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The Historical and Political Roots of ISIS: A Failure of American Leadership

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Abstract

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has captivated the world's attention with its brutal tactics of beheadings and burnings and its alternative Quranic teachings. Despite fixation on these tactics by the global community and repudiation of their methodology by global Islamic leaders, limited inquiry into the historical and ideological underpinnings of the group has occurred at an intergovernmental level, which has hamstrung the global response. In addition to analyzing the limited primary sources that constitute ISIS's propaganda, this paper discusses the failure of state building after the United States' initial invasion of Iraq, which directly fomented the rise of an insurgent group like ISIS, as well as the initial failure of the global community to understand the nature of the enemy it fought. Finally, it suggests principles for the United States to follow in future foreign engagements, particularly when fighting ideologies as insidious as that of ISIS.

The Historical and Political Roots of ISIS:
A Failure of American Leadership

Analysis of a failed intervention, a misunderstood enemy, and the best path forward for the United States

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ABSTRACT:

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has captivated the world's attention with its brutal tactics of beheadings and burnings and its alternative Quranic teachings. Despite fixation on these tactics by the global community and repudiation of their methodology by global Islamic leaders, limited inquiry into the historical and ideological underpinnings of the group has occurred at an intergovernmental level, which has hamstrung the global response. In addition to analyzing the limited primary sources that constitute ISIS's propaganda, this paper discusses the failure of state building after the United States' initial invasion of Iraq, which directly fomented the rise of an insurgent group like ISIS, as well as the initial failure of the global community to understand the nature of the enemy it fought. Finally, it suggests principles for the United States to follow in future foreign engagements, particularly when fighting ideologies as insidious as that of ISIS.

HONOR CODE:

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Introduction

On May 1, 2003, two months after he had launched the War in Iraq, United States President George W. Bush famously gave a speech about the war while standing in front of a banner that said, "Mission accomplished." In fact, the mission was just beginning. From the time the United States launched its state building operation in Iraq – just days after Bush's speech – the contemporary roots of the terrorist group the world would come to know as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began to emerge. ISIS's historical roots, however, dated more than a millennium earlier to the time just after Islam's conception. As the United States' endeavor to build a democracy in Iraq continued, many of its tactics contributed to the subsequent development of the ISIS, which, after subsuming Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), declared a global caliphate in 2014 and enraptured the world with its harsh tactics such as beheadings and burning dissidents alive. The group justified its tactics through a menagerie of historical events and Quranic texts, and it demanded total allegiance from inhabitants of its conquered territory just as Abu Bakr, Islam's first caliph, had more than 1300 years prior. As the global community wallowed in developing an appropriate response (and it remains an open question as to whether its current approach meets that standard), ISIS launched a propaganda campaign to attract followers from around the world and inspiring them to take violent action in their home countries. Dozens of ostensibly "ISIS-inspired attacks" have occurred since 2014, and even as the group suffers battlefield losses, lone wolves continue to perpetrate killings around the world. The global community's failure to understand the nature of its enemy and the sectarian, religious, and political history of the region from which it originated has contributed to the rise of the ISIS. Moving forward, the global community must develop institutions and principles to prevent future terrorist groups from gaining influence as rapidly as ISIS did as well as to stop the underlying

causes of the organization from taking root. The United States' intervention in Iraq to dispose of the Saddam Hussein regime and subsequent fight against Islamic extremists failed due to a misunderstanding of the historical and cultural context surrounding the rise of these organizations, their recruitment, and their operations. After analyzing why these misunderstandings took place, this paper will offer potential paths that the United States and its Western allies might take to mitigate the impact of these violent extremists and ultimately discredit them in the eyes of the Islamic people.

