

# The Jihadis Return

ISIS and  
the New  
Sunni  
Uprising

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**In this explosive new book, renowned Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn analyzes events leading up to the seizure by jihadis of a vast territory spanning the Iraq-Syria border.**

Though capable of staging spectacular attacks like 9/11, jihadist organizations were not a significant force on the ground when they first achieved notoriety in the shape of al-Qa'ida at the turn of century. The West's initial successes in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan weakened their support still further.

Now that's all changed. Exploiting the missteps of the West's wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, as well as its misjudgments in relation to Syria and the uprisings of the Arab Spring, the jihadis have won stunning victories leading to the creation of a caliphate stretching from the Sunni heartlands in Iraq through a broad swath of northeastern Syria.

The secular, democratic politics that were supposedly at the fore of the Arab Spring have been buried by the return of the jihadis. And, in all likelihood, the West will once again become a target.

How could things have gone so badly wrong? Writing in these pages with customary calmness and clarity, and drawing on his unrivaled experience as a reporter in the region, Cockburn analyzes the unfolding of one of the West's greatest foreign policy debacles.

# THE JIHADIS RETURN

ISIS AND THE NEW  
SUNNI UPRISING

PATRICK  
COCKBURN



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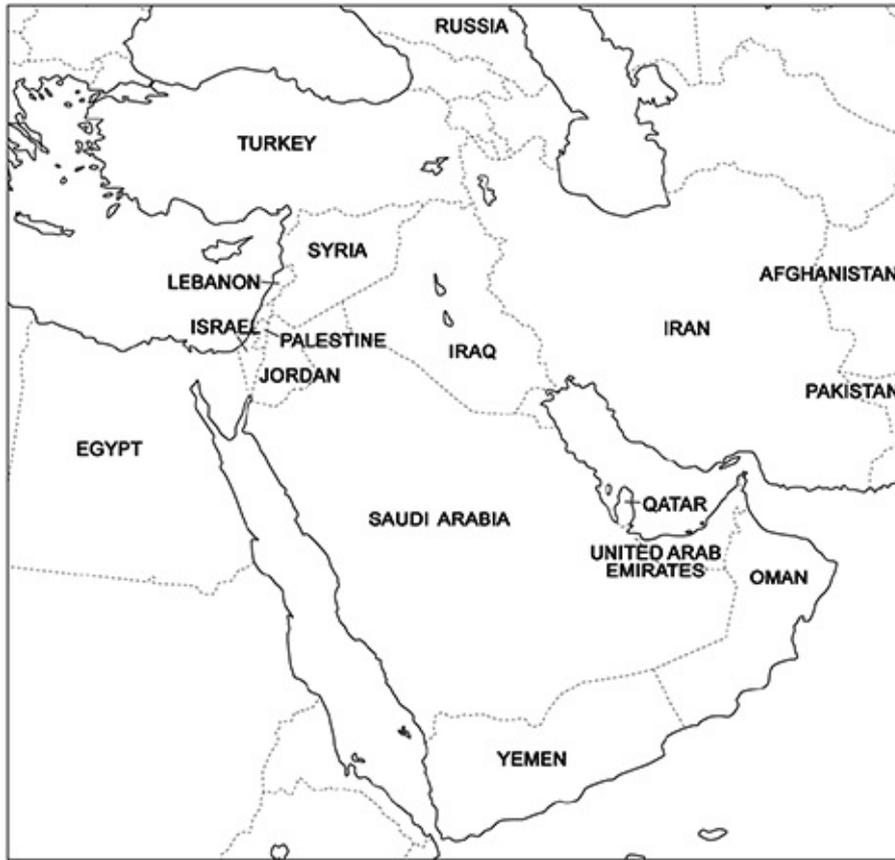
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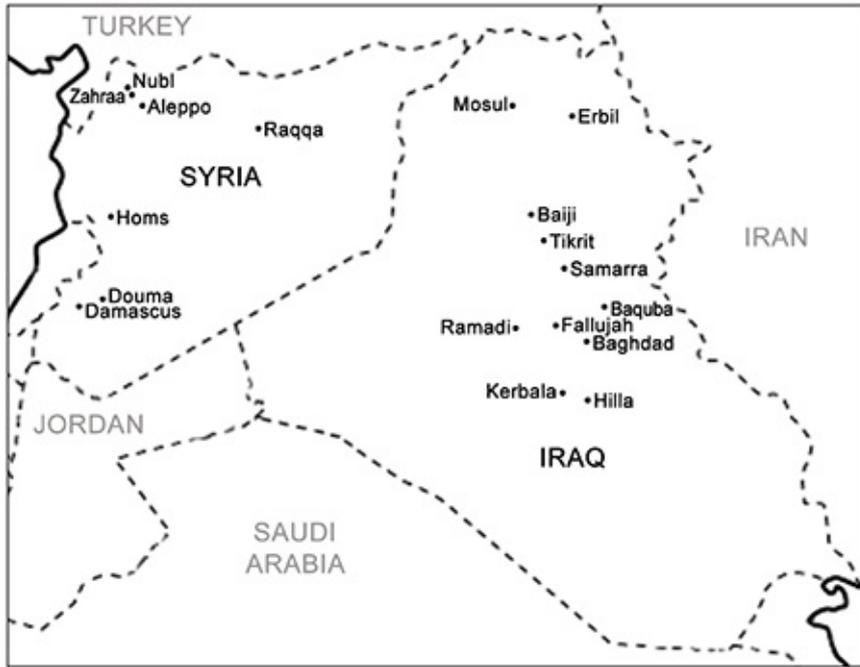
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## PREFACE

