

# ISIL and the Exploitation of Authority

## Where does the West begin to Fight?

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ISIL exploits power vacuums and then fills the space so tightly there is almost no room to breathe. Literally. Their inadvertent strategy of exploitation owes much to fate and is threefold: first, exploit the sustained vacuum and gross abuse of power by the governments in Iraq and Syria towards Sunnis; second, prey on regional disillusionment in the Middle East following the excitement of the uprisings demanding democratic representation met with autocratic regimes that have either imploded into chaos or solidified their hold on power; third, answer the alienation minority Muslim citizens feel towards their governments and communities across continents. ISIL appears strong where others are weak, whether the weak be jihadists deferential to Al Qaeda, Western countries deferential to the Assad and Maliki regimes, or families and friends deferential to non-Muslim cultures.

The foremost challenge of defeating ISIL the ideology vs. the organization is that it requires restoring the broken allegiance between the state and its constituency. It is no accident that ISIL and its nascent followers in Libya and Nigeria for two, thrive in “broken” countries. ISIL functions as an anti-current-establishment organization seeking to replace it with a different authority. The precedent for its self-declared state was set in 2003, in painful living memory for the majority of its followers.

### Iraq, June 2003

It was a curious time to be in Iraq. The two of us aid workers, my Danish mentor and myself, arrived in country to conduct a rapid assessment of the humanitarian needs for a Danish non-governmental organization (NGO). It was just over a month since President Bush had declared

the end of major combat operations from aboard an aircraft carrier off the coast of San Diego, but well before the Coalition Provincial Authority had implemented its comprehensive, indiscriminate de-Baathification process, gutting the civil service and military leadership of Sunnis. It was after the Iraq Museum had been plundered for 36 hours by thieves and before a massive bomb destroyed the United Nations headquarters at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, killing 20 people including the UN's chief envoy to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello. It was before Saddam Hussein was discovered hiding in a hole in Tikrit.

If there were palpable tensions as Shia, Sunni, Kurd, Christian and other minorities began to test their well-established boundaries, adjusting their routines for the long fuel lines and check-points, there was also an unmistakable undercurrent of positive energy. It was before there was any hint of insurgency because no one knew what to expect next. Saddam Hussein had disappeared and though every one of his portraits across Baghdad had been defaced, they were still there, a left or right eye yet staring back above us at gates, intersections and government buildings. There was still a caution in people's tone when speaking about him or the future: an instinctive hedging of bets until they knew he was gone for sure. The result was a mixture of eerie quiet with the spontaneous chaos of a nascent post-war economy.

Thin, policemen in ill-fitting uniforms stood in the middle of intersections, attempting to direct the traffic converging from all sides at once. In this window of time you could travel "safely" from Erbil to Basra so long as you understood the first principle of safe travel: speed was your best defense against the criminals or unsympathetic army or police who had dropped their uniforms but not necessarily their weapons. Certainly we would learn they did not drop their knowledge and training.

Most importantly of all, there was an unmistakable sense of excitement if guarded optimism amongst the population and the smiles were everywhere. Three men pushing a stalled pick-up truck past the rusted boats in Basra harbor paused to smile for our cameras. In Kirkuk, boys smiled kneed deep in filth as they worked cleanup campaigns for the city. The guys driving behind us had only smiles as we laughed to watch them steady a new satellite dish atop their classic Volkswagen Bug.

What would it take to recapture this window of time in which Iraqi citizens checked fears with hope? Certainly they must feel safe once again.

