

# THE REINVENTION OF JIHADISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has reshaped the global jihadist landscape in ways that have spawned questions about the future terrorist environment. In parsing the evolution of jihadism since Al Qaeda's apex, the author argues that the movement self-destructed due to a number of compounding dynamics: less foreign volunteers interested in the cause, a smaller "audience," the shift from global to local enemies, and the fast turnover of leaders. The domestic vacuum created by the Syrian conflict, however, has provided fertile ground for the revival and reinvention of the movement. With ISIL gaining centrality, jihadism has mutated into a non-ideological, bottom-up product of the region's eroding superstructure.*

Peter Harling\*



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\* Dr. Peter Harling is the former Middle East advisor with the International Crisis Group (ICG), an international conflict prevention organization.

**T**he future of jihadism in the Middle East is looking bright. Indeed, a threshold appears to have been crossed whereby the response to the mounting jihadist threat perpetuates and exacerbates the very causes of the phenomenon in a self-reinforcing loop.

The ever-expanding recourse to airstrikes has been destroying more and more of the region's urban landscape and disrupting its social fabric. Entire cities are being wiped off the map, with millions put to flight and driven into extremes of desperation. Much needed humanitarian aid is in short supply, unlike chauvinism and discrimination. The spread of militias, at the expense of conventional armies, is fueled by an all-out arms race that promises to undermine existing states and feeds into what has become a system of radicalization in the region. Military operations are repeatedly carried out with little thought given to an eventual political normalization or economic recovery. Paradoxically, jihadist threats are often a pretext for not addressing any of its enabling political and socioeconomic factors; the worse the situation becomes, the more the deteriorating status quo appears to enjoy support from key players and constituencies.

### *A Mutating Phenomenon*

Meanwhile, the jihadist movement is reinventing itself to take full advantage of the shifting context. To fully understand this dialectic transformation and its future prospects, we must first start by winding the clock back to the Afghan jihad of the 1980s. Its features were the exact opposite of the phenomenon we face today. A well-defined struggle against the Soviet occupation drew small numbers of foreign volunteers, whose state-sponsored transfer into an extremely hostile environment was the culminating point of an intense ideological itinerary.

The second stage in this cursory chronology of the jihadist movement is its emancipation from state support and repatriation to the Arab world. In the 1990s, small jihadist cells metastasized across the region. They developed around "Afghan Arabs," whose charisma was steeped in theological credentials and military experience. Having returned to their respective homelands, they redefined the enemy as the authoritarian regimes they lived under, but failed to gain traction other than in Algeria and Egypt, where their resounding defeat blunted their potential elsewhere. In parallel, the post-Soviet order in Afghanistan helped incubate the highly hierarchical, media-driven, global jihad known as Al Qaeda, conceptualized by Osama bin Laden and climaxing with the suicide attacks of 11 September 2001.

A third chapter was opened with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which, by toppling a

failed regime in a country already broken by traumatic wars and endless international sanctions, created the first genuine vacuum in the Arab world for the jihadist movement to seep into – a foreshadowing of voids to come a decade later. Initially, its leading figures hailed from the “Afghan Arab” generation, who carved out a space for themselves through a combination of assets: the prestige recently acquired (and soon to be lost) by Al Qaeda; the media savvy that characterized the latter; the spectacular use of suicide missions that gave jihadists an edge over mainstream opposition armed groups; and other effective asymmetric tactics honed in Afghanistan, such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the creative use of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), etc.

The jihadist movement ultimately self-destructed, however, as a result of several deleterious dynamics. First, although it lured into battle a stream of foreign volunteers from the region and the Muslim world, it capitalized on their presence only as fodder for suicide bomb attacks. Mostly incompetent as fighters, they were seen as too costly to host, train, equip, and manage. The difficult trek to Iraq thus proved disappointing for those seeking a more romantic adventure, reducing the movement’s overall magnetism. Second, the horrendous forms of violence jihadists publicized had yet to enjoy the broad audience they do today for reasons that will be discussed below. Third, the shift away from fighting the US, the “far-enemy” prioritized by bin Laden, to neighboring Shiite “apostates,” may have galvanized Sunni co-religionists, but it also pitted them against an opponent that was deeply rooted within local society, unlike Soviet and US occupation forces.

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Fourth, and most important, the quick-paced turnover internal to the jihadist movement – a consequence of systematic US targeting of its leaders – led to the replacement of an experienced cadre by ever-younger, less legitimate, and more aggressive figures, mostly of Iraqi descent, whose ferocity became involute. Lacking genuine religious or military credentials, they successfully imposed themselves through ultra violence, which increasingly turned against those in their own immediate vicinity. The intimidation and indiscriminate killings of Sunni notables prepared the ground for the rebellion the US invested in as of 2007, and which became known as the “Awakening.” In general, the jihadist movement then imploded.

