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In early June 2014 the world was shocked by news of the fall of Mosul, the third largest city in Iraq, to jihadi militants loyal to something called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. The conquest was rapid—soldiers of the Iraqi army dropped their weapons and fled rather than resist the ISIS advance. It was alarming—the jihadis captured tanks, artillery and other heavy weaponry supplied to the Iraqis by the United States. And it was unmistakably consequential—it sounded a clarion call that the conquerors not only aspired to build the “state” under whose banner they fought but also were executing a plan for doing so.

Weeks later a previously little-known preacher named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed himself head of a caliphate, the Islamic State, and demanded the fealty of Muslims worldwide.

ISIS had not come out of nowhere. Dark tidings of its establishment of Taliban-like rule in Raqqa and other Syrian locales had swirled for months, and in the spring of 2014 its fighters had crossed into Iraq to capture Ramadi and other towns. But the fall of Mosul made ISIS a central preoccupation of the global media and prompted the US and allied governments to announce a new phase of the “war on terror.”

Since then, though its territory in Iraq and Syria has begun to shrink, ISIS has haunted the world stage, the perpetrator of choreographed outrages, the enslaver of women, the looter of antiquity and the purveyor of vicious sectarianism, all
trumpeted with evident glee via videotape and social media. Bands of jihadists from Afghanistan to Libya to Yemen have sworn oaths to the would-be caliph, and thousands of recruits have streamed to ISIS-controlled lands from Europe and the Middle East. These legions number perhaps 35,000 in total, and they are not all combatants, but ISIS has weathered US and allied bombing to construct a state-like apparatus centered in Raqqa. It has taken credit for terror attacks across the Arab world, in Bangladesh and Turkey, on a Russian airliner over Sinai, and in cafés and a concert hall in Paris, France.

Despite its prominence in the headlines, the ISIS phenomenon is still somewhat opaque. It is difficult and exceedingly dangerous for journalists to report from inside its ambit. In its own steady propaganda, ISIS fancies itself the herald of apocalypse, contributing to conspiracy theories about its provenance and wild speculation about its capacities. Even its name is in doubt: Should it be called the Islamic State, as it wishes? The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, as per a literal English translation of its initial Arabic designation? Daesh, as per the Arabic acronym? We will call it ISIS, simply because this term is most widely used in English-language media.

There would be no ISIS had there been no US invasion of Iraq.

What is ISIS, and where does it come from?

ISIS is frequently described as an offshoot of al-Qaeda, in order to locate the group at the extreme end of the jihadi spectrum, which in turn is at the fringes of Sunni Islamism, both in terms of its puritanical or salafi doctrine and its rigid enforcement of same. This description is both correct and somewhat beside the point. It is true that ISIS regards itself as promoting the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and arrogates to itself the right to decide what that Islam is. ISIS denigrates the enormous body of Sunni jurisprudence that came after Muhammad’s time as deviation and reviles Shi’i Islam as heresy. Like al-Qaeda and its ilk, ISIS justifies its violence against non-Muslims with the idea that they are infidels (kuffar) and its attacks on Muslims, including Sunnis, with the notion of takfir or excommunication. And it is certainly true that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam as understood by the vast majority of Muslims at present and in centuries past. Its claim to the caliphate is almost universally rejected; its pretensions to pure belief and practice are derided; its moral policing is feared and despised; its stage-managed murders in the name of religion are alien and abhorred. Most of the victims of ISIS violence are Muslims, and most of those engaging ISIS on the battlefield are Muslims, as well.

But political factors are more important in explaining why ISIS appeared when it did. The first appellation of the cells that became ISIS was al-Qaeda in Iraq. There would be no ISIS had there been no US invasion of Iraq.
enlisted not in some boundless global jihad but in the battle to rid Iraq of US occupation and the government dominated by Shi‘i Islamist parties that took over in Baghdad in 2005. From the outset, though the details remain murky, these jihadi fighters joined hands with the ex-Baathists who had been army and intelligence officers under Saddam Hussein and were the backbone of the insurgency after Saddam’s ouster.

Loose ties between Baathists and homegrown Iraqi salafis date back to the 1990s, when Saddam, reeling from military defeat and international economic sanctions after the ill-starred invasion of Kuwait, authorized a “faith campaign” to portray himself and his regime as protectors of (Sunni) Muslim piety. Two of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s uncles, according to William McCants, author of a solid book on...
ISIS, worked in the Iraqi security services during this period. In 1996 Baghdadi enrolled in a graduate program in Qur’anic recitation at the new Saddam University for Islamic Studies. There he fell in with others who chafed at the quietist bent of Abu Ghraib and other jails of the occupiers. An illustrative, Qur’an study and (perhaps) his family’s lineage tracing back to the Prophet. Some of the men who rallied to what would be no ISIS had there been no US invasion of Iraq. Like other officers, he had expected his turn in command and was embittered to discover that he had no place in the post-Saddam order. As reported first in Der Spiegel on April 18, al-Khlfawi rose in the ranks of the insurgency, taking the nom de guerre Hajji Bakr, was captured, and spent the years 2006 to 2008 in Camp Bucca. There he gathered names of others of various ideological persuasions who wanted to continue the rebellion after getting out. Though not especially religious himself, according to the German magazine, “he did believe the faith of others could be exploited.” McCants writes that Hajji Bakr engineered Baghdadi’s appointment as emir of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2010, on the basis of his advanced Qur’an study and (perhaps) his family’s lineage tracing back to the Prophet. Some of the men who rallied to what would soon become ISIS were disgruntled Baathists, others jihadis and still others neither; some were likely tortured at Abu Ghraib or elsewhere. But in any case it is safe to say that there would be no ISIS had there been no US invasion of Iraq.