### ISIL's case in Syria

In now five years of horrific civil war, human rights violations, and one of the largest refugee crises since WWII, the tactics of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad have not succeed to unite its disparate enemies in a unified campaign against the government. The most glaring example of the Syrian regime's brazen cruelty is its continued use of barrel bombs—weapons made of barrels filled with oil, explosives or shrapnel—dropped indiscriminately from helicopters at heights above anti-aircraft fire on civilian neighborhoods. A year after the UN Security Council (UNSC) 2139<sup>1</sup> demanded an end to their use, a new report from Human Rights Watch estimates that in the past year alone, 450 new bombing sites in Daraa and 1000 in Aleppo have killed 6000 individuals, including 1892 children.<sup>2</sup>

The Syrian government's prosecution of war against its own citizens has inadvertently mobilized tens of thousands of foreign fighters for its opposition, which in turn have empowered ISIL. Through its social media presence, it has successfully portrayed itself as the "most pure" of the jihadist opposition and the one most capable of standing up to the Assad regime.

The unchecked record of Syrian civil war captures the sustained impotence of foreign powers to enforce even its own UNSC resolutions. The perceived lack of action despite the humanitarian crisis across the region has been a recruitment force in itself. As long as the Syrian regime can perpetuate its brutal, indiscriminate attacks on its own civilian non-combatants with impunity,

ISIL will continue to co-opt foreign and domestic recruitment for jihad and make its case as the protector of targeted, marginalized Sunnis worldwide.

### **ISIL's case for Iraq**

On January 30, 2015, ISIL launched the largest number of attacks in Iraq since June 2014. The locations selected had symbolic and strategic significance.<sup>3</sup> Attacks included the oil infrastructure in Kirkuk, defensive positions outside Mosul and government posts in Fallujah, Ramadi and Samaraa. All locations highlight ISIL's recognition that both its enemies and supporters exist along a demographic spectrum and require individual strategies and bespoke messaging. For example, the target of opportunity in Samaraa included a concentration of Shia merchants yet re-vengeed an alleged massacre in Diyala earlier that week in which 72 Sunnis were reported killed.<sup>4</sup>

On the same day, ISIL forces occupied a minor oil field in Kirkuk. Kurdish Peshmerga quickly rebuffed the attack but the point was still made: Kirkuk's oil is the prize jewel and guarantor of an economically viable, independent Kurdistan. The attack served a twofold message: first to remind the Kurds that were only able to retake Kirkuk from Iraqi forces after ISIL's initial attack in June 2014.<sup>5</sup> Second, ISIL warns the Kurds against joining the fight in Mosul or they target Kurdish interests in Kirkuk.<sup>6</sup>

The backdrop for these attacks and ISIL's geographic and political success in Iraq cannot be separated from the years of abusive sectarian rule of the Shia dominated Iraqi government since it assumed power in 2004. The brief respite from this record when Sunnis chose to support the American military surge over the radical jihad of Al Qaeda in Iraq, was a risk that did not ultimately pay off. Sunni communities were met with continued marginalization and betrayal from their government. Even the former leader of the "Sons of Iraq" admits it cannot now be replicated, not least, because of the way in which the legal framework for counterterrorism laws is interpreted so that "any Sunni can be arrested and accused of terrorism without cause, convicted without due process and pass years in jail without a trial."<sup>7</sup>

On this background, US support for Iraqi military forces augmented by Iranian supported and trained Shia militia signal to the Sunni population that the national government will continue to be unduly influenced by Iran. The use of these militias deepens the wedge of mistrust born of the record since the US led invasion. In short, the US strategy is fighting the non-state actor of ISIL with an equally brutal non-state actor in Shia militias.

As long as Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis have no viable alternative, as long as the Syrian and Iraqi governments' abuses and deliberate targeting of their citizens continues, no ground offensive can deliver the goal of comprehensively defeating ISIL. Certainly a UN Security Council blocked by Russian and Chinese veto regarding the Syrian government, nuclear negotiations with Iran, and gross human rights violations committed by all sides of the sectarian divide are powerful dynamics which complicate effective, decisive action. Witness: the US-led bombing campaign played out domestically as a step towards defeating ISIL. However, on the ground it played into ISIL's media hand accusing the US of supporting the Assad regime. For Syrian Sunnis displaced internally or refugees, the response triggered questions of timing and why such actions started after three years of war and only after ISIL took control of a third of Iraq and intensified after US hostage James Foley was executed.<sup>8</sup>