Iraq has disintegrated. Little is exchanged between its three great communities – Shia, Sunni, and Kurds – except gunfire. The outside world hopes that a more inclusive government will change this but it is probably too late. The main victor in the new war in Iraq is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), which wants to kill Shia rather than negotiate with them. Iraq is facing a civil war that could be as bloody as anything that we have seen in Syria and could go on for years.

The crucial date in this renewed conflict is June 10, 2014, when ISIS captured Iraq's northern capital, Mosul, after three days of fighting. The Iraqi government had an army with 350,000 soldiers on which \$41.6 billion had been spent in the three years since 2011, but this force melted away without significant resistance. Discarded uniforms and equipment were found strewn along the roads leading to Kurdistan and safety. The flight was led by commanding officers, some of whom changed into civilian clothes as they abandoned their men. Given that ISIS may have had as few as 1,300 fighters in its assault on Mosul, this was one of the great military debacles in history. Within two weeks those parts of northern and western Iraq outside Kurdish control were in the hands of ISIS. By the end of the month the new state had announced that it was establishing a caliphate reaching deep into Iraq and Syria. Its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi said it was "a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers...Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis. The Earth is Allah's."

People in Baghdad are used to shocks after years of war, massacres, occupation, and dictatorship, but when Mosul fell they could feel the ground shifting under their feet. Soon ISIS fighters were only an hour's drive north of a capital in which the streets, normally choked with traffic, grew quiet as people stayed at home because they thought it too dangerous to go out. This was particularly true of Sunni districts such as al-Adhamiyah on the east bank of the Tigris River, where young men rightly believed that if they passed through a checkpoint they were likely to be arrested or worse. People watched television obsessively, nervously channel hopping as they tried to tease out the truth from competing propaganda claims. The sense of crisis was made worse by the main government channel broadcasting upbeat accounts of the latest victories, though the claims were seldom backed up by pictures. "Watch enough government television and pretty soon you would decide there is not a single member of ISIS in the country," said one observer.

The political geography of Iraq was changing before its people's eyes and there were material signs of this everywhere. Baghdadis cook on propane gas because the electricity supply is so unreliable, but soon there was a chronic shortage of gas cylinders—they come from Kirkuk, and the road from the north had been cut by ISIS fighters. To hire a truck to come the 200 miles from the Kurdish capital Erbil to Baghdad now cost \$10,000 for a single journey, compared to \$500 a month earlier. There were ominous signs that Iraqis feared a future filled with violence as weapons

and ammunition soared in price. The cost of a bullet for an AK-47 assault rifle quickly tripled to 3,000 Iraqi dinars, or about \$2. Kalashnikovs were almost impossible to buy from arms dealers, though pistols could still be obtained at three times the price of the previous week. Suddenly, almost everybody had guns, including even Baghdad's paunchy, white-shirted traffic police, who began carrying sub-machine guns.

Many of the armed men who started appearing in the streets of Baghdad and other Shia cities were Shia militiamen, some from Asaib Ahl al-Haq, a splinter group from the movement of Shia populist and nationalist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This organization is partly controlled by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and, it is generally assumed, by the Iranians. It was a measure of the collapse of the state security forces and the national army that the government was relying on a sectarian militia to defend the capital. Ironically, one of Maliki's few achievements as prime minister had been facing down the Shia militias in 2008, but now he was encouraging them to return to the streets. Soon dead bodies were being dumped at night. They were stripped of their ID cards but were assumed to be Sunni victims of the militia death squads. Iraq seemed to be slipping over the edge into an abyss in which sectarian massacres and counter-massacres might rival those during the sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shia in 2006–7.

