

The rise of ISIS signals a deeper crisis of representation amidst the different communities of the region

Gabrielle Rifkind and Gianni Picco

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Alarm has spread as the Islamist militant group Isis (Islamic State of Iraq & Syria) who now prefers to call itself the Islamic “state”, has crossed the border of Iraq and Syria, threatening the implementation of a caliphate and harsh Islamic law to any who do not practice its brand of violent ‘puritanism’. Sectarian hatred has begun to shape the regional DNA threatening to erode boundaries that have prevailed since the collapse of the Ottoman empire a century ago.

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The regressive programme of ISIS has a merciless hardline vision and ultra-conservative agenda. It has already established a sharia court and the more recently published videos of its fighters burning their passports seem evidence of a hypermodern propaganda machine. This is a sophisticated organization with experienced leaders which has moved beyond al Qaeda and terror, to see itself as is a regional force for change.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the breakdown of Iraq's political, economic and social infrastructure. This created a power vacuum for Al Qaeda and the likes of such groups as ISIS to fill. The evolution of ISIS can be traced to the extreme Salafist Islamism in Iraq, during the 'first' sectarian civil war of 2007-8. But such groups need to be put in a wider context: the 'Great Game' of the perverse spillover of the Saudi vision of the caliphate as expressed by the Taliban as they were and still are.

Any comparison between the Taliban and ISIS and their religious vision must link to the religious version of Sunnism as taught in Saudi. The regional sectarian war has been stimulated by proxy powers. The conflicts both in Iraq and Syria should not be called a civil war but the third chess game between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the last thirty years which has now morphed into a Sunni-Shiite sectarian confrontation in the "Syrian Iraqi space".

At the time of the first sectarian civil war in Iraq, the thousands of Sunni's being killed in Anbar province by Shiite death squads turned to Al Qaeda for protection. The American military surge led to Sunni tribal leaders agreeing to forgo their connections with ISIS in exchange for the US negotiating representation and their protection with the Maliki government. These promises proved to be empty. Not only did the Sunni's continue to be

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marginalized, but they saw emerge as dominant an Iranian-backed Shi'a-dominated government with a sectarian agenda.

ISIS rank and file members comprise of many foreign fighters who have come from across the Arab and Islamic world to join its jihad. But the leadership includes several senior ex-army and intelligence officers who served under Saddam Hussein, including Saddam's deputy Izzat Ibrahim al Douri, a man whose cruelty was legendary. This has created the potent mixture of extremist ideology and professional military experience that makes ISIS such a powerful force.

Saudi Arabia will not be unduly unhappy about the Shia fragility in Iraq as they have been disturbed by the Iranian influence in Iraq ever since the 2003 war. There is however no credible evidence that the Saudi government is financially supporting ISIS. Nevertheless, private Saudi and other Gulf state donors were allegedly the most significant funding source for ISIS in the past. Whilst the creator of such groups, Saudi influence may now have lost control of this group, currently viewed by Riyadh as a terrorist organization that is a direct threat to the kingdom's security.

The significance of such private donations has now been marginalized by other sources of ISIS income, including smuggling, extortion and criminal activities. Access to finance from the oil fields in northern Iraq and northern eastern regions of Syria now suggests that they have control over their own money. The degree of efficiency of this organization points to an infrastructure that is paying monthly salaries to its soldiers.

The rise of ISIS signals a deeper crisis of representation amidst the different communities in the region. When governments do not protect their citizens in

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the harsh and brutal conditions of war, people turn to paramilitary organizations for their security. Decades of corrupt and authoritarian governments in the region which brutally suppressed both secular opposition and moderate Islamists have created the breeding ground for a more nihilist ideology.

The boundary of the nation state is gone in the minds of many of its citizens, and events on the ground have reinforced this. A remapping of the region is taking place along sectarian lines breaking up into potentially hostile statelets, carved into exclusively ethnic enclaves. According to Peter Harling, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG), “the problem is the divisive and autocratic and corrupt way power is practised and not the borders”. But the current breaking down of the borders and the climate of insecurity has optimized the conditions for this radical religious expression. These changes may prove to be irreversible, but are unlikely to address the sources of social and political failure in the region where governments have shown little interest in improving the live of the people.

The 600-mile border between Iraq and Syria is now controlled by this group. Some Iraqi Sunni, notably in western Anbar Province, the site of anti-government protests, claim more commonality with eastern Syria’s Sunni majority. The borders of the nation state as put in place in 1916 by Sykes – Picot under French and British influence placed minority groups in power. This, together with the drawing of the boundary in Iraq by Gertrude Bell in 1920, is now under major challenge.

The glue of the nation state in this region over the last few decades has failed to create cohesive social and political identities in an era of change which has strengthened the influence of non-state actors and weakened institutions. The

Arab Spring not only wanted to oust dictators, they wanted power decentralized and moves to more local identities that more closely reflect the needs of their communities.

This is coupled by the battle for self-determination in the region, with the Iraqi Kurds driving a move towards independence. The President of the northern region of Iraq Mr Barzani has called for a referendum on independence, saying it was time for Kurds to decide their own fate. Whilst the US government have said that Iraqi leaders must, “produce the broad-based, inclusive government that all the Iraqis ... are demanding”, it now seems much too late.

But given this level of chaos, with whom can business be done in the immediate period and where are the potential sources of stability? There is a strange cohort of new alignments, in which the enemy’s enemy regularly becomes a friend to counter the force of the ISIS group. Russia has supplied an initial delivery of aircraft, the US has deployed drones and helicopters and Iran has supplied attack jets. Adversity makes for strange bed-fellows.

Any military intervention will need to be limited in its scope and avoid repeating the earlier ravages of the hardline Shiite militia groups which only fed the soil beds of Sunni radicalism. Key will be the Sunni tribal leadership in Anbar province. The interests of the Sunni Baathist leadership and ISIS are potentially irreconcilable and suggest a temporary alliance. They have such disparate goals that it may be possible to prise this toxic partnership apart. The ISIS agenda is to establish a state stretching from Iraq to Syria opposing any political solution that preserves the borders of present-day Iraq. The Sunni interests are either about overthrowing the Maliki government to regain a supremacy lost in 2003, or having a semi-autonomous region, like Kurdistan, that can be protected from the depredations of Baghdad.

The barren and regressive ideology of ISIS and governments in the region has provoked sectarian violence, tribal, ideological and religious antagonism. A vision of a new moral order is essential that can inspire different groups with the conviction that they can co-exist in the region. This new architecture which is emerging in the Levant will challenge Saudi Arabia and Iran to take on their respective responsibilities of Sunni and Shite leadership.

In the aftermath of this immediate crisis, the rise of ISIS may make it easier for Saudi and Iran to find a modus vivendi, not because they will have influence over the ISIS movement but because of their concerns about the influence of this group. A new chapter in human history will be required, or the region will continue to be plunged back into the dark ages.

Image courtesy of [Wikipedia](#).

Gabrielle Rifkind is Middle East Programme Director at the Oxford Research Group (ORG). She has recently co-authored *'The Fog of Peace: The Human Face of Conflict Resolution* with Gianni Picco.

Gianni Picco is an Advisor to the Middle East Programme at the Oxford Research Group (ORG).

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