In late 2012, as the Syrian uprising degenerated further into civil war, Baghdadi, Hajji Bakr and their confederates saw an opportunity. With meticulous organization reminiscent of Baathist party structure, according to documents obtained by Der Spiegel, they infiltrated Syrian towns like Raqqa that had fallen to elements of the armed Syrian opposition. They absorbed Syrian jihadi veterans of the Iraqi insurgency, and proceeded to blackmail or assassinate rivals and intimidate everyone else. Soon the local councils that had emerged after the Syrian army’s departure were theirs. Other rebel groups tried to expel ISIS, and Hajji Bakr was killed, but through clever tactics it held on, and eventually it was able to return to Iraq in force. As US troops had withdrawn, ISIS concentrated its fire on its longer-term foe, the government in Baghdad and its affiliated Shi’i Islamist militias, both of which enjoyed the backing of Tehran. ISIS picked up where al-Qaeda in Iraq had left off in both whipping up and taking advantage of the virulent sectarianism running amok in the region since 2003. Its victories in Iraq conjured its mystique as the strongest and best-organized force arrayed against the regime of Bashar al-Asad, the Iraqi government and the foreign sponsors of both, as well as all the other main parties to the conflicts in the Levant.

It is crucial to the staying power of ISIS, thus far, that it has no external patron—at least not among states (there are some private donations). Its main revenues flow from taxation, oil sales, illicit traffic in relics and numerous other items, and duties assessed on the roads leading in and out of its territory. The gray markets and smuggling routes that help to sustain ISIS are another legacy of the long decade of sanctions on Iraq and the years of the US occupation, particularly the fateful choice of US proconsul L. Paul Bremer to dissolve the Iraqi army, which pushed much of the officer corps into contraband rackets. The Iraqi insurgencies of the 2000s were also thus self-funded, and the collapse of the Syrian state next door has only fueled the war economy in the region.

The maelstrom in Syria is the second contemporary backdrop to the raising of the ISIS black flag. In 2011, Syria was gripped by a popular uprising akin to those that had just toppled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. The revolt engulfed most of the country—there were demonstrations in Damascus as well as in provincial towns—and at first was led by local coordinating committees with a resolutely pluralist program for the future. The regime, however, had learned a lesson from the overthrow of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Husni Mubarak: Peaceful, pro-democracy protesters were to be met with bullets. Within a few months, the opposition began shooting back. Emboldened by the phrase “Asad must go” from the White House and small arms bought with subventions from the Gulf, the opposition determined to remove the regime by force. But the regime was cohesive, unlike those in Tunisia and Egypt, and it was adept at manipulating the country’s ethnic-religious minorities to fear the Sunni Arab majority. The militarization of the uprising, together with the regime’s bloody reprisals and the hardening communal divisions, set in motion the escalation to massacres and barrel bombs that has left whole cities in ruins and driven half of the population from their homes.

The Syrian war has been prolonged and intensified by outside meddling. To besiege the regime, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies bankrolled untold rebel battalions, most of which professed Sunni Islamist views. Turkey allowed several commanders to set up camp on its soil, and looked the other way as travelers slipped across its southern border to reinforce the various jihadi groups in the opposition. The US made abortive attempts to stand up “moderate” anti-Asad...
militias. The regime, for its part, brought in Hizballah units from Lebanon to fight alongside its army and paramilitaries. Iran sent advisers, Revolutionary Guards and money; Russia provided diplomatic cover and, starting in September, air power to deploy against the rebels. ISIS thrived in the chaos.

Today, sitting astride the Euphrates valley, ISIS brags that it is erasing the lines drawn in the sand by the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. This secret accord between British and French diplomats carved up the Arab lands of the dying Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence for the two Western powers. It laid the groundwork for the division of Iraq and the Levant into British and French mandates after World War I. The boundaries of those mandates, which later became the borders of Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, were much contested by local nationalists and in the Middle East “Sykes-Picot” is a code word for colonial skullduggery. Together with another British document, the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the Sykes-Picot dispensation paved the way for the settler-colonial project of Israel and the dispossession of the Palestinians. In a sense, ISIS is another force mobilizing resentment of the dubious record of Western imperialism, whose mantle is now borne by Washington.