The renewed sectarian violence was very visible: there was an appalling video of Iraqi military cadets being machine gunned near Tikrit by a line of ISIS gunmen as they stood in front of a shallow open grave. It reminded me of pictures of the SS murdering Jews in Russia and Poland during World War II. Human rights organizations using satellite pictures said they estimated the number of dead to be 170, though it might have been many more. Shia who were from the Turkoman ethnic group living in villages south of Kirkuk were driven from their homes and between 15 and 25 of them were murdered. It may be that the Shia will react in kind, but so far the killings have largely been of Shia by ISIS.

ISIS described its military strategy as “moving like a serpent between the rocks”—in other words, using its forces as shock troops to take out easy targets, but not getting dragged into prolonged fighting in which its fighters would be tied down and suffer heavy casualties. It picked off government garrisons in Sunni-majority districts, and in the places it captured it did not necessarily leave many of its militants behind but rather relied on local allies. Many in Baghdad and in governments across the world hoped that these allies of ISIS – local tribes and local Sunni leaders – could be persuaded to split from ISIS because of its violence and primeval social agenda. In the refinery town of Baiji, local people said that ISIS had been going from house to house asking for the names of married and unmarried women, sometimes demanding to see ID cards, which in Iraq specify marital status. They explained they were doing this because their unmarried fighters wanted to have wives. No doubt there will be a negative reaction to this sort of activity from the local Sunni communities, but a movement that is well organized and prepared to kill any opponent will not be easy to challenge.

The rise of ISIS and its military successes have led to shortsighted euphoria in Sunni countries: people congratulate themselves that it is no longer only the Shia who are on the offensive. But in practice ISIS' seizure of a leadership position in Syria and Iraq's communities will most likely prove to be a disaster for them. ISIS is a vanguard

that will not allow itself to be easily displaced and, like the fascists in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, will seek to crush anybody who tries. The Sunnis have ceded a commanding role to a movement that sees itself as divinely inspired and whose agenda involves endless and unwinnable wars against apostates and heretics. Iraq and Syria can be divided up, but they cannot be divided up cleanly and peacefully because too many minorities, like the million or more Sunnis in Baghdad, are on the wrong side of any conceivable dividing line. At best, Syria and Iraq face years of intermittent civil war; at worst, the division of these countries will be like the partition of India in 1947 when massacre and fear of massacre establishes new demographic frontiers.

The fall of Mosul and the ISIS-led Sunni revolt marks the end of a distinct period in Iraqi history that began with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein by the US and British invasion of March 2003. There was an attempt by the Iraqi opposition to oust the old regime and their foreign allies to create a new Iraq in which the three communities shared power in Baghdad. The experiment failed disastrously and it seems it will be impossible to resurrect it because the battle lines between Kurd, Sunni, and Shia are now too stark and embittered. The balance of power inside Iraq is changing. So too are the de facto frontiers of the state, with an expanded and increasingly independent Kurdistan – the Kurds having opportunistically used the crisis to secure territories they have always claimed – and the Iraqi-Syrian border having ceased to exist. The impact of these events is being felt across the Middle East as governments take on board that ISIS, an al-Qa‘ida-type group of the greatest ferocity and religious bigotry, has been able to claim the creation of a Sunni caliphate spanning much of Iraq and Syria.



This book focuses on several critical short- and long-term developments in the Middle East that are affecting or will soon affect the rest of the world. The most important of these is the resurgence of al-Qa‘ida-type movements that today rule a vast area in northern and western Iraq and eastern and northern Syria. The area under their sway is several hundred times larger than any territory ever controlled by Osama bin Laden, the killing of whom in 2011 was supposed to be a major blow to world terrorism. In fact, it is since bin Laden’s death that al-Qa‘ida affiliates or clones have had their greatest successes, including the capture of Raqqa in the eastern part of Syria, the only provincial capital in that country to fall to the rebels, in March 2013. In January 2014, ISIS took over Fallujah just forty miles west of Baghdad, a city famously besieged and stormed by US marines ten years earlier. Within a few months they had also captured Mosul and Tikrit. The battle lines may continue to change, but the overall expansion of their power appears permanent. With their swift and multi-pronged assault across central and northern Iraq in June 2014, the ISIS militants had superceded al-Qa‘ida as the most powerful and effective jihadi group in the world.

These developments came as a shock to many in the West, including politicians and specialists whose view of what was happening often seemed outpaced by events. One reason for this was that it was too risky for journalists and outside observers to visit the areas where ISIS was operating because of the extreme danger of being kidnapped or murdered. “Those who used to protect the foreign media can no longer

protect themselves,” one intrepid correspondent told me, explaining why he would not be returning to rebel-held Syria. The triumph of ISIS in Iraq in 2013–14 came as a particular surprise because the Western media had largely stopped reporting on the country. This lack of coverage had been convenient for the US and other Western governments because it enabled them to play down the extent to which the “war on terror” had failed so catastrophically in the years since 9/11.

