

Chapter Two- "The Rise of ISIS":

Q. How does it differ from Al-Qaeda?

At times affiliated with it, ISIS has had different priorities and different methods: namely, killing Shias whom it considers heretics; two, establishing a Caliphate from 'top down' - ie. By first declaring it to exist. And thereby call Sunni Muslims to come and live within its boundaries.

(Both, to some degree, sought to overturn corrupt Arab regimes along the way to establishing the Caliphate.)

Q. How did ISIS start, where and with what leadership?

In Afghanistan, among the scattered Palestinians and Jordanese who had come to fight the Soviets there and came to be known as 'Afghan Arabs,' was one tough guy from Jordan who eventually came to be known as Zarqawi. He had self-radicalized while in a Jordan prison, studying the Kuran intensively.

Zarqawi was not trusted by Al-Qaeda leadership and he didn't at first formally join them, but he was allowed to start his own training base there in Afghanistan..

After 9/11, at first given refuge by some remnants of the Taliban he later fled to Iran and then to Iraq. There he led the bombings on the UN presence there and on Shia holy site in Najaf. In short order Zarqawi had sparked a civil war in Iraq between Sunni and Shia communities!

Q. What were the key points in the rise of ISIS as a separate entity from Al-Qaeda?

First. It must have been when as he and others were fighting American forces (west of Baghdad mostly) in 2004 and he applied for membership and was named "Al-Qaeda in Iraq".

Before he could get much farther with the formation of his councils of jihadi groups, he was targeted and killed by American war planes. That was in 2006.

Successor leaders carried on the vision but became increasingly disparaged by Al-Qaeda (and Sunni tribal leaders) including Osama Ben Laden because of their ferocity and goal of killing Shia's. Two of them were killed in an air raid in 2010 and the movement nearly died out.

Second turning point: in one month after the death of two interim leaders, a new commander emerged: *Abu Bakr-al Baghdadi*.

Q. Who is Bakr al-Baghdadi and what fortuities brought him to lead ISIS after the deaths of Masri and *Omar* al-Baghdadi in 2010?

His was an Iraqi family of farming and military service. He went to university for Quranic studies and eventually got his doctorate just after the US invasion. Picked up somewhat randomly by US forces, he spent ten months in prison where he met jihdists of some maturity and that's where he set is own personal course.

Being available, and 'credentialed', no doubt were helpful. But if that wasn't enough, then the good luck of having an uncle serving as courier for the council of the group allowed him to steal the election as new commander of ISIS. The uncle had been a colonel in Saddam's army.

Q. Did the Arab spring of 2011 have any effect in the eventual success of ISIS?

Yes but not immediately. Clearly the conditions that brought huge crowds out in Tunis, Libya and Cairo gave promise (to those in the West who were hoping for something resembling democracy), but just as quickly those hopes were dashed.

In the wake of the collapse of the popular uprisings against autocracies, ISIS found its voice in that wide-spread disappointment in popular government as a possible outcome. It could and did appeal to those frustrations.

Q. What role did the Syrian uprising against Assad's government play in the evolution of ISIS?

I'd say that it was huge, for the warfare there divided Baghdadi from his lieutenant Jawlani, who in effect hijacked their resources to fight with local groups against Assad's forces.

That prompted Baghdadi to make his first public move: declare the existence of *the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham* (or greater Syria) and himself as its head. That was in 2013.

Jawlani then declared that his group was separate and would be allied with Al -Qaeda and would call itself the Nusra Front.

Q. OK, ISIS is present in Syria, but what about in Iraq: what went on there?

Something really big! In June, 2014, it captured Mosul, the country's second largest city. And within three weeks, Baghdadi make his second big announcement: the Caliphate ... why then?

Supposedly to be ready for arrival on earth of the 'Mahdi' or messiah, ISIS forces captured the small town of Dabiq, north of the Syrian city of Aleppo, where legend had it the Mahdi would return.

Q> How does ISIS finance its army of Toyota trucks and the arms, not to mention to upkeep of all those men?

Not as much in the news of late, but we know for sure that sales of oil from, among other places, the big field in Syria is one source. Another: the cash on hand in the banks of Mosul. Plus 'taxes' or extortion from the people living in their cities and towns. And the sale of ancient artifacts.

Q. Why haven't efforts to cut off their financing succeeded, recalling the UN's approval of interdiction efforts among member states?

Our source book doesn't go into it, but I've read elsewhere that smuggling through Turkey or southern Iraq is rife.

It is very likely that payments are being funneled through accounts in other Arab countries, such as those in the Gulf... Even private contributions? Yes. Why would any person wealthy or Sheik, say in Arabia or Kuwait, want to see ISIS succeed?

Q. Biggest tragedies so far... seen from our distance?

One, the uprooting of several millions of Syrians from their homes and spilling into neighboring countries, then going on by one means or another into Europe. The burden of all that must be huge and resources so far are too limited for extended resettlement in the region, although Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan have each done quite a lot.

Two, the widespread fear in the world at large of an expansion of terrorist activities beyond the Middle East and the seemingly intractable challenge these present to cooperative policy or strategy?

Three? There is renewed urgency in all of the region for regimes that have not done so, to reform themselves and to become more responsible to their own people. In the scales, there is certainly a counter force, so to speak, for those regimes to double down and try to secure their staying power. Egypt would be one of these. Maybe also, Saudi Arabia, witness its precedent setting foray into Yemen to confront Shia rebels and Iran's proxy.

Q. Best policy options for the US?

*Increase aid to those countries that are relatively stable and responsible, like Tunisia & Jordan.

*Continue diplomatic efforts to end the Syrian civil war and reach a political settlement!

Yes, sure but how? Who is willing to help and how?

*The Russians have achieved one of their goals in aiding Assad who has even retaken some lost territory, notably Palmyra. Are they content to have a role in achieving peace or is there more to their aims than that?

Q. If the US is determined to keep its armed presence to a minimum in the region, what countries can we look to for that kind of help?

*Turkey? Why not? (Not interested in fighting ISIS, but only Assad, or so they say.)(And they won't trust the Kurds.)

*Iraq? Why, why not? (Is it a valid goal of the US to keep the country intact?)

*Saudi Arabia? (Can they be persuaded to get out of Yemen and be of more help in Syria?)(They seem to be transfixed by the influence of Iran in their own corner of the region.)

*Egypt? (Given its internal problem of legitimacy, can we expect any more of it than keeping a peaceful border with Israel?)

Q. Let's step back a moment and ask a larger question: what are America's interests in all of this? Can we divide the fight against ISIS from the civil war and humanitarian disaster in and around Syria?

**Provocatively, is there anything beyond (1) Israel's safety; (2) the fall back need for OIL; and, perhaps, (3) the vestigial remainder of the Cold War with Russia?*

What about spreading instability across Africa? Is that something for us to worry about with ISIS and its 'franchises'?

And Europe itself? Dangers to the EU by fragmenting among those with many and those with fewer refugees. Instability in any of the governments themselves, like Merkel in Germany.

Other insights:

I. Q. What about ISIS as a 'Revolution', does it help our understanding of the challenge to see their movement that way? (Dr. Scott Atran of France) How?

II. Consider this point from another analyst writing in late 2015- Ken Pollack of the Brookings Institution- Unless we are prepared to lead in stopping civil wars in four ME countries going on now, there's scarcely any regime in the region that is secure from spill-over effects. We have to expect continuing instability for some time to come.