### **ISIL's Anti-"Outsider" Authority**

Pushing ISIL out of places like Tikrit and eventually Mosul is well within a conventional urban fight, which will be brutal. Tragically, the first line of defense and greatest suffering in Mosul will be on the civilian population, which is not entirely aligned with ISIL's violent extremist interpre-

tation of Islam, as online posts record<sup>9</sup> and activists have revealed.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the fight, conventional and asymmetric, the uncomfortable crux of the matter is that ISIL's ideology is working. In recent testimony to Congress, the Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. admitted to Congress that the flow of fighters into Syria has not been curtailed by US-led airstrikes. Director Clapper estimate<sup>11</sup> 20,000 foreign fighters have entered Syria, including an estimated 3,400 from Western countries.

Recent analysis<sup>12</sup> reported in the Wall Street Journal indicates there is no easy profile of the foreigners who have joined ISIL. This conclusion is similar to the equally broad pattern found amongst Europeans who have travelled or sought to join ISIL: From Muslim-reared to converts, university educated or not, professionally certified to former rappers and fitness instructors, male and female, rich and poor, Western born citizens and recent immigrants. The breadth of motivation mirrors this diversity, from theologically conservative to adventure seekers, from ethnically and religiously marginalized to mainstream straight-A students. Into this bewildering array characteristics set against bold tapestry difference, there is one common trait: Youth. And use of social media.

The diverse cross-section of foreigners who support ISIL testifies to their appeal of offering a bold, new paradigm. Conveniently ISIL is unburdened by a record of being in power. In its first year as a self-declared state, this signs of disaffection are manifold. Even so, their appeal continues to feed on malcontent so long as you are willing to reinvent yourself.

ISIL's "outsider authority" provides an appealing alternative to the young men and women disillusioned with the perceived failure of inherited or adopted systems of power. The opportunities to see failure are endless, especially for a youthful demographic adept at technology and exposed to a level of information unprecedented in human history. From the failure to achieve political change in the context of Arab uprisings, to the failure of Western powers to check the Syrian regime's horrific abuses toward its majority Sunni citizens, which has been so crucial to motivating foreign recruits. As a Muslim in Western countries, you are a minority and the pressure to assimilate is inherent in your adopted culture. Perhaps you see it in your parents and their pressure which lands somewhere along a spectrum between realistic adaptation or fierce conservation. That these same Western nations seemed to have no problem interfering in the Middle East in their self-interest of oil, Israel and preserved the control of the status quo power, further explains the appeal of ISIL to foreign recruits from Western countries.

### Foreign Female Recruitment

The age and number of several females who have left Western countries to join ISIL presents an interesting study. The role of women in Al Qaeda has traditionally been in support of a male counterpart: husband, father, brother, son. Notable examples include Defne Bayrak, the journalist and propagandists for violent jihad who was the wife of the "CIA bomber." Malika al-Aroud is the Belgian widow of one of the suicide bombers who killed Afghan leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. In 2008 Al-Aroud explained to the New York Times, "It's not my role to set off bombs—that's ridiculous," she said in a rare interview. "I have a weapon. It's to write. It's to speak out. That's my jihad. You can do many things with words. Writing is also a bomb."

In a letter "To the Muslim Sisters" supposedly written by the spouse of Al Qaeda's Ayman Zawahiri, women are encouraged to support violent jihad, largely through men's roles. She praises the "mothers who have given up their sons in the way of Allah and the victory of His religion. And in spite of this, they do not tire or get bored from aiding this religion." The ideal spouse is a mujahedeen or jihadist: "Mujahidaat and Migrants and Believers, for they are the best of ideals for us, and through them we are guided and by them we feel solace."