But ISIS does not aim merely to kick the West out of the Middle East, as shown by its list of enemies and its choice of targets. The Syrian regime and Iran it vilifies as rawafid or refusers of true Islam because it identifies them with Shi’ism; the Russians it hates as godless supporters of Asad; the Turks and Gulf Arabs it disdains as handmaidens of the West, like the rest of the opposition in Syria, particularly the Kurdish militias who have reversed their gains in the northeast. Outside Iraq and Syria, militants who describe themselves as ISIS fire upon both the Afghan army and the Taliban; kill tourists to undermine the Egyptian and Tunisian governments; and bomb neighborhoods and mosques to stoke inter-communal tension in Lebanon, Kuwait and Yemen. The attacks abroad, such as the explosion of the Russian airliner, may be retaliation for strikes against ISIS, but they are also provocations.

The mass shootings in Paris on November 13 introduced another term from ISIS propaganda—“extinction of the gray zone”—to a non-specialist audience. By the “gray zone,” the group means any attempt to assume a stance of neutrality between its self-declared caliphate and the realm of the “the Crusaders.” The argument goes that the latter space is so corrupt that Muslims must either abscend or lapse into apostasy—those Muslims who think otherwise are in “the hideout of hypocrites.” Much has been made of the fact that the Paris assailants committed their crimes in arrondissements where significant inter-cultural contact occurs; they shot whites, blacks, North Africans and South Americans; among their victims were a Moroccan-born Muslim architect who was sketching renovations to pilgrimage sites in Mecca and the cousin of a Muslim on the French national team who was playing at the stadium where bombs also went off. Did ISIS train its sights on these areas because it saw them as “gray zones”? Perhaps, but the attack certainly succeeded in producing the deeper polarization that ISIS wants.

One of the slain attackers was discovered bearing a Syrian passport, leading to frenzied worry that ISIS had spirited a terrorist into France among the tens of thousands of refugees who have landed on European shores. After the so-called migration crisis of the late summer, symbolized on front pages worldwide by the tiny body of Alan Kurdi, 3, washed up on a Turkish beach, right-wingers in Europe and the US seized upon the passport to argue that Syrian refugees are a menace to the public. Upon investigation, the document was found to belong to a dead Syrian soldier, probably killed by ISIS, his papers stolen for the purpose of misdirection. ISIS has no sympathy for Syrian refugees; it denounces them as cowards and kuffar (because they are leaving the abode of Islam). So it is particularly wrenching that after the Paris operation more of those refugees may stay in limbo. By a November 29 agreement, Turkey will receive almost $1.2 billion from the European Union in exchange for tightening its border controls to keep refugees in. The EU has sealed similar deals with Libya and Morocco. The point is to keep refugees—and not just Syrians—out of sight and out of mind, thus banishing the air of crisis.

As Adam Shatz noted in the London Review of Books, still a third result of the Paris assaults will be to put France’s large Muslim community in the vise. As of 2010, according to the Pew Research Center, French Muslims numbered 4.71 million, some 7.5 percent of the population. Roughly 3 million are foreign-born, mostly in North Africa, and many of the remainder were born in France to North African immigrants. Muslim citizens of the first, second and even third generation suffer disproportionately from joblessness and poverty. As many as 70 percent of the inmates in French prisons are Muslim. Both men and women endure racism and stigmatization; young men, in particular, contend with regular police harassment. These last ills are sure to inflame in the aftermath of the attacks. The government is sending signals of new discriminatory measures. French President François Hollande proposed amending the constitution to allow the state to strip French citizenship from dual nationals who act against the national interest, a category so vague that it could easily be open to abuse. Thousands of French Muslims are said to have gone to Iraq and Syria already. Further alienation of this population may very well attract more recruits.

So what is ISIS, and where is it going?

Again, information is scarce, but from the accounts of visitors and residents who have escaped, ISIS does indeed appear to be erecting a state-like edifice in the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria. States, we will posit, are entities that claim a monopoly...
Ahmed, a 25-year old Afar who served eight years in the Eritrean infantry, fled his country in 2006. He went first to Djibouti, and then to neighboring Ethiopia but, finding no work and fearing the risks of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, he went back to his first place of refuge. I met him in Djibouti Ville—the country’s bustling deepwater port and only city—where he now struggles to carve out a life.

Most Eritreans from other ethnic groups who flee to Djibouti continue on to Ethiopia and Sudan for the long and dangerous journey to Libya and a chance at a boat to Europe—that is, if they are not jailed here and sent to a desert refugee camp, the rough equivalent of a life sentence. But Afar refugees have it better, for they tend to blend into Djibouti’s populace, about a third of whom are Afars.

Ahmed was typical of the Eritrean Afars here. Though he said he felt trapped and had few prospects for work or education, he preferred to remain among other Afars, with whom he shares culture and community, even though he is cut off from...
what little attention and aid reach Eritreans in other parts of the region. The other option was to venture into the conflict and uncertainty that awaits elsewhere.

One of Eritrea’s more downtrodden Muslim minorities, the Afars also live on the margins of its exploding refugee crisis, which broke into the news when hundreds of bodies washed up on the shores of Italy’s Lampedusa island in October 2013 and has popped in and out ever since, whenever a large boat goes down in the Mediterranean.

