

# The un-Islamic State

By Mouin Rabbani

## ■ Executive summary

The Islamic State (IS) movement needs to be understood as a political project whose primary objective is to establish a viable entity in areas it can control rather than engage in permanent insurgency against more powerful adversaries. The conditions for its emergence were created by the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the dissolution of the Iraqi state and its replacement with a sectarian political system and conflict, and the collapse of state authority in regions of Syria. The available evidence indicates that the IS is at best uninterested in achieving the conventional forms of legitimacy and integration pursued by other Islamist movements; engagement is therefore unlikely to prove a viable option.

There are no quick or simple solutions to the challenges posed by the IS. Those being considered, particularly Western military intervention, are almost guaranteed to make a catastrophic situation worse, while a strategy that relies on disaffected Sunni tribes and sectarian Shia militias is unlikely to succeed. A comprehensive approach is needed involving a re-evaluation of policy towards the Syrian crisis, engagement with regional parties on a much broader spectrum of relevant issues, and a focus on establishing legitimate institutions that are able to address deep-seated grievances and resolve the conflicts that allow movements like IS to thrive.

## Introduction

Since the Islamic State (IS) movement seized control of Iraq's second city of Mosul in early June 2014 it has achieved unprecedented levels of success in Iraq and Syria, seized territory in Lebanon, and expanded to the border regions of most surrounding states. As a result the international community, which had virtually forgotten about Iraq and was growing increasingly uninterested in Syria, put these conflicts back at the top of its agenda virtually overnight. The U.S. is once again engaged in hostilities in Iraq and considering direct, less covert means of involvement in Syria, as are a number of its partners. Regional governments, which had previously seen the IS as either a distant threat or useful proxy, seem to be overcoming their differences to confront what is perceived to be a common and growing challenge.

Much has been written about the IS's genesis, ideology, objectives and practices. Most of these characterise it as a puritanical movement that represents either an extremist incarnation of Islamic orthodoxy or a radical distortion of it. The more pertinent observation that the IS represents a thoroughly modern project and that explanations for its existence are primarily to be found in the political landscape

in which it operates rather than Islamic theology is less frequently made.

## Origins and development of the IS movement

The IS's roots are located in the 2003 U.S. occupation of Iraq and the Syrian crisis a decade later. The U.S. administration in Iraq systematically dismantled the Iraqi state and its institutions and replaced them with a sectarian political system and conflict that reproduced itself throughout government institutions. Unsurprisingly, Iraqi politics gradually came to be dominated by fundamentally incompatible identity-based political forces rather than national ones competing on the basis of different political programmes. While the supremacy of Islamist parties among the disenfranchised Sunni community was not a foregone conclusion, the increasingly religious milieu of the Arab world in recent decades, the increasingly Islamist character of opposition politics in the region (both of which are to some extent a legacy of the cold war), and the prominence of Islamist militias in the struggle against both the occupation and the new regime in Baghdad contributed to these parties' ascendancy.

Similar dynamics were at work in the ranks of the armed Syrian opposition in the period 2011-13, where – as in Iraq – those with the most effective military forces also obtained the greater share of foreign funding, weapons and skilled cadres. Locally, endemic socioeconomic decay, particularly rampant youth unemployment and its debilitating impact on individual lives; a deep-seated sense of perpetual injustice; and the opportunity to redress these realities while simultaneously affirming a sense of self-worth and improved opportunities – all with a bit of adventure thrown in – ensured a steady supply of recruits.

What made Iraq and Syria, rather than more conservative societies like Jordan and Saudi Arabia or polarised polities like Lebanon and Palestine conducive to the emergence of such movements was the withdrawal and in some regions collapse of the state. A similar process can be observed today in Libya and, to a lesser extent, Yemen. Indeed, the breakdown of central authority and the absence of national institutions with sufficient legitimacy to address grievances and mediate political conflict have not only empowered subnational phenomena like sectarianism and tribalism as social defence mechanisms, but provided militias adopting such agendas with the space to develop and opportunity to expand.