This failure is also masked by deceptions and self-deceptions on the part of governments. Speaking at West Point on America’s role in the world on May 28, 2014, President Obama said that the main threat to the US no longer came from al-Qa‘ida central but from “decentralized al-Qa‘ida affiliates and extremists, many with agendas focused on the countries where they operate.” He added that “as the Syrian civil war spills across borders, the capacity of battle-hardened extremist groups to come after us only increases.” This was true enough, but Obama’s solution to the danger was, as he put it, “to ramp up support for those in the Syrian opposition who offer the best alternative to terrorists.” By June he was asking Congress for \$500 million to train and equip “appropriately vetted” members of the Syrian opposition. It is here that self-deception reigns, because the Syrian military opposition is dominated by ISIS and by Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), the official al-Qa‘ida representative, in addition to other extreme jihadi groups. In reality, there is no dividing wall between them and America’s supposedly moderate opposition allies.

An intelligence officer from a Middle Eastern country neighboring Syria told me that ISIS members “say they are always pleased when sophisticated weapons are sent to anti-Assad groups of any kind because they can always get the arms off them by threats of force or cash payments.” These are not empty boasts. Arms supplied by US allies such as Qatar and Turkey to anti-Assad forces in Syria are now being captured regularly in Iraq. I experienced a small example of the consequences of this inflow of weapons even before the fall of Mosul when, in the summer of 2014, I tried to book a flight to Baghdad on the same efficient European airline that I had used a year earlier. I was told it had discontinued flights to the Iraqi capital because it feared that insurgents had obtained shoulder-held anti-aircraft missiles originally supplied to anti-Assad forces in Syria and would use them against commercial aircraft flying into Baghdad International Airport. Western support for the Syrian opposition may have failed to overthrow Assad, but it was successfully destabilizing Iraq, as Iraqi politicians had long predicted.

The failure of the “war on terror” and the resurgence of al-Qa‘ida is further explained by a phenomenon which became apparent within hours of the 9/11 attacks. The anti-terror war would be waged without any confrontation with Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, two close US allies, despite the fact that without the involvement of these two countries 9/11 was unlikely to have happened. There is nothing conspiratorial or hidden about the ultimate responsibility for the operation that led to the destruction of the Twin Towers. Of the nineteen hijackers, fifteen were Saudi. Bin Laden came from the Saudi elite; US official documents stress repeatedly that financing for al-Qa‘ida and jihadi groups came from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. As for Pakistan, its army and military service played a central role since the early 1990s in propelling the Taliban into power in Afghanistan where they hosted bin Laden and al-Qa‘ida. After a brief hiatus during and after 9/11, Pakistan resumed its support for the Afghan

Taliban. Speaking of the central role of Pakistan in backing the Taliban, the late Richard C. Holbrooke, US special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, said: “We may be fighting the wrong enemy in the wrong country.”

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The importance of Saudi Arabia in the rise and return of al-Qa‘ida is often misunderstood and understated. Saudi Arabia is influential because its oil and vast wealth make it powerful in the Middle East and beyond. But it is not financial resources alone that make it such an important player. Another factor is its propagating of Wahhabism, the fundamentalist 18th-century version of Islam that imposes sharia law, relegates women to second class citizens, and regards Shia and Sufi Muslims as heretics and apostates to be persecuted along with Christians and Jews. This religious intolerance and political authoritarianism, which in its readiness to use violence has many similarities with European fascism in the 1930s, is getting worse rather than better. A Saudi who set up a liberal website on which clerics could be criticized was recently sentenced to a thousand lashes and seven years in prison.

The ideology of al-Qa‘ida and ISIS draws a great deal from Wahhabism. Critics of this new trend in Islam from elsewhere in the Muslim world do not survive long; they are forced to flee or murdered. Denouncing jihadi leaders in Kabul in 2003, an Afghan editor described them as “holy fascists” who were misusing Islam as “an instrument to take over power.” Unsurprisingly, he was accused of insulting Islam and had to leave the country.

A striking development in the Islamic world in recent decades is the way in which Wahhabism is taking over mainstream Sunni Islam. In one country after another Saudi Arabia is putting up the money for the training of preachers and the building of mosques. A result of this is the spread of sectarian strife between Sunni and Shia. The latter find themselves targeted with unprecedented viciousness from Tunisia to Indonesia. Such sectarianism is not confined to country villages outside Aleppo or in the Punjab; it is poisoning relations between the two sects in every Islamic grouping. A Muslim friend in London told me: “Go through the address books of any Sunni or Shia in Britain and you will find very few names belonging to people outside their own community.”