### *The Syrian Game-Changer*

Its revival since 2013, in both Iraq and Syria, is a consequence of a broad array of factors, which would take too long to unpack. Suffice it to say that the Syrian conflict turned the early Iraqi model on its head. The broad popular movement that developed against the Assad regime, and which the latter worked hard to radicalize, offered a huge potential reservoir of recruits. Damascus not only retreated from large swaths of its own country, but deployed extreme tactics, such as ballistic missiles and chemical weapons, usually reserved for attacking foreign territory, creating a domestic vacuum much greater than what had existed in US-occupied Iraq. The unthinkable forms and levels of violence carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies have also trivialized the jihadists' own brutality in the eyes of many victims and on-lookers. Jihadists, having learnt a lesson from their Iraqi debacle, understood the need to both defeat any potential Sunni Arab rivals and placate surrounding society in areas where they sought to consolidate. Moreover, the prevalence of militias and consequent loss of faith in the "state" as a framework to project oneself in have helped the jihadists gain acceptance for lack of any clear alternative.

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Another critically important change pertained to foreign volunteers. The trip to Syria at first was uniquely low-cost and low-risk. For those with money, living conditions on the ground remain relatively permissive, by warzone standards. The digitalization of the world creates a connected, wireless jihad, in which fighters (not unlike other migrants) articulate on social media their own gratifying self-image, easily communicate with like-minded kin back home, and can even hope to

lure their good company to their side. Many appear to fire more tweets than bullets.

The thin veneer of military expertise and religious conviction that characterizes many foreign volunteers has led them to compensate through other means, and carve out a specific space for themselves through a combination of characteristic communication skills and unhindered sadism. Such eroticization of violence is a symptom of their thoroughly uprooted, globalized, resentful, and juvenile subculture, which has more in common with school shootings in the US than the jihadist movement we have known up until now.

A huge mistake in attempting to understand the jihadist movement today would be to analyze it in isolation of the broader context, and attempt to rationalize it by drawing on frameworks inherited from the past. The huge amount of interest generated by discussions presenting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as the brainchild of some Baathist mastermind tells us more about our pressing desire to find some convenient, clear-cut interpretation than it does about the topic at hand.

It is important to note, in this context, that some of the worst aspects of ISIL are not necessarily imbued in a Middle Eastern or Muslim ethos. The pornography of violence forms in itself a system that brings together presumed enemies: take the amplifying, bi-partisan and contagious US cult of security, the revival of Europe's far-right parties, the testosterone-laden posturing of even mainstream leaders all too happy to "strike" with no plan, the glorification of miserable armies by Arab regimes, the militia culture sweeping the region and encouraged enthusiastically by the likes of Iran, etc. All offer more or less the same, muscular, binary worldview that erases the complexities and anxieties of modern life, and posit self-righteous violence as an instant form of liberation and fulfillment.

### *A Truly Novel Phenomenon*

ISIL introduces a new dynamic and sets an effective precedent, which will no doubt affect, if not reshape, the jihadist movement more broadly. A first jihadist "success" in a crumbling Arab world is a turning point in and of itself. Although it may seem relatively easy to contain in places like eastern Syria and north-western Iraq, it would be naïve to underestimate the real threat it poses, due to its ability to adapt, replicate, scale up, inspire others, and leverage its opponents' reactions to its advantage.

Among the more potent facets of its model, the following are particularly noteworthy. ISIL appears less hierarchical and more networked than any of its jihadist predecessors, notably Al Qaeda. Although Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi serves as a figurehead, he does not appear to be trying to impose a clear doctrinal vision, and certainly does not obsess about theological debates, unlike his forebears. Rather, he has constituted himself as a remarkably neutral figure – almost an artificial construct of a leader, making few statements, speaking with no accent, dressing as if he was keen to personify a caliph taken out of Arab popular culture, and generally following the flow more than striving to assert his authority ostentatiously.

Under al-Baghdadi, there seems to operate a relatively flat network of commanders who enjoy considerable autonomy and maintain an unexpected level of cohesiveness, presumably by way of intense interaction via modern communication tools. If

Al Qaeda evoked the “franchise” metaphor, ISIL is more akin to UBER: digitally empowered entrepreneurship within a low-maintenance framework. Accordingly, it has shown an unusual ability to absorb pre-existing networks, such as residual state bureaucracies, Baath Party remnants, and rogue tribes.

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Consequently, it has proven to be remarkably non-ideological, regardless of its stately grand-standing, Islamist pretenses, and uncompromising brutality. It has not theorized the notion of an “Islamic state” beyond vague, inconsistent, and impractical references to a mythicized early Islamic era. Symptomatically, its original name (the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham) happily combines in a single sentence a contemporary denomination (Iraq) and a historical one (Sham, a reference to ancient Syria). It clearly seeks consolidation in “soft-belly” areas, rather than any expansion based on a territorial vision that would pit it against “hard” enemies. It has made at best lackadaisical efforts to codify and justify its recourse to violence, staged to maximize modern-life “buzz” effects at the expense of any ethical underpinning. Its narrative boils down to simple categories – shorn of the elaborate theological trappings – to which the jihadist movement until recently paid considerable attention.