Nevertheless, this does not explain why the IS in particular succeeded where others failed – or, rather, was able to seize the initiative and dominate or eliminate so many of its competitors. Here ideology and the particular variant of Islam promulgated by the IS are largely negligible factors. Rather, this phenomenon can primarily be attributed to the movement's thoroughly contemporary rather than atavistic modus operandi. Firstly (and unlike so many of its competitors, whose *raison d'être* is confrontation with the state, or what might be called a conventional guerrilla insurgency), from the outset the IS – as its name suggests – has pursued a strategy of establishing and consolidating a political entity in regions where the former state no longer functions or can be expelled. It is in this respect a fundamentally political rather than religious project – even though the IS insists the two are inseparable.

Secondly – and closely related to the first – the IS strategy has focused on obtaining the resources and means required to function as a state. For it, control of territory; the provision of governance, administration and services; and the regulation of society and the economy are core functions. Territorial expansion is not prioritised and pursued for its own sake as with many of its competitors, but rather pursued only when there is a reasonable prospect that such territory can be integrated, defended and governed. While the IS's proclamation of a caliphate in late June 2014 was motivated by a host of factors, not least among them a determination to settle accounts with al-Qaeda, subordinate other participants in the Iraqi Sunni rebellion and Syrian armed opposition to its will, and, of course, capitalise on its spectacular successes of the previous months, its willingness to take a step eschewed by

similar movements reflects the reality that statehood is germane to the IS project.

## The IS movement: strategy and objectives

Much has been written about the background to the IS's recent sudden expansion and the interplay in this respect between the Syrian and Iraqi arenas, and there has been an equal amount of speculation about where it might seek to expand next. Its current response to the latter question – i.e. Arbil, the capital of the Kurdish region of Iraq – seems in light of the consequences somewhat out of character. Unless, that is, speculation is correct that it deliberately sought to provoke Western intervention in order to profit from direct conflict in the knowledge that the U.S. and its allies lack the will to repeat the invasion of Iraq and the means to defeat it in Syria. To the question "Baghdad or Damascus?" the response is almost certainly "neither". The former is too heavily defended, the latter too distant, and both are the seats of central authority.

A no less interesting question is whether the recent vast expansion of IS territory, and therefore of assets at potential risk, might motivate the movement to deal more pragmatically with the world around it and perhaps even attempt to come to informal or other understandings with adversaries to enable it to consolidate its position and govern more effectively. In this respect some have looked to Lebanon's Hizbullah and more recently the Palestinian organisation Hamas as examples of radical, armed Islamist movements that have either achieved or seek conventional forms of legitimacy after attaining significant political power and the responsibilities of governance. An initial informal non-aggression pact between the IS and Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which allowed the latter to seize Kirkuk and expand its territory by some 40% while the IS consolidated its hold on Iraq's Arab Sunni heartland, seemed to suggest this could be a possibility.

Yet the IS is fundamentally different in character and agenda from these other movements, and to extrapolate IS policies on the basis of the trajectory of other militant Islamists would be akin to inferring Khmer Rouge conduct from the record of the Bolsheviks after they established the Soviet Union. The tacit alliance with Iraq's Kurds was thus exceptionally short-lived and no more stable than the IS's periods of coexistence with other elements of the Syrian armed opposition. To return to the Soviet analogy, the brief dalliance with the KRG might be compared to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, although the IS's strategic calculations in this instance more closely reflect those ascribed to Hitler, with the KRG fulfilling the role of Stalin.

Perhaps the greatest irony of the IS phenomenon is that its vision of an Islamic state that correctly applies the pristine and unadulterated practices its leaders ascribe to the religion's inaugural practitioners would almost certainly be disavowed by the latter as a monumental parody. Indeed, from what is known about the statecraft of the Prophet

Muhammad and the first caliphs, they would in all likelihood have rather quickly run afoul of the IS's caliphate. No less importantly, the fulfilment of the IS's programme requires the systematic dismantling (and in too many cases the physical demolition) of 14 centuries of Islamic civilisation and tradition.

Few of the ideas promulgated by the IS are without theological foundation, nor are its practices entirely without precedent. Nevertheless, it can hardly claim to be rooted in well-established Muslim tradition or jurisprudence and should therefore be primarily understood as a thoroughly modern interpretation and application of a faith whose imagined past is a projection backwards of contemporary agendas rather than a revival of early Islamic rule. The IS's reclamation of Islam's essence is thus on a par with the Khmer Rouge's insistence that it represented the pure soul of communism.