Even before Mosul, President Obama was coming to realize that al-Qa‘ida-type groups were far stronger than they had been previously, but his recipe for dealing with them repeats and exacerbates earlier mistakes. “We need partners to fight terrorists alongside us,” he told his audience at West Point. But who are these partners going to be? Saudi Arabia and Qatar were not mentioned by him since they remain close and active US allies in Syria. Obama instead singled out “Jordan and Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq” as partners to receive aid in “confronting terrorists working across Syria’s borders.” There is something absurd about this since the foreign jihadis in Syria and Iraq, the people whom Obama admits are the greatest threat, can only get to these countries because they are able to cross the 510-mile-long Turkish-Syrian border without hindrance from the Turkish authorities. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan may now be frightened by the Frankenstein they have helped to create, but there is little they can do to restrain the monster.

The resurgence of al-Qa‘ida-type groups is not a threat confined to Syria, Iraq, and

their near neighbors. What is happening in these countries, combined with the increasing dominance of intolerant and exclusive Wahhabite beliefs within the worldwide Sunni community, means that all 1.6 billion Muslims, almost a quarter of the world's people, will be increasingly affected. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that non-Muslim populations, including many in the West, will be untouched by the conflict. Today's resurgent jihadism, which has shifted the political terrain in Iraq and Syria, is already having far-reaching effects on global politics with dire consequences for us all.

—Baghdad, July 2014

# 1:

## JIHADIS ON THE MARCH

A video posted in the spring of 2014 by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS—formerly al-Qa‘ida in Iraq) shows foreign jihadis, most likely somewhere in Syria, burning their passports to demonstrate a permanent commitment to jihad. The film, which is professionally made, is sobering to watch for anybody who imagines that the ongoing war in Syria can be contained. It shows rather how the conflict in the great swath of territory between the Tigris River and the Mediterranean coast is starting to convulse the entire region.

You can tell by the covers of the passports being burned that most of them are Saudi, which are grass green, or Jordanian, which are dark blue, though many other nationalities are represented in the group. As each man rips up his passport and throws it into the flames, he makes a declaration of faith, a promise to fight against the ruler of the country from which he comes. A Canadian makes a short speech in English and, before switching to Arabic, says: “[This] is a message to Canada and all American powers. We are coming and we will destroy you.” A Jordanian says: “I say to the tyrant of Jordan: we are the descendants of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi [the Jordanian founding father of al-Qa‘ida in Iraq killed by US aircraft in 2006] and we are coming to kill you.” A Saudi, an Egyptian, and a Chechen all make similar threats underlining the jihadis’ open intention to operate anywhere in the world. What makes their threats particularly alarming is that their base area, the land where they are in control, is today larger by far than anything an al-Qa‘ida-type of group has held before.

If you look at a map of the Middle East, you will find that al-Qa‘ida-type organizations have become a lethally powerful force in a territory that stretches from Diyala province northeast of Baghdad, to northern Latakia province on Syria’s Mediterranean coastline. The whole of the Euphrates Valley through western Iraq, eastern Syria, and right up to the Turkish border is today under the rule of ISIS or JAN, the latter being the official representative of what US officials call “core” al-Qa‘ida in Pakistan. Al-Qa‘ida-type groups in western and northern Iraq and northern and eastern Syria now control a territory the size of Britain or Michigan, and the area in which they can mount operations is much bigger.



The Syrian-Iraqi border has largely ceased to exist. It is worth looking separately at the situation in the two countries, taking Iraq first. Here nearly all the Sunni areas, about a quarter of the country, are either wholly or partially controlled by ISIS. Before it captured Mosul and Tikrit it could field some 6,000 fighters, but this figure has multiplied many times since its gain in prestige and appeal to young Sunni men in the wake of its spectacular victories. Its very name (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) expresses its intention: it plans to build an Islamic state in Iraq and in “al-Sham” or greater Syria. It is not planning to share power with anybody. Led since 2010 by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also known as Abu Dua, it has proved itself even

more violent and sectarian than the “core” al-Qa‘ida, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is based in Pakistan.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi began to appear from the shadows in the summer of 2010 when he became leader of al-Qa‘ida in Iraq (AQI) after its former leaders were killed in an attack by US and Iraqi troops. AQI was at a low point in its fortunes, as the Sunni rebellion, in which it had once played a leading role, was collapsing. It was revived by the revolt of the Sunni in Syria in 2011 and, over the next three years, by a series of carefully planned campaigns in both Iraq and Syria. How far al-Baghdadi has been directly responsible for the military strategy and tactics of AQI and later ISIS is uncertain: former Iraqi army and intelligence officers from the Saddam era are said to have played a crucial role, but are under al-Baghdadi’s overall leadership.