History of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Rise of ISIS

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, it did so with a fiery "shock and awe" campaign that sought to immediately and indefatigably decimate both the capability and tenacity of the Iraqi military. It succeeded. Within two months, the United States had effectively ousted Saddam Hussein from power (Sepp 218). However, after the initial invasion, civilian administrator Paul Bremer – President Bush's appointee to rebuild the Iraqi government – issued Coalition Provisional Order Number 2, which disbanded the Iraqi military and bureaucracy (a process known as "de-Baathification"), creating a formidable power vacuum that would haunt US troops for years to come (Pfiffner 82). Moreover, some senior commanders in the military failed to recognize the need to ingratiate American troops to Iraqi civilians; instead, many units prioritized absolute security of their troops over building relationships with key local leaders. They conducted patrols in armored vehicles, liberally arrested suspected insurgents, and frequently used force against civilians, which turned "hearts and minds" against the occupants from the outset (Sepp 219). By the surge in 2007, units finally recognized the necessity in living among the Iraqi people, but in many cases, damage had already been done (Petraeus). Prior

actions created fertile ground for the rise of a guerilla insurgency organization that had local support.

The concept of an Iraqi identity eroded, gradually descending into sectarian tension during the reconstruction (Gerges 8). Meanwhile, recently unemployed Iraqi soldiers feeling slighted from the villainization of Saddam's former Baathist party (which most Iraqis joined solely out of self-interest to have employment, not because they ascribed to Saddam's ideas) and betrayed by the new American occupiers who initially showed interest in recalling them to duty but ultimately – because of Bremer's directive – were not reintegrated into the Iraqi military. This allowed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to take advantage of the instability and found Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004 (Gerges 10; Pfiffner 82). Al Qaeda in Iraq wreaked havoc with suicide bombings and attacks on civilians (both Shia, the initial target, as well as Sunnis who refused to support its cause) and the fledgling government alike (Gerges 71). Over time, the violence continued, and an insurgency power vacuum created after a US airstrike killed Zarqawi allowed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a "mediocre" student of Islam who spent time in an American prison during the Iraq War, to lay the foundations for his own insurgency group, which came to be known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Gerges 135). ISIS lurked in the shadows until the provisional government, led by Nuri al-Maliki and supported by the United States, was at its weakest point. Avoiding the mistakes that decimated AQI, ISIS began to make its move in 2010 (Gerges 118).

> There is no doubt that ISIS learned important lessons from its predecessors, carefully avoiding the mistakes of AQI and ISI while building bridges and social networks within the Sunni communities. ISIS … relied more on cooption and commonalities than on coercion and ideological rigidity. (Gerges 119)

Baghdadi, in fact, went further than AQI when, in 2014, he declared a global caliphate to which all Muslims should pledge allegiance. His military operation included many of Saddam's former

top lieutenants who felt disenfranchised by Iraq's government, and his ideological operation featured a formidable online presence aimed to attract followers from around the world (Thompson). With a slick propaganda machine, jarring disciplinary tactics, and startling battlefield gains, ISIS had captivated the world's attention.

The ISIS Ideology and Historical Roots

Much of the international community has fixated on the concept of jihad with respect to analyzing the motivations of ISIS, but ideologically, the need for jihad stems from a concept of jahiliyya. Fundamentally, ISIS's interest is not so much in ideology as it is in geopolitical supremacy. Historically, the term "jahiliyya" refers to an "age of ignorance" that pervaded pre-Islamic Arabia, but beginning in the middle of the 20th century, Islamist philosophers including Sayyid Qutb began to posit that the modern world lived in a state of jahiliyya particularly considering its penchant for materialism and the prevalence of poverty amid unprecedented global wealth (Shepard 525). ISIS has embraced this definition to demonize the western occupation of the Middle East and the western way of life, and it uses jihad as the means to execute its ultimate geopolitical goal, which is establishing an enduring caliphate in the Middle East (Gerges 154). As its propaganda magazine says, "If it were not for jihad, the world would be filled with corruption," (*Rumiyah* Issue Two 2). Religion is a means to ISIS's end, not its underlying motivation, a fundamental misunderstanding particularly among many western politicians. Middle East scholar Fawaz Gerges notes, "There is essentially nothing religious in its actions, its strategic planning, its unscrupulous changing of alliances, and its precisely implemented propaganda narratives," (154). The varying historical Islamic caliphates and leaders from which ISIS draws its tactics corroborates the lack of ideological rigidity in the organization.