The females who have left Western countries to join ISIL represent a nuanced departure from the examples of women supporting violent jihad from home through online messaging

and fund raising. ISIL's Western females are individually recruited through social media and are making their choice largely on their own, the process hidden from their families. As with their male counterparts, they are disproportionately young. They are also drawn specifically by the violence. Khadijah Dare, a 22 year old female from South London who travelled to Syria to marry a Swedish fighter for ISIL, proudly boasted online she wanted to be the first female jihadi to kill a Western hostage.

Analysts, family members and friends have reacted with shock and confusion that these females, and especially the number of teenage girls would ever leave the freedom and choices of home for a life of "slavery and rape," if the extreme opinions are to be believed. This reaction is natural but perhaps an example of how Western perceptions can undermine our understanding of the appeal of ISIL's ideology.

In February 2015, three East London classmates—Shamima Begum, 15; Kadiza Sultana, 16; and Amira Abase, 15—boarded a Turkish Airlines plane from London's Gatwick Airport to Istanbul. Video footage from CCTV shows the girls arrival in Turkey. The families told British lawmakers they had no idea what the girls were planning. Relatives of the missing girls told MPs they were baffled by the teenagers' decision and did not know how or why they became radicalized. Shamima Begum's sister Sahima Begum said: "My sister was into normal teenage things. She used to watch "Keeping Up With The Kardashians."

These women are coming from complicated households. Places where cultural and religiously sanctioned patriarchal systems yet exist but are not validated by the broader state or the wider dominant culture. To survive with integrity to your faith yet loyalty to the broader state puts two values systems in tension. Rather than departing for a life of slavery, online messages from females who have joined ISIL in Syria and Iraq, confirm they were motivated by a desire to live openly as an observant Muslim. They did not feel a sense of belonging, purpose and value as Muslims in Western countries. "I always wanted to live under Sharia. In Europe, this will never happen. Besides, my Muslim brothers and sisters over there need help," a Dutch national Khadija, 24, told Al-Monitor over the phone. Like Khadija, Sara, 18, also from the Netherlands reported not feeling coerced. She went to Syria to "follow God's rules" and to "help the people."

The following message sent by a female who had joined ISIL demonstrates the mixed rejection of Western culture for the "right" to cover themselves.



Time will reveal what the females who join ISIL experienced. Regardless, they will have an important role in sustaining or defeating the ideology which compelled them in the first place. Whether it was naïve romanticism or informed personal conviction, they were not coerced. Their travel required careful planning and secretive fundraising to evade familial objections and watchful national authorities. For what they gave up in terms of personal freedom, they have also taken a stand for what they believe, which will be empowering. In some cases, that power

may have been to stand up to their own families. In the words of Amira Abase's father on her decision, he makes it clear why his daughter did not seek his approval, "She doesn't dare discuss something like this with us. She knows what the answer would be!"

### Opportunity Inherent in the Challenge

ISIL's appeal is not separate from Islam after all it appeals to personal belief that the authority of religion is not separate from state authority. In this way, it is an extreme variation of the

governance model throughout the Middle East, including Israel. What distinguishes ISIL is that it specifically draws support from those with authority issues seeking to submit to an alternative authority. This demographic includes those deliberately targeted by the state, i.e. Sunnis in post-Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Bashir al-Assad's Syria, as well as those who perceive rightly or wrongly, they are marginalized and their values not shared, i.e. Muslim citizens in Western countries and Nigeria.

Perhaps the best analogy to explain ISIL's success is the mafia. It is not that members of the mafia are anarchists who reject the principle of state authority to govern, regulate, tax and protect its citizens. Rather, individuals join the mafia who do not feel represented and protected by the state's authority, and so construct a parallel system of governance, staffed by a bureaucracy with leadership, junior enforcers, tax collectors, and soldiers.