Despite Eritrea’s small size—it is between 4 and 5 million—and the fact that it is not a hot war zone, it is producing one of the largest groups of asylum seekers in Europe. These people flee to escape indefinite terms of “national service” in the military or civilian jobs in state-run projects or services and are able to flee political repression by the army. They have moved Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia nearly 25 years ago, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), now known as the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice. Both iterations are known as the “popular front,” which for Eritreans underlines the reality of continuity masked by the name change.

Thousands make the risky Mediterranean crossing each week. Others join the throngs of refugees and migrants trekking through the Balkans. Some even fly to South America and make their way to the United States. But most of those we are seeing in media portrayals are urbanites from the country’s densely populated, mostly Christian highlands.

By contrast, the Afars, pastoralists and fishers from the coastal lowlands of southern Eritrea, rarely make the news. A few go to Sudan, the launching pad for the trans-Saharan journey, and none are in the crowded camps in northern Ethiopia, which have gotten some media attention. The Afars who flee—and there are thousands—are on the other side of the Horn of Africa, facing the Arab world, not Europe. And they are Muslims.

Each person I met had his or her own tale of neglect and abuse, of trampled dreams and dashed hopes. Some of the young, unmarried Afar men dreamed of a new start in a faraway land and were applying for resettlement, though few had any real idea of what might await them. But most who came with families—a majority of Afars—opted to remain close to their homeland, some in cities, others in rural camps. What they all had in common was the conviction that they were part of a mistreated minority within Eritrea and that this deeply felt grievance had to be redressed if there was to be peace in the country and if they were to return, which most wanted to do sometime.

Because the Afars fly below the radar does not mean their human needs are any less pressing than those reaching Greece or Italy or that the political dimension of their situation is any less consequential. Quite the reverse, as extremes thrive in the chaos of this strategic crossroads between Africa and the Middle East. And if ever Eritrea is to emerge from its dark slide into repression and dictatorship as a stable multicultural state that citizens will want to return to instead of run from, then all its Muslim minorities, including the Afars, will have to be brought into the nation-building process, not as targets of forced assimilation but as actors in their own right.

Afar People and Politics

The Afars are a Cushitic people related to the Somalis and the Saho of central Eritrea. They have their own language and culture, shaped by the unforgiving environment in which they live. Most derive their livelihoods from pastoralism, the only viable mode of existence on this parched land, though some along the coast have lived from fishing and regional trade. Their homeland stretches from the Red Sea coast of Eritrea to what is now eastern Ethiopia and includes half the territory of the modern state of Djibouti in an area often termed “the Afar triangle,” or just Afarland.

Its location astride the Bab al-Mandab straits at the southern entrance to the Red Sea has given Afarland a strategic importance for centuries and repeatedly made the Afars targets of conquest. This fact, coupled with their extremely harsh environment, hardened the Afars while fostering a fierce warrior culture that has endured through the invasions of the Ottoman Turks, the European colonial powers and the Ethiopian empire even as their lands were carved up and distributed among what were to become the post-colonial states.

Almost all Afars are Sunni Muslim, with a traditional leadership anchored in four sultanates and more than one hundred clan families that still exert a powerful influence over their lives. The mightiest of the sultanates was the Awa (Aoussa) headquartered in Assaita, which was the Afar capital until the Afar Regional Council decided to relocate it to the tiny hamlet of Semera, until then hardly more than a rest stop on the Addis Ababa-Djibouti road. Semera was officially designated the regional capital in 2007. Today, it is a bustling commercial center with a university and a regional airport. The Semera-Assaita axis remains at the core of Afar culture.

Afar militancy in Ethiopia traces back to the 1970s when young reformers studying in Cairo organized themselves as the Afar Koborih Angoyya (the Afar Mobilization Movement) and forces loyal to Sultan Ali Mirah formed the Afar Liberation Front to wage guerrilla attacks on the new regime of Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Names changed over the years, as did allegiances, but Afar resistance to Ethiopian rule continued sporadically until Mengistu’s overthrow in 1991 and carried over into the first years under Meles Zenawi, whose own rebel group, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, led a multi-ethnic coalition that took over Ethiopia and began to transform it on the basis of “ethnic federalism.” Under this policy, the Afars got a semi-autonomous Afar Regional State. But fighting
broke out among factions of the resistance movement, at that point called the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF, commonly known as Ugugumo, or Revolution). Some chose to work within the new Ethiopian framework, but a few broke off and fought on.

The Afar region in Eritrea—then still part of Ethiopia—had served as an early base for the territory’s original independence movement, Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), in the 1960s and 1970s, but the Afars were for the most part on the periphery of the independence struggle. The EPLF, which broke away from the ELF in 1970, pushed into the region in 1983 after driving the ELF out of the country in a civil war, but according to Afar veterans of that period, their fighters were not popular as they had little grasp of or appreciation for the distinctive Afar culture. This feeling intensified in the early years following Eritrea’s independence as the Afars resisted what they took to be a new round of conquest.