Baghdadi has shown a propensity to follow any Islamic precedent that is convenient to enhance his power. In establishing his genealogical legitimacy to serve as a caliph, Baghdadi followed the ways of Abu Bakr, who replaced Muhammad in 632 when the prophet died. He explicitly declared not only a lineage that conferred legitimacy through the Banu Hashim clan (to which Muhammad belonged), but he also conjured the rhetoric of Abu Bakr's first speech as caliph, which demonstrated his affinity for the past in shaping his future as caliph (Atwan 110; Rosiny 100).

When Baghdadi declared a global caliphate in Mosul during the summer of 2014, he unfurled a black flag just as the Abbasid empire did when it overthrew the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth century. The unfurling of the black flag in Mosul aimed to define an enemy: for the Abbasids, that enemy was the Umayyads; for ISIS, that enemy is infidels worldwide (and the apostates who support them) (Spuler 48). From there, both the Abbasids and the ISIS utilized formidable networks of propaganda to carefully disseminate information to targeted groups in a way that such groups understand and appreciate (Lassner et al. 129–30). Abbasid propaganda aimed to find those who were "aggrieved" by the political establishment of the day (Hovannisian et al. 62–63). Similarly, ISIS uses sophisticated, professional magazines in both Arabic and English to attract disaffected young people in western countries and disenchanted Muslims worldwide to join their cause. As the effectiveness of the initial wave of propaganda waned, both ISIS and the Abbasids redoubled efforts to gain territory by force (Jangebe 6). Of course, the Abbasids also made significant advances in the sciences and the arts and largely embraced multiculturalism, each of which ISIS abhors (Diab).

ISIS has also taken governance tactics from the Umayyads, the very enemy of the Abbasids, to whose empire Baghdadi has referred as the "golden age" of Islam (Diab). Wilferd

Madelung argues that the Quran encourages refusing to care for those who prefer "infidelity to faith" regardless of their kinship, which allows ISIS to claim that anyone who is not with them – thus, not a "true Muslim" – can be disregarded, exploited, and abused (7). Furthermore, Madelung finds several primary characteristics of Mu'awiya's regime (one of the Umayyad dynasty's most consequential) that contributed to its success including meeting the enemy in his own country, for which ISIS has shown a propensity in inspiring attacks around the world, and distributing provisions and stipends appropriately to those who support the caliphate, which ISIS does by paying its soldiers a wage that far exceeds what they could find elsewhere in their villages and thus develops a relationship that enhances the caliphate's power (323). By "pitting Muslims against Muslims, inciting suspicion, mistrust, hatred and constant strife," ISIS capitalized on regional instability with hopes to build an economically viable, politically powerful, and militarily redoubtable caliphate (Madelung 324)

ISIS's Digital Propaganda and the Need for Western Counterinsurgency

Overstating the importance of the information campaign in the Middle East is almost impossible. Spreading propaganda has been as central to ISIS's success (if not more so) as any of its military gains, and American mistakes have exacerbated the inherent tensions of an occupying force to facilitate a volatile region particularly in Iraq. Since the dawn of the invasion, many Iraqis had been skeptical of America's motivation in invading, which, although ostensibly to find weapons of mass destruction and promote democracy, clearly had additional components (Krugman; Fallows). This skepticism was compounded by images of torture coming from Abu Ghraib, the ongoing "kill or capture" campaign, and the defensive posture of troops on the ground towards civilians (Schmidt; *Kill/Capture*; Sepp 219).