Similar to the Khmer Rouge, and returning once again to the comparison with other Islamist movements, IS branding is in significant part based on a categorical rejection of either compromise or concession to an imperfect world, or a gradualist approach to achieving its objectives. The pragmatism and interaction with existing states and institutions exhibited by other Islamist movements is therefore something the IS has condemned not only when in opposition, but more importantly after achieving power. Although the movement derives its theological roots from 18th-century Wahhabi doctrines that serve as the state ideology of Saudi Arabia and have for several decades been energetically disseminated throughout the Muslim world, the IS rejects the Saudi state as a distortion of Wahhabi tenets.

As attested by the rapidity and ferocity with which the IS has eliminated the presence of minorities in areas under its rule, suppressed erstwhile Sunni allies in Iraq and Syria, and criminalised tradition and local custom, initial post-combat statements reassuring populations under its control that their rights would be respected pursuant to traditional Islamic practice have proven to be nothing more than a tactic to encourage a false sense of security and thus prevent the premature emergence of significant resistance to its designs.

## Conclusion: future prospects

Under the circumstances the assumption that history is on the verge of repeating itself and that the IS will be removed much as its Iraqi precursor led by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was defeated by foreign-sponsored local forces seems to be far-fetched. The IS movement is no longer a clandestine insurgent group that can be evicted by stronger militias and prevented from resurrection by internal security forces, but – not unlike the KRG – an increasingly conventional military force that can only be dislodged by taking physical control of its fiefdom. The coalition that occupied Iraq in 2003 appears to have little appetite for a rematch,

and should its position change it is inconceivable that a renewed foreign occupation of Iraq will not make an already catastrophic situation more so.

Additionally, the IS appears to have rather methodically put to sleep most of the leaders of the previous Awakening movement and potential kingpins of a new one. This notwithstanding, mechanisms to empower a cowed population to assert itself without exposing its members to mass slaughter need to be examined. On a related note, the risk that any operation to suppress the IS will degenerate into a sectarian campaign to blunt Sunni aspirations has already been realised and needs to be addressed. In the current highly polarised environment, subcontracting Iraqi national security functions to sectarian Shia militias is a particularly dangerous approach that is liable to have a lasting disastrous impact.

Secondly, as many analysts have pointed out, there is a fundamental contradiction in Western policy towards Iraq and Syria. Seeking to strengthen the government opposed to the IS in Iraq while acting to weaken its counterpart in Syria may serve any variety of policy objectives, but defeating the IS is not one of them. Similarly, given the near-apocalyptic perceptions of the IS that have gripped Western capitals in recent months, the approach of continued demurrals and deflection concerning the extent to which the policies of regional allies have empowered and assisted IS needs to be revised. One might also note that complacency towards the propagation of *takfiri* thought – the Islamic counterpart of George W. Bush's belief that one is "either with us or with the terrorists" – is particularly hazardous, given the heterogeneous societies of the Levant and Iraq.

In the short term there are no easy responses to the challenges posed by the IS. Military containment may succeed, but to do so it needs to be led by local and regional forces rather than those who have already brought Iraq to the brink of dissolution. Even limited U.S. military intervention is likely to bolster the IS at least as much as it weakens it. Secondly, policy towards the Syrian crisis requires a comprehensive review. One need not endorse the Assad regime's brutal policies or assist with their implementation in order to recognise that the regime is a reality in the Middle East that will continue to exist at least until a political transition commences in Syria. Those who freely treat with Omar Bashir, Nouri al-Maliki, Binyamin Netanyahu and Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi lack persuasive grounds for rejecting engagement with Bashar al-Assad on matters of common concern.

Thirdly, neighbouring states need to be dealt with as participants in a potential solution rather than part of an existing problem. This applies equally to Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, who, along with others, should be encouraged – and if necessary pressured – to revise policies that enable and empower the IS by design or default.

Finally – and crucially – political transition must be actively pursued, not only in Syria, where it has been reduced to a slogan for regime change, if not regime suicide, but equally in Iraq. Only the emergence of institutions enjoying sufficient popular – and not necessarily electoral –

legitimacy can address deep-seated grievances and peacefully resolve the conflicts that allow movements such as the IS to thrive, and thereby reassert governance and authority on a national scale that ultimately forms the only durable solution to this challenge.

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