As the ultimate anti-"outsider" authority, ISIL draws the paradoxical demographic of those seeking to defy one authority in order to submit to another one. The decision should not be as shocking as it is usually reported. It is entirely consistent with the decision an individual makes when joining the military, taking monastic vows, and for the majority, marriage itself. The act of sublimating personal freedom reduces options in order to focus effort, to hone your sense of personal meaning and align your identity with something larger than the individual you. In an era where it is difficult to avoid a daily encounter with information overload, where the rhetoric of freedom in Western culture does not extend to the personal choice to cover your face in public, where the cost of higher education no longer correlates to the certainty of work, ISIL makes a kind of sense.

In order to defeat a foreign idea, we need to understand it. Understanding requires a more nuanced exploration and starts with our own perceptions and language. We need to be cautious that our labels and categorization of ISIL as "barbaric," "inhumane," or "from the stone ages," do not cloud our judgment and misdirect our efforts to defeat it. Labels are not tactics. The idea and harsh reality of ISIL deeply offends the overwhelming majority of all people, religious or not, political or not, male, female, young and old. And yet it has struck a powerful chord which resonates across national and cultural boundaries, for a minority yes but a minority that is dangerous precisely because it cannot be controlled by the authority it seeks to defy.

Sun Tzu cautioned that in order to defeat your enemies you must know yourself. This knowledge includes knowing our culture, our vulnerabilities. ISIL has successfully exploited a vacuum and disaffection with authority that confronts Western countries represent and in part, own by their actions in the Middle East. For this ISIL generation, those actions are especially culpable since the Iraq invasion in 2003. Sectarian and ethnic lines have been deepened through targeted violence and continue in the conventional fight to retake territory from ISIL.

Defeating ISIL will continue to be a military fight for some time to come. Central to the campaign to defeat both ISIL the organization and idea, is credible, representative government in both Iraq and Syria. The West can lead by example. In the US, bi-partisan acknowledgement of mistakes which did not cause but contributed to the alienation that is ISIL's lifeline, would be a powerful first step. On the domestic frontline, bi-partisan affirmation of the constitutional right to free exercise of religion, and the founding principles of *E Pluribus Unum*, that from many we seek unity, is needed. Inherent in this complex challenge ISIL presents, is an opportunity for addressing our own political divisions.

It is important to begin now to envision what is possible. A critical step on the pathway to this peace could be found in a truth and reconciliation process. This process would involve representation from Sunni, Shia, Kurdish and other minorities with twinned goals of each community owning actions that were divisive as well as equitable, representative distribution of resources. The greatest challenges hold the greatest opportunities. Iraq and Syria can once again be places of excitement and purposeful optimism for a shared future.

Dismissal and disgust will not defeat ISIL. Only through empathy and cultural self-examination that such an idea can make sense to the educated professionals as well as violent psychopaths that live amongst us can we identify the necessary questions we need to ask. Without this process, the ideology of ISIL will metastasize, with “franchise jihad” adopted by the marginalized, alienated individuals anywhere. This is not to raise a paranoid alarm bell, rather the opposite. Any ideology that forcefully draws lines and division, whether it comes from the state or the backyard, amongst society must be defeated. We must keep unity as the goal of our diversity, acceptance within a framework of human rights, and check our instinctive perceptions in order to build bridges across even the greatest differences. □

#### Notes

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2. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/24/syria-new-spate-barrel-bomb-attacks>
3. <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2015/02/03/Three-Hidden-Messages-Behind-ISIL-s-Bloody-Rampages>
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9. See BBC series of articles, “Mosul Diaries”: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29600573>
10. “Exposing ISIL: Activists Risk Death to Track Extremists” in WSJ: <http://www.wsj.com/video/exposing-ISIL-activists-risk-death-to-track-extremists/8940136C-76BD-48E2-B185-77CB4C190798.html>; “Syria: ISIL besieged by opposition fighters in Raqqa” <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/01/article55326743/syria-ISIL-besieged-by-opposition-fighters-in-raqqa>
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12. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/us-authorities-struggle-to-find-a-pattern-among-aspiring-ISIL-members-1425586022?mode=e2fb>.



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