Details of al-Baghdadi’s career depend on whether the source is ISIS itself, or US or Iraqi intelligence, but the overall picture appears fairly clear. He was born in Samarra, a largely Sunni city north of Baghdad, in 1971 and is well educated, with degrees in Islamic studies, including poetry, history, and genealogy from the Islamic University of Baghdad. A picture of al-Baghdadi, taken when he was a prisoner of the Americans in Bocca Camp in southern Iraq, shows an average-looking Iraqi man in his mid-twenties with black hair and brown eyes.

His real name is believed to be Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai. He may have been an Islamic militant under Saddam as a preacher in Diyala province, to the northeast of Baghdad, where, after the US invasion of 2003, he had his own armed group. Insurgent movements have a strong motive for giving out misleading information about their command structure and leadership, but it appears al-Baghdadi spent five years, between 2005 and 2009, as prisoner of the Americans.

After he took over, AQI became increasingly well organized, even issuing detailed annual reports itemizing its operations in each Iraqi province. Recalling the fate of his predecessors as AQI leader, al-Baghdadi insisted on extreme secrecy, so few people knew where he was. AQI prisoners either say they never met him or, when they did, that he was wearing a mask.

Taking advantage of the Syrian civil war, al-Baghdadi sent experienced fighters and funds to Syria to set up Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) as the al-Qa‘ida affiliate in Syria. He split from it in 2013, but remained in control of a great swath of territory in northern Syria and Iraq.

Against fragmented and dysfunctional opposition, al-Baghdadi has moved fast towards establishing himself as an effective, albeit elusive, leader. The swift rise of ISIS since he took charge has been greatly helped by the uprising of the Sunni in Syria in 2011, which encouraged the six million Sunnis in Iraq to take a stand against the political and economic marginalization they have encountered since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

ISIS launched a well-planned campaign in 2013, including a successful assault on Abu Ghraib prison in the summer of that year to free its leaders and experienced fighters. The military sophistication of ISIS is far greater than the al-Qa‘ida organization from which it emerged, even at the peak of its success in 2006–7 before the Americans turned many of the Sunni tribes against it.

ISIS has the great advantage of being able to operate on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border. Though inside Syria ISIS is engaged in an intra-jihadi civil war with

JAN, Ahrar al-Sham, and other groups, it still controls Raqqa and much of eastern Syria outside enclaves held by the Kurds close to the Turkish border. Jessica D. Lewis of the Institute for the Study of War, in a study of the jihadi movement at the end of 2013, described it as “an extremely vigorous, resilient and capable organization that can operate from Basra to coastal Syria.” Though the swiftly growing power of ISIS was obvious to those who followed its fortunes, the significance of what was happening was taken on board by few foreign governments, hence the widespread shock that greeted the fall of Mosul.

In expanding its influence, ISIS has been able to capitalize on two factors: the Sunni revolt in neighboring Syria, and the alienation of the Iraqi Sunni by a Shia-led government in Baghdad. Protests by the Sunnis that started in December 2012 were initially peaceful. But a lack of concessions by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki together with a massacre at a peace camp at Hawijah in April 2013, which was stormed by the Iraqi army and resulted in the deaths of over 50 protestors, transmuted peaceful protest into armed resistance. In the parliamentary election of April 2014, Maliki presented himself primarily as the leader of the Shia who would quell a Sunni counterrevolution centered in Anbar. After Mosul, Maliki was blamed for refusing reform that might have blunted the appeal of ISIS, but he was not the only Shia leader who believed that the Sunni would never accept the loss of their old dominance.

The general Sunni hostility to Maliki as a proponent of sectarianism had enabled ISIS to ally itself with seven or eight Sunni militant groups with which it had previously been fighting. Mr. Maliki is not to blame for everything that has gone wrong in Iraq, but he played a central role in pushing the Sunni community into the arms of ISIS, something it may come to regret. Paradoxically, although he did well in the April 2014 parliamentary election by frightening the Shia voters with talk of a Sunni counterrevolution, he behaved as if this was merely an electoral ploy and seemed not to realize how close the Sunni were to an actual insurrection, using ISIS as their shock troops.

In this failing, he ignored some pretty obvious warning signs. At the start of 2014, ISIS had taken over Fallujah forty miles west of Baghdad as well as extensive territory in Anbar, the huge province encompassing much of western Iraq. In March, its gunmen paraded through Fallujah’s streets to show off their recent capture of US-made armored Humvees from the Iraqi army. It was a final humiliation for the US that al-Qa’ida’s black flag should once again fly over a city that had been captured by US Marines in 2004 after a hard-fought victory accompanied by much self-congratulatory rhetoric. ISIS not only holds the city now, but also the nearby Fallujah dam, which allows them to regulate the flow of the Euphrates, either flooding or choking off the river for cities farther south. Unable to dislodge them by force, the Baghdad government diverted the water of the river into an old channel outside the control of the rebel fighters, which relieved the immediate crisis. But the fighting in Anbar showed how the military balance of power has changed in favor of ISIS. The Iraqi army, with five divisions stationed in the province, suffered a devastating defeat, reportedly losing 5,000 men dead and wounded and another 12,000 who deserted.