The United States did mount a counterinsurgency campaign that was largely championed by David Petraeus. A cornerstone of this campaign was local "Awakening groups" of (largely Sunni) soldiers whom the United States trained to fight insurgents and terrorists, equipping them with weaponry and paying them salaries (Bruno). The frequently provocative observer Nir Rosen suggested – perhaps all too presciently – that the United States thought it had bought Sunni support, but, in fact, the Sunnis "bought the Americans" and bought time to develop a strategy to dismantle the largely Shia coalition-supported government (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations). The United States had promised reintegration for these "Sons of Iraq," but as the sectarian rifts widened, ISIS found the recruiting ground with disaffected Sunnis, many of whom had military experience at both the tactical and operational levels. Meanwhile, Nuri al-Maliki, the Shia President of Iraq, defied constitutional power-sharing agreements and proceeded to subjugate Sunni officials within his administration (Al-Qarawee 6-7). "The sectarian polarization has deepened … [Iraq's] crisis and has exacerbated its fragmentation," writes Iraq scholar Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee (10). Consequently, the landscape was ripe for the emergence of ISIS, a conglomerate of marginalized ex-Baathist figures as well as jihadist nationalist groups. When, during ISIS's initial wave, thousands of Iraqi troops laid down their (US-provided) equipment and surrendered without a fight, the consequences of the US's failure in state-building reached a new height.

Unlike the United States, ISIS has proven itself to be a master of public relations (at least for its intended audience) insofar as its publications, entitled *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, reach and inspire audiences of aspiring jihadists around the world. "ISIS are experts in fear," writes journalist Patrick Cockburn (xiv). The publications not only provide a theological justification for some of the caliphate's more grotesque tactics (e.g., beheadings), but also provide step-by-

step guides for copycats around the world (Kibble 31; *Rumiyah* Issue Two 12). Additionally, ISIS publishes high-quality videos of its beheadings of westerners and punishment of other "infidels," which, ironically, reverses the US doctrine of shock and awe back on the western citizenry, who has expressed uniform outrage and condemnation at the attacks. The mass refugee crisis in Iraq and Syria belies ISIS's assertion that people live happily under its rule, but it certainly has attracted some followers both within its immediate geographic region and around the world (Wong).

Recently, the United States and its global coalition have succeeded in killing thousands of ISIS operatives, in seizing and freezing significant funds and oil reserves, and in regaining significant swaths of territory, but as 2003 proved, eradicating the enemy is the easy part … building a lasting state is far more challenging (Wong). The fact is that the United States entered Iraq in 2003 without a viable exit strategy, underestimated the underlying sectarian tensions and history of political marginalization in Iraq, and left fertile ground for creation of an insurgent group such as ISIS (Al Qarawee 4). The Bush administration prioritized political gains at home for long-term success abroad; every action was predicated upon the need for immediate success, and many of those actions – such as the surge of 2007 – may have had a negative long term impact. Writing about the surge, Steven Simon suggested in *Foreign Affairs* that it could have negative long-term consequences.

> The problem is that this strategy to reduce violence is not linked to any sustainable plan for building a viable Iraqi state. If anything, it has made such an outcome less likely, by stoking the revanchist fantasies of Sunni Arab tribes and pitting them against the central government and against one another. In other words, the recent short-term gains have come at the expense of the long-term goal of a stable, unitary Iraq. (Simon 58)

Simon's observation proved all too prescient as disgruntled Sunnis fueled the early military gains of ISIS (Thompson). Moreover, once ISIS had emerged, the western propensity to lump it in

with Al Qaeda as "standard issue jihad" understated the flexible ideology, yet unapologetically brutal tactical approach used by the fledgling caliphate (Gerges 154).

Lessons Learned and the Path Forward for the United States

Moving forward, the international community, led by the United States, has the capacity to avert the proliferation of at least some terrorist groups by altering its standard operating procedures in international conflict. Before entering a foreign country, political leaders and military leaders should define a clear end state and exit strategy, and once such a decision is reached, it should not be adjusted "on the fly," as was the case with Paul Bremer seemingly unilaterally authorizing the dismantling of the Iraqi military (Pfiffner 77-78). Open-ended state building operations quickly turn into quagmires, a lesson the United States should have learned by now. Moreover, aggressive implementation of counterinsurgency efforts to win the loyalties of the civilians on the ground is pivotal to realizing success in 21st century warfare. When US generals implemented this tactic in certain regions of Iraq, it had success in reducing violence and in increasing reports of weapons stockpiles and other forms of actionable intelligence, but it ostensibly ran counter to the priorities of senior officials at the Department of Defense who demanded immediate results and implemented measures such as harsh interrogation, employment of private defense contractors not bound to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and a willingness to view Iraqi civilians as collateral damage (Bruno; Sullivan; Schmidt). The policies of the Iraq War left a power vacuum and a pervasive feeling of political disenfranchisement that directly led to the spawning of ISIS (Al-Qarawee; Simon).