In response, the government in Asmara teamed up with both Djibouti and Ethiopia in the mid-1990s to crush the Afar revolt, only to end up in conflicts with each erstwhile ally by the end of that decade, leaving them to deal with the Afar situation alone. They did so with gusto, refusing to consider anything like the accommodation reached in Ethiopia and repressing the Afars who would not submit to the new order.

Since then, the Afar struggle has devolved into local fights defined by the national territories in which—or against which—they rage. In a stark political twist, one of the Ugugumo factions found support from Eritrea after the
Afar leaders have been jailed for suspected oppositional 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia and began carrying fishing and other external trade is tightly controlled, so the Eritrea, is marked improvement in primary health care and Ethiopia, killing five, but Ethiopia responded two months later with air attacks on what they charged were training bases inside Eritrea, and the faction has been inactive along the border ever since.

Meanwhile, another Ugugumo offshoot, supported by Ethiopia, appeared on the scene in 1999, calling itself the Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization. It carried out occasional attacks against Eritrean forces in the 2000s, but it also built a social support structure in the Afar Regional State, engaged with the refugees in the new camps there, and developed a wider role among other Eritreans living in Ethiopia than its counterpart on the other side of the border. Its leaders say they make occasional forays into Eritrea to attack security forces when they abuse civilians, but their military wing appears to be mainly occupied with securing sections of the border and protecting the many Eritreans now on the Ethiopian side of it. The low-intensity conflict in this area appears to be in a lull.

Eritrean Afars interviewed in Ethiopia complain of marginalization by successive governments on the basis of language, culture, economics and politics, with no viable channel to redress grievances. They describe a system of governance that emulates the British Empire’s “indirect rule.” Local administration is done by Afars, but many popular Afar leaders have been jailed for suspected oppositional activity or have fled, and Tigrinya speakers top the bureaucracy. Current policy permits elementary school instruction in local languages up to fifth grade, so many of the early classes are taught by Afars. But from sixth grade onward, classes are taught in English, mostly by Tigrinya speakers lacking facility with the Afar language. There are more primary schools than ever before, but only two secondary schools in the entire southern Red Sea zone and not a single technical or other post-secondary school, all of which are in other zones. The one bright spot, as in other regions of Eritrea, is marked improvement in primary health care and prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS.

Commerce with Ethiopia—the mainstay of the local economy—has been halted since the border war, and fishing and other external trade is tightly controlled, so the port of Assab, the region’s only city, is all but dead, and an intensifying drought is devastating the rural economy. The one growth area is prisons, of which there are many, swollen with soldiers and national service conscripts caught trying to flee. But if they succeed in reaching Djibouti, they face new challenges.

Djibouti’s Urban Refugees

Most of the Eritreans who come to Djibouti crossed their country’s heavily militarized southern border after escaping from one of the many jails and military installations in and around Assab. Djibouti authorities view them all with suspicion, as they have been in a tense standoff with Eritrea since a border dispute that erupted into armed conflict in 2008. Eritrea still holds Djiboutian prisoners of war. One result is that Eritreans caught crossing into Djibouti are often treated as possible enemy combatants or spies and detained. Most are sent to camps if released.

Djibouti officially houses fewer than 1,000 Eritrean refugees in three camps administered by the Office National d’Assistance aux Réfugiés et Sinistrés, the official refugee authority, and supplied by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but refugees, relief workers and diplomats say that many new arrivals never register, particularly Eritrean Afars who melt into Djibouti’s large Afar community or continue on to Ethiopia. This statement was consistent with my observations in the capital, where I interviewed a dozen Afar refugees at length and met more than one hundred at a wedding in the Afar quarter, most of them young men.

Kamil Mohammed, 27, was born in Djibouti to a Djibouti Afar father and an Eritrean Afar mother and raised in Assab. He could claim citizenship in either country and carried a Djibouti identity card. He had left Eritrea for Ethiopia in 2006 at the age of 18 to avoid national service and had recently migrated to Djibouti to be near his family. Though he held a good job with the UNHCR, he said he still thinks of Eritrea as his home and would return if he could be certain of the possibility of traveling back and forth to Djibouti to visit his relatives.

Ahmed, the former soldier referred to above, had also gone from Djibouti to Ethiopia and back again, after fleeing Eritrea. He had been sent to the Sawa military training center for his twelfth year of secondary school and for basic training before serving a year in the army, as with all students from his generation. He said he left because he saw no prospect of release from service to find work to help support his impoverished family. After a fruitless three-month search for work in the Afar Region of Ethiopia, he came back to Djibouti to register with the UN and ask for resettlement, but he said he received no identity card there after filing his application, so he had to hide from local authorities to avoid being sent to Ali Addeh, the government-run refugee camp. Meanwhile, he was trying to raise money from relatives and through part-time work to get to Sudan, in case his effort to be resettled through UN channels failed.