Farther to the north in June 2014, ISIS, joining forces with local Sunnis, took control of Mosul (Iraq’s second-largest city with a population of over one million), swiftly ousting the Iraqi military from the city. But, as one Iraqi remarked, in some

respects “Mosul had ceased to be under government authority long before.” Prior to the takeover, ISIS had been levying taxes on everybody from vegetable sellers in the market to mobile phone and construction companies. By one estimate its income from this alone was \$8 million (£4.8m) a month. The same sort of “taxation” was occurring in Tikrit, north of Baghdad, where a friend reported that people would not eat at any restaurant that wasn’t up to date with its tax payments to ISIS lest the place be bombed while they were dining.

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Turning now to Syria: today the armed opposition to the Assad government is dominated by jihadis who wish to establish an Islamic state. They accept foreign fighters and have a vicious record of massacring Syria’s minorities, notably the Alawites and the Christians. With the exception of those areas held by the Kurds, the whole eastern side of the country, including many of the Syrian oilfields, is now under jihadi control. The government clings to a few outposts in this vast area, but does not have the forces to recapture it.

Different jihadi groups compete with each other in this region and, since early 2014, have been engaged in internecine combat. In 2012, ISIS founded JAN, sensing an opportunity during the rapidly escalating civil war in Syria and fearing that its own struggle might be marginalized. It sent the new group money, arms, and experienced fighters. A year later, it tried to reassert its authority over the fledgling group, which had become excessively independent in the eyes of ISIS leaders, attempting to fold it into a broader organization covering both Syria and Iraq. JAN resisted this effort, and the two groups became involved in a complicated intra-jihadi civil war. The Islamic Front, a newly established and powerful alliance of opposition brigades backed by Turkey and Qatar, is also fighting ISIS, despite sharing its aim of strict imposition of sharia. When it comes to social and religious mores, ISIS and JAN do not differ markedly, although the latter organization has a reputation for being less rigid. However, it was JAN fighters in Deir Ezzor on the Euphrates in eastern Syria who burst into a wedding party in a private house, beating and arresting women who were listening to loud music and not wearing Islamic dress.

Despite this conflict, non-jihadi groups are today peripheral in the Syrian opposition. In particular the more secular Free Syrian Army (FSA), whose political wing was once designated by the West as the next rulers of Syria, has been marginalized. ISIS holds eastern Aleppo province while much of the recent fighting in Aleppo city itself has been led by JAN and Ahrar al-Sham, another al-Qa’ida-type movement. A recent attack on Syrian government-held territory in Latakia, located on the Mediterranean coast, was spearheaded by Moroccan jihadis along with Chechens. Meanwhile, JAN fighters run some of the suburbs of Damascus and a variety of villages and towns stretching up to the Turkish border. The fighting between ISIS and the other jihadis is really a battle over the spoils, more of a reflection of how strong they are than of any differences with respect to their long-term aims.

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This sharp increase in the strength and reach of jihadist organizations in Syria and Iraq has generally been unacknowledged until recently by politicians and media in the

West. A primary reason for this is that Western governments and their security forces narrowly define the jihadist threat as those forces directly controlled by al-Qa'ida central or "core" al-Qa'ida. This enables them to present a much more cheerful picture of their successes in the so-called "war on terror" than the situation on the ground warrants. In fact, the idea that the only jihadis to be worried about are those with the official blessing of al-Qa'ida is naïve and self-deceiving. It ignores the fact, for instance, that ISIS has been criticized by the al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri for its excessive violence and sectarianism. After talking to a range of Syrian jihadi rebels not directly affiliated with al-Qa'ida in southeast Turkey earlier this year, a source told me that "without exception they all expressed enthusiasm for the 9/11 attacks and hoped the same thing would happen in Europe as well as the US."

Jihadi groups ideologically close to al-Qa'ida have been relabeled as moderate if their actions are deemed supportive of US policy aims. In Syria, the Americans backed a plan by Saudi Arabia to build up a "Southern Front" based in Jordan that would be hostile to the Assad government in Damascus, and simultaneously hostile to al-Qa'ida-type rebels in the north and east. The powerful but supposedly moderate Yarmouk Brigade, reportedly the planned recipient of anti-aircraft missiles from Saudi Arabia, was intended to be the leading element in this new formation. But numerous videos show that the Yarmouk Brigade has frequently fought in collaboration with JAN, the official al-Qa'ida affiliate. Since it was likely that, in the midst of battle, these two groups would share their munitions, Washington was effectively allowing advanced weaponry to be handed over to its deadliest enemy. Iraqi officials confirm that they have captured sophisticated arms from ISIS fighters in Iraq that were originally supplied by outside powers to forces considered to be anti-al-Qa'ida in Syria.