Once ISIS launched its digital campaign, the United States was conspicuously feckless in fighting back; although it clearly won the intelligence battle to find and kill thousands of ISIS operatives, it failed to counter the information war in the digital arena that inspired terrorist

attacks around the world (Wong). Given the ongoing phenomenon of United States cultural imperialism around the world (including the Middle East, from which many of the disaffected Muslims who joined ISIS came) coupled with the vulnerable and flexible ideology of ISIS, US popular culture information campaigns – whether through music, movies, or art – aimed at combating ISIS may have had an effect in countering its digital successes (Gerges 154; Shadid; Neal). The best response to the rhetoric, however, was real successes on the battlefield. Although ISIS tried to frame such losses as tests from Allah, its number of new recruits has waned amid mounting losses (Witte et al.)

Finally, although the US remains a global hegemon, it must leverage its power more carefully with respect to engaging in international conflict, perhaps paying more credence to the opinions of liberal institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and NATO, both of whom largely rejected the US plan to go to war in Iraq. Because of the first conflict in Iraq, when ISIS emerged, the world was weary to engage, which hindered the effectiveness of its initial efforts, which were inept. Over time, the global unity of resolved demonstrated the inherent power of institutions when backed by military might – more than 60 states ultimately joined a US-led coalition to fight the group, and this strength in numbers helped to erode ISIS's narrative of divinely-inspired invincibility (Lynch III; Levs).

Conclusion

Couched in the veil of seventh-century Islamic fundamentalism, ISIS is a political organization that rose out of 21st century incompetence on the part of American political leaders, whose frequently fruitless approach to counterinsurgency and failure to understand the enemy exacerbated the challenges of building a state in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. ISIS was incubated in the environment of the Iraq War – namely the prisons in which Abu Bakr Al-

Baghdadi and many of his future operatives were held and the anti-civilian posture that fomented the initial rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq – and bred in the post-war state-building sectarian politics of the US-chosen President of Iraq, Nuri Al-Maliki. Its ideology, although externally unyielding, was carefully crafted through flexible interpretations of Quranic text and cherry-picked pieces of Islamic history that transcended the prototypical definition of jihad to which the world has grown accustomed.

The world did not adequately provide for building a state in Iraq by failing to address distribution of resources, Sunni-Shia cooperation and reconciliation, provincial elections, and foreign investment both in terms of aid and infrastructure development (Simon 76). This job – and frankly the job of the war itself (if it was going to be fought) – should have been handled by an international coalition, preferably through the United Nations. Although all coalitions and liberal institutions can be susceptible to abuse, certainly such a coalition likely would have had a better cultural understanding of the identity politics that pervaded Iraq and could have allowed the system to rebuild to a strength that would have either prevented or defeated an insurgent group such as ISIS on its own. Instead, the United States acted unilaterally in the initial phase, and then, upon realizing the breadth of the conflict it had created, wanted to avoid intervening to clean up the mess that was ISIS. Ultimately, the United States did respond by forming an international coalition and, more effectually, putting US trainers on the ground to expedite the Iraqi response. As of December 2016, ISIS is rapidly losing territory and manpower as the coalition forces have made impressive gains.

Yet upon the ultimate eradication of ISIS, there will remain two failed states adjacent to one another in the Middle East in Iraq and Syria, and the international community will once again have to decide what role it should play in the region. Ultimately, the people of those

regions must decide what they want for themselves and inform the international community if they desire assistance in achieving their goals; unilateral state building operations without regard to the will of the people have repeatedly ended in abject failure. Power vacuums always fill themselves, and this one will be no exception. The adage goes that those who fail to learn from the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. Both Islamic History from the sixth through the ninth centuries and Iraqi history from 2003-2016 must inform the decisions of world leaders in Iraq. Only time will tell from what lessons they will draw.

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