Another Ahmed I met, a 35-year old Afar from a small fishing village outside Assab, had traveled 155 miles north to the port of Tio and then crossed into Ethiopia at the frontier town of Bada, the site of heavy fighting in the border war. This route was typical for Eritrean Afars. He said his father had died in the 1980s and his two brothers were in national service, so he had been the family’s sole provider. He had avoided national service for nearly seven years by working on fishing boats and keeping an extremely low profile on land,
but he fled after he heard the authorities came to his home looking for him. He called the national service “a form of colonization.” He said he came to Djibouti because “I can fit into the culture.” He had no plans to leave, though he lacked proper identity papers and like other urban refugees lived in constant fear of being detained and sent to one of the camps or, worse, to one of the city’s detention centers.

The Ali Addeh Refugee Camp

Temperatures were pushing 118 degrees Fahrenheit when we reached the crest of a rocky hill overlooking Ali Addeh, a desolate shantytown on Djibouti’s southeastern border with Ethiopia and Somalia. Clumps of dull brown scrub dotted the ochre hills. Nothing stirred. It was the end of May, the hottest, driest time of the year.

As we neared the entrance on a rutted dirt road, a guard appeared from a tiny gatehouse to demand our papers: Where was our letter? Did we have a permit to be here? We did not.

Two days earlier I had met the ONARS director and he had told his assistant to phone the camp to convey his approval. The guard had apparently not gotten the message. Nevertheless, after probing a bit more to determine who we were and flipping through my passport, he waved us in, no doubt relieved to return to his air-conditioned shelter.

Entering, we wound our way through a warren of houses patched together out of sticks, bits of plastic, flattened oil cans, burlap sacks and scraps of tarp to a community center where some 40 Eritrean refugees awaited our arrival. Mebrahtu, a camp elder, stood outside to greet us. Otherwise, the dirt streets were empty. If I had not known better, I would have thought the camp abandoned. As I soon learned, many residents wished it were. The guard was there as much to keep people in as to keep intruders out. Some of its 14,000 residents had been there since it opened.

Lutheran World Relief supports a clinic and a primary school, and the Norwegian Refugee Council has installed latrines and a few other facilities, but Ali Addeh is otherwise not served by international aid agencies and visited only rarely by outsiders. Apart from a handful of positions filled by refugees at the clinic and school, there is almost no work available, so most residents pass their days idly. “I have no future here unless I die,” said one.

During a day of individual interviews at the small Eritrean community center, I heard many stories of flight from Eritrea by refugees from the highlands, who were a majority of the Eritreans in this camp.

Hermon, 37, had been called up for the mandated 18 months of national service in 1996 but was kept in the army when war erupted with Ethiopia in 1998 and never released. He said he stayed until 2011 out of fear his family would be punished if he fled but finally did so when he lost all hope of discharge. “We were kept like slaves,” he added.

Ghebreab, a highland Tigrinya-speaker who had been orphaned as a child, was only 15 when the border war broke out in 1998. He said he was taken out of school then and sent to a military training camp and kept in the army afterward. He put up with the drudgery until he heard that the authorities had come to his house and arrested his younger brother. When he asked his commander for an explanation, he said he was hung by his hands in the hot sun for 100 hours and warned he would be killed if he asked again. That is when he decided to flee. He made it out in 2011, walking into Djibouti under cover of darkness.

Amanuel, 43, another highlander, was initially exempt from national service due to a deformed right leg, but said he was called up in 2006 after being caught in a raid on a clandestine Pentecostal church, which had been banned four years earlier. He said he was sent to a desert training camp as punishment. He, too, crossed into Djibouti in 2011 and, like the other two, was immediately arrested as an enemy combatant. All three were released last year and sent to Ali Addeh.
Mebrahtu, the “elder” who arranged the encounters, said that only about 120 from this group of detainees are left in the country today; most moved on to Libya. For his part, he had been jailed twice in Eritrea in the first years of a sweeping crackdown on dissent after the border war, once for trying to escape to Yemen, another for questioning party leaders about state control of the economy. The second time he was tortured for five weeks to get him to give up names of those who shared his outlook. He was released after being forced to sign a confession that could be used to rearrest him at any time. Soon after, he fled his post and hid in the capital, Asmara. It took him almost ten years to scrape together the money to be smuggled out in 2012.

Zahara, a 26-year old Afar, was one of the fortunate few—she had one of the rare jobs. She, too, had done her twelfth year of secondary school at a military camp, and was then sent to nursing school. But she soon grew disillusioned and angry over the sexual harassment to which she was subjected. In 2009, she and four others tried to flee to Sudan. They were followed, however, and caught.

The would-be escapees were sent to the notorious prison at Adi Abieto in Eritrea’s central highlands where, she said, she saw “many terrible things.” Many men were beaten with wood or metal rods on the soles of their feet until they were unable to walk; women were struck in their upper bodies, often on their arms as they sought to protect themselves. Some were mothers of escapees being interrogated about their children’s flight. She said she saw some die.

Zahara drew on her medical training to treat their wounds, which was apparently appreciated by her jailers. After eight months, she was sent back to the nursing college and then assigned to a hospital in Asmara, but she was not permitted to visit her family. Nor was she paid for her work, she said, not even pocket money, as she was still being punished. After another year and a lot of remonstrating, she got a short leave to attend what she insisted was an important wedding. Once in Assab, however, she met soldiers she knew and quickly made plans to leave, with the soldiers.

