical care.

The United States' preferred Syrian rebels, the FSA and Harakat al-Hazm, do not elicit confidence. The FSA, built mainly of defectors from the Syrian armed forces, is a shadow of its former self. Blocked from any major victory, squeezed by the much more fierce Islamist rebels and by the Syrian army, the FSA has gone in two directions – toward extortion and smuggling, and toward coordination with the Islamist rebels for territorial gains. The FSA's Colonel Riad al-Assad went along the grain of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood – no coordination with the US unless they get "assurances on toppling the Assad regime." In Damascus, the FSA's Front (*JabhatThuwarSuriyya*) has decided not to target the Islamic State, but to concentrate on the Assad regime. Harkat al-Hazm, meanwhile, has been fighting alongside al-Qaeda's official representative in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra. Backed by Qatar and Turkey, as well as the US, Harkat al-Hazm has made little advance in Syria.

On the less "moderate" front are groups with close connections to al-Qaeda. In January 2012, the Islamic State set up Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front), which has had a fraught relationship with its mentor. As the IS became more publically brutal, al-Nusra distanced itself. Comically, al-Nusra suggested that it would release abducted UN peacekeepers if the US removed them from the terrorist list (the feint did not work). Alongside them is the Khorasan Group sent by al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri to recruit amongst the foreign fighters for missions in the West.

The largest group of fighters is in Ahraras-Sham, the leading section in the Islamic Front. Its principle leadership – including its charismatic leader Hassan Abboud – was wiped out in early September in a huge suffocation bomb. Abboud had tried to fashion himself as a moderate. He was the protégé of Abu Khaled al-Suri, who was killed earlier this year. Al-Suri had a close relationship to al-Qaeda, having been chosen to mediate between Jabhat al-Nusra and IS during their 2013 conflict. Abu Jaber, the new leader, has a less broad-minded reputation than Abboud. The strange alliances and routes are clear in Abu Jaber's itinerary. He went from the Free Syrian Army to the al-Fajr Islamic Movement, now to leadership of Ahrar and the Islamic Front. Qatar wants the US to adopt Ahrar as its moderate entity.

All the Islamist groups have turned to the camouflage of moderation. A new front, *al-Faylaq al-Khamis* (The Fifth Legion) has claimed to be nationalist, with the Syrian flag on its materials rather than the pennants of *jihād*. But its leadership had been Islamist just before it decided to hide its beards under a balaclava.

Strangely, Obama's team has reached out to Saudi Arabia to help create a “moderate” rebel force. Confidence that Saudi Arabia, which does not have a reputation for moderation in its support of *jihadis*, would be able to deliver is low. Saudi Arabia's own proxy in Syria is *Jaysh al-Islam*, led by Zahran Alloush (whose father Abdullah is a Syrian cleric in Saudi exile). Alloush's speeches bristle with sectarianism. Little wonder that on December 11, 2013, his fighters (along with al-Nusra) conducted a massacre of Alawites, Christians, Ismailis and Druze in Adra (north-east of Damascus). A few days before Obama's speech, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein described the Islamic State as *takfiris* – those want to kill infidels. The Islamic State reveals “only what a Takfiri state would look like: it would be harsh, mean-spirited, house of blood, where no shade would be offered, nor shelter given, to any non-Takfiri in their midst.” Such a statement, with some modulation, would not be an inappropriate description of the other Islamist groups – although they do their atrocities in the dark and do not like to confront the West.

No easy political agreement can come in Syria. The rebels remain obdurate that Assad must go, even if this means delivery of Syria to the Islamic State. Assad will not throw his troops at the IS unless he has an assurance that the rebellion against him is over. Regional tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia remain on a boil.

Responsibility for the emergence of the IS vests with a number of key actors. The United States' reckless war on Iraq created the reservoir for *jihadis*, as money from the Gulf Arabs came to sustain them in an emerging sectarian clash against an ascendant Iran. The narrow and suffocating Assad and al-Maliki regimes – which alienated large sections of Sunnis – propelled the disenfranchised to reckless rebellion. In 2007, the cartoonist Ali Ferzat said of the process called the Damascus Spring (2005), “either reform or *le deluge* [the flood].” It was the flood. Alienated people who measure their alienation in sectarian terms (Sunnis) cannot be only defeated in the battlefield. Political reforms need to be on the cards. So too must an alternative to the economic agenda pursued in both Iraq and Syria since the mid-2000s. Both the Syrian and Iraqi governments pursued neo-liberal policies that increased inequality and despair. Absent a politics of class, the platforms against neo-liberal corruption took on a harsh sectarian cast. The IS fed on that alienation for its own diabolical agenda. It can be halted by airstrikes and degraded by ground warfare. But only if the social conditions that produced the IS – the inequality and the despair – are altered could it be truly vanquished.