Its relative pragmatism is reflected in the diversity of its constituents, ISIL retaining a rare protean quality, enabling it to be many things to many different people. This is also discernible in the way it deals with its social environment. Although potential rivals, rising threats, and vulnerable minorities are dealt with ferociously, the majority’s passive support is sought, which explains a preoccupation with levels of governance unseen among past jihadist precedents, and a tendency to be somewhat more intelligible and less obstructive than their forebears and alternative power structures. In contrast with the opaque, arbitrary, and predatory behaviors attributable not only to jihadists of old, but to enduring regime structures and other militias, ISIL clearly states what it wants and, having done so, lets people fend for themselves to a surprising extent.

### ***The Eroding Superstructure***

ISIL’s greatest potential lies more in the evolution of its environment than it does in its intrinsic features. The Middle East is undergoing massive transformation, part of which relates to a fast eroding “superstructure.” The strategic landscape – in a region

historically shaped, for better or worse, by foreign interferences – is in flux, with US policy lacking an organizing paradigm, European neighbors in disarray, Russia aggressively joining the fray, the Palestinian issue on the back-burner, Iranian power rising, and key Arab capitals either wiped out or unclear about how to exactly define their role.

Nation states built around authoritarian security services, highly centralized infrastructure and personalized power, another critical component of the region's fabric, have either collapsed entirely or face virtually insurmountable challenges. Across the region, once national forms of leadership are giving way to divide and rule tactics, according to which regimes abandon any ambition to forge genuine unity and seek legitimacy principally through the manipulation of domestic strife and the fear of collective break-down. Meanwhile, kleptomaniac political and economic elites, who have amassed immense fortunes primarily by cannibalizing the state, are indifferent to deteriorating basic services that have all kinds of knock-on effects related to education, health, justice and so on.

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Subnational structures do not appear to constitute a workable alternative, given the breakdown of most communal, tribal, professional and provincial frames of reference. Even the family construct is disrupted, with parents failing to serve as role models, children struggling to get married, kinship solidarity mechanisms stressed by skyrocketing needs, and a general sense of dislocation. The nihilism that defines today's youth in a country like Iraq, which appears ahead of the curve due to a succession of wars, grueling international sanctions in the 1990s, the early bankruptcy of its regime and its precocious demise, should serve as a cautionary tale.

As the above dynamics corrode the superstructure, it is crucial to look at what is emerging to fill the gaps. Novel forms of leadership, organization and governance, new narratives, however inchoate and shifting, are beginning to shape the region at least as much as legacies of the past. ISIL is but one example.

This in itself marks a dramatic change. For the first time, the jihadist movement does not derive from a top-down attempt at transforming society according to a programmatic vision, with results generally contained to the fringes: it is a bottom-up product of profound alterations in the region's socioeconomic and political fabric.

This frames the problem in an entirely different analytical light, calling for a much broader and more dynamic study of the conditions of its incubation.

### *Leveraging Its Opponents*

Part of the challenge stems from ISIL's instinctive focus on provoking an emotional rather than rational response on the part of its adversaries. Its morbidly theatrical use of violence is specifically tailored to achieve this. Because it emanates, precisely, from the malaise of both Arab and Western societies, it knows intuitively how to capitalize on our insecurities, hypocrisies, and divisions. In a globalized, digitalized world, it is winning the media war by simply bringing inordinate attention to itself.

By prompting absurd policies that wreak havoc among local communities while preserving and rewarding failing political orders, it leverages its opponents' power to further devastate the region's superstructure, and instill within its own purported base a deepening sense of injustice and victimhood.

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Its greatest success has been to engage its enemies in what could be described as “ritualized conflicts,” which destroy everything but ISIL itself. While Western governments try to bomb themselves out of the embarrassment ISIL causes them, the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran and most other governments around the region simply use the jihadist movement to pursue unrelated interests. A spectacular albeit motley array of players has thus formed the greatest de facto coalition in history, to fight what remains, in essence, a lesser militia. These mighty Western, Russian,

Arab, and Iranian forces, which have all declared ISIL to be their paramount enemy, have destroyed much and achieved little.

At each and every turn in this downward spiral, however, these players find in ISIL reason to continue with the same course of action. Then ISIL flies to their aid with some new display of perversity in the horror show it puts on, distracting from their collective and individual failures, and saving them from the kind of reset that would be needed to start addressing the host of problems that promise long life to the jihadist movement.