As soon as they crossed into Djibouti, they were detained. The boys were taken to prison, the girls to Ali Addeh. Today, Zahara works as a nurse at the camp clinic but is paid only a third of what citizens earn for the same work. This underpayment, said other refugees, is standard practice. But Zahara is not griping. She said that having nothing to do day after day would be worse.

Ismael, 25, also Afar, fled to Djibouti at the end of 2013 after six years in national service, much of it as a teacher. He said he left because he had lost hope for his future and feared imprisonment for his dissenting political views. He had also been jailed upon his arrival but was quickly released and sent to Ali Addeh. He said he, too, felt stuck here, but he dreamed of returning to Eritrea once the political situation changed and was not going anywhere else until that happened.
A Jihadism Anti-Primer

Darryl Li

The US national security state has for the past quarter-century been preoccupied with something it has called “jihadism.” From the aftermath of the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan through the September 11, 2001 attacks to the rise of the self-declared Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, or ISIS, the specter of mobile Muslim multitudes wreaking global havoc has given rise to an equally vast body of commentary.

Nearly all of this work is empirically or conceptually flawed. There are many reasons for such shortcomings, foremost being sheer racism and Islamophobia, followed closely by an inability to think beyond the worldview of the national security state. But many critical challenges to discourses on jihadism, however necessary and salutary, have also unwittingly contributed to the stultifying nature of these debates.

What follows is an anti-primer of sorts on jihadism. Unlike innumerable works, it does not purport to tell readers everything they need to know about the different groups whose exotic names and acronyms animate excited “national security” debates. Instead it is an attempt to help readers think through this issue beyond the fashionable threat of the day, to clarify what is and is not known so far, and to better weigh the issues at stake.

Answering the Wrong Questions

Discussions of jihad today are like a secularized form of demonology. They stem from a place of horror that shuts down serious thinking about politics. Perhaps the most striking example of this orientation is a summer 2015 analysis in the New York Review of Books—like much of its ilk, widely circulated but quickly forgotten—declaring ISIS simply too horrific to be analyzed. Indeed, the magazine’s unexplained decision to grant anonymity to the author (described only as a “former official of a NATO country”), despite the lack of any sensitive information in the article, seemed only to reinforce this sense of radical cataclysmic difference.

The problem with all demonologies, however, is that they all too easily give rise to witch hunts. By positing jihadism as a problem about Islam, the debate is nearly always framed around questions of authenticity: How much do groups like al-Qaeda or ISIS represent something inherent to Islam and Islam only—or, in other words, how afraid should “we” be of Muslims? In this framing, ordinary Muslims are ritualistically called upon to condemn the acts committed by jihadis, something that is never demanded of Christians and Jews for acts of co-religionists who may also seek to justify their actions in scriptural terms. But no matter how sincere or thorough such self-flagellations may be, the demand for condemnation will never be completely sated. For the suspicion will persist that as infinitesimally small as groups like ISIS may be, they nevertheless make claims to Islamic authority that are compelling enough to some number of people to both give and take life in an organized fashion. As a result, “Muslims are presented with a brutal logic in which the only way to truly disassociate from ISIS and escape suspicion is to renounce Islam altogether.”

Aside from its tendencies toward racism, the problem with demonology as starting point is that it sets a low bar for analysis and makes for a lot of boring writing. As a result, the engine of much commentary on jihad runs on the shock of discovery that “jihadis” are organized, may not be very religious, care about money, have fun, know how to use computers, fall in love, drink alcohol, use drugs and so on. These writings reveal far more about their presumed audiences than about the jihadi groups themselves. This banalizing narrative serves both the state—which seeks to discredit the jihadis’ self-presentation as superhuman idealists—and liberal critics, who point to impiety or lack of religious learning as proving that Islam as such is not the issue.

The rediscovery that inhumane acts are committed by human beings is often paired with some kind of disclaimer that the writer is not an apologist or a proponent of “moral equivalence” between state violence and jihad but someone who seeks to understand the enemy in order to better combat it. This skittishness about “humanizing” the enemy is a kind of boundary maintenance reinforcing the false idea that the only choices on hand are apology for jihad or joining the fight against it.

Against this discourse on monsters who are actually human but whose monstrousness must nevertheless be reasserted, there are two main forms of pushback: The first insists that jihadi groups do not represent Muslims or Islam in any meaningful sense. The second holds the US or other governments directly or indirectly responsible for the emergence of such groups. Both arguments are generally correct, necessary and important. But insofar as they engage in debates over who is the “real” enemy, these arguments do not move debates about jihad outside the circle of demonology.

There is an enormous body of scholarship in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies demolishing the myth that Muslims are inherently or irrationally violent. Some of it also shows that political groups fashioning themselves in Islamic terms, such as the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt or the Justice and Development Party in Turkey (usually known by the Turkish acronym, AKP), should not be conflated with jihadis, whatever else their flaws may be. There is also scholarship showing that even groups engaging in violence under the banner of jihad cannot all be lumped together—nationalist organizations such as Hamas and Hizballah.

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The clock tower in Raqqa, Syria. In November 2013, ISIS cut the heads off the statues, one of a man and the other of a woman.

Drawing by Molly Crabapple, based on an image provided by a Syrian resident of Raqqa.
are distinguished from transnational groups like al-Qaeda. In other words, not all Muslims are pious, not all pious Muslims are Islamists, not all Islamists are violent and not all violent Islamists are at war with the West (or other Muslims they dislike).

There is, however, one significant limitation to this approach when it comes to the question of jihadism: Telling us who is not a jihadi is not particularly helpful for understanding jihadism on its own terms. In a sense, we are back in the condemnation trap, except using more analytical language. Moreover, the “not all Muslims” argument can all too easily play into the distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims that states have long employed as an instrument of rule. It is much better at telling the state which Muslims not to torture or bomb than it is at arguing against those practices in the first place.

There is a corollary to this political argument, namely “not all terrorists are Muslim,” frequently trotted out to ask why violence perpetrated by right-wing or white supremacist groups is not treated as terrorism. If the question is posed rhetorically to draw attention to the continuities and complicities between state and extra-state forms of racial terror, it is helpful. But when couched instead as a plea for the state to be simply more judicious in the distribution of its violence, then it is naïve at best.

The other most common pushback against anti-Muslim demonization is to highlight the role that the United States played in creating the conditions that gave rise to jihadism. Indeed, a critical understanding of imperial practices and the US role in particular is absolutely indispensable. But it is equally true that reducing jihadi groups to mere epiphenomena of US actions is a dead end for analysis. Such approaches give rise to a kind of Frankenstein theory of jihad, which insists that the US can manufacture such groups but then somehow always loses control over them without ever really explaining how (an even more conspiratorial argument is that the US continues to control such groups, which at least enjoys the virtue of consistency). Moreover, the political logic of the complicity charge can be all too easily appropriated by warmongers, such as the late columnist Christopher Hitchens, who maintained that US support for Saddam Hussein in the 1980s made Washington all the more obligated to overthrow him in 2003.

A more sophisticated variant of this argument is to highlight the role of US proxies like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in stirring up jihadi energies. Again, there is much truth to this account: The House of Saud’s role as a leading exporter of counterrevolution and the Pakistani military establishment’s ruthlessness in pursuit of domestic and foreign policy goals are a matter of well-established record. But when the influence that these regimes exercise over jihadi groups is overplayed or commentators suggest that Riyadh and Islamabad are somehow directing overseas attacks against their most powerful patron in Washington, the argument loses its footing. And politically, this narrative can bizarrely turn into a redirection of militarism rather than a rejection of it. One respected commentator on the region, Patrick Cockburn, has gone so far as to argue, “The ‘war on terror’ has failed because it did not target the jihadi movement as a whole and, above all, was not aimed at Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.” More extreme versions of the argument include conspiracy theories blaming the House of Saud for the September 11 hijackings, which conveniently ignore its
long-standing mutual enmity with Osama bin Laden as well as al-Qaeda's bloody attacks on the Saudi regime.

Arguments over who is the real enemy—whether emphasizing that the enemy is not all Muslims or declaring that there is no enemy as such, only the blowback from imperial policies—ultimately do not challenge jihad talk as demonology. The fundamental problem is not only how Islam is discussed; it is how politics is understood in general. The statist discourse and its liberal opposition present a choice between demonizing the enemy and banalizing him. But there is a third option: taking radicalism seriously as a political orientation, whether its idiom is Islamic, communist or anarchist. The challenge is how to understand the distinctiveness of jihadi groups without lapsing into an all-too-often racialized exceptionalism. Letting racist flat-earthers and their more respectable counterparts set the terms of debate with questions like whether jihadis represent Islam or why they are so horrible only obscures this important task. Jihadi groups may have very different ideas of the good and may operate in forms unfamiliar to those who can only think of politics in terms of the state and its categories. But that does not render any less concrete the ideas and interests at stake in their antagonisms, nor does it make thinking clearly about them any less urgent.

Unthinking Through Jihadism

In the vacuum left by all of the attempts to distinguish jihadists from other Muslims, the work of explaining and interpreting jihadism is largely abandoned to the cottage industry of “terrorism experts.” Aside from its sordid links with racist fearmongering, this field’s intimate relationship with the national security state has left it without the autonomy needed to develop into a serious intellectual project. Over the past decade, a more sophisticated, professionalized generation of specialists in jihadism has emerged. This newer cohort is more likely to have at least some relevant linguistic experience and may even dabble in critiques of Islamophobia to bolster its own credibility. Nevertheless, the overwhelming demand to provide “actionable” insights renders jihad studies unable or unwilling to engage any of the grand recurring questions of social and political theory. Jihadologists may dismiss this as ivory tower irrelevance; others might call it intellectual autonomy.

The terrorism studies field has continued to hamper useful conversations in many ways, starting with the concept of “jihadism” itself. This category logically presupposes various people identifying as Muslim, engaging in violence and legitimizing this violence in terms