The name al-Qa'ida has always been applied flexibly when identifying an enemy. In 2003 and 2004 in Iraq, as armed Iraqi opposition to the American and British-led occupation mounted, US officials attributed most attacks to al-Qa'ida, though many were carried out by nationalist and Baathist groups. Propaganda like this helped to persuade nearly 60 percent of US voters prior to the Iraq invasion that there was a connection between Saddam Hussein and those responsible for 9/11, despite the absence of any evidence for this. In Iraq itself, indeed throughout the entire Muslim world, these accusations have benefited al-Qa'ida by exaggerating its role in the resistance to the US and British occupation.

Precisely the opposite PR tactics were employed by Western governments in 2011 in Libya, where any similarity between al-Qa'ida and the NATO-backed rebels fighting to overthrow the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, was played down. Only those jihadis who had a direct operational link to the al-Qa'ida "core" of Osama bin Laden were deemed to be dangerous. The falsity of the pretense that the anti-Gaddafi jihadis in Libya were less threatening than those in direct contact with al-Qa'ida was forcefully, if tragically, exposed when US ambassador Chris Stevens was killed by jihadi fighters in Benghazi in September 2012. These were the same fighters lauded by Western governments and media for their role in the anti-Gaddafi uprising.

Al-Qa'ida is an idea rather than an organization, and this has long been the case. For a five-year period after 1996, it did have cadres, resources, and camps in Afghanistan, but these were eliminated after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Subsequently, al-Qa'ida's name became primarily a rallying cry, a set of Islamic

beliefs, centering on the creation of an Islamic state, the imposition of sharia, a return to Islamic customs, the subjugation of women, and the waging of holy war against other Muslims, notably the Shia, who are considered heretics worthy of death. At the center of this doctrine for making war is an emphasis on self-sacrifice and martyrdom as a symbol of religious faith and commitment. This has resulted in using untrained but fanatical believers as suicide bombers, to devastating effect.

It has always been in the interest of the US and other governments that al-Qa'ida be viewed as having a command-and-control structure like a mini-Pentagon, or like the mafia in America. This is a comforting image for the public because organized groups, however demonic, can be tracked down and eliminated through imprisonment or death. More alarming is the reality of a movement whose adherents are self-recruited and can spring up anywhere.

Osama bin Laden's gathering of militants, which he did not call al-Qa'ida until after 9/11, was just one of many jihadi groups twelve years ago. But today its ideas and methods are predominant among jihadis because of the prestige and publicity it gained through the destruction of the Twin Towers, the war in Iraq, and its demonization by Washington as the source of all anti-American evil. These days, there is a narrowing of differences in the beliefs of jihadis, regardless of whether or not they are formally linked to al-Qa'ida central.

Unsurprisingly, governments prefer the fantasy picture of al-Qa'ida because it enables them to claim victories when it succeeds in killing its better-known members and allies. Often, those eliminated are given quasi-military ranks, such as "head of operations," to enhance the significance of their demise. The culmination of this heavily publicized but largely irrelevant aspect of the "war on terror" was the killing of bin Laden in Abbottabad in Pakistan in 2011. This enabled President Obama to grandstand before the American public as the man who had presided over the hunting down of al-Qa'ida's leader. In practical terms, however, his death had little impact on al-Qa'ida-type jihadi groups, whose greatest expansion has occurred subsequently.



The key decisions that enabled al-Qa'ida to survive, and later to expand, were made in the hours immediately after 9/11. Almost every significant element in the project to crash planes into the Twin Towers and other iconic American buildings led back to Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden was a member of the Saudi elite, and his father had been a close associate of the Saudi monarch. Citing a CIA report from 2002, the official 9/11 report says that al-Qa'ida relied for its financing on "a variety of donors and fundraisers, primarily in the Gulf countries and particularly in Saudi Arabia." The report's investigators repeatedly found their access limited or denied when seeking information in Saudi Arabia. Yet President George W. Bush apparently never even considered holding the Saudis responsible for what happened. An exit of senior Saudis, including bin Laden relatives, from the US was facilitated by the US government in the days after 9/11. Most significant, twenty-eight pages of the 9/11 Commission Report about the relationship between the attackers and Saudi Arabia were cut and never published, despite a promise by President Obama to do so, on the grounds of national security.

In 2009, eight years after 9/11, a cable from the US Secretary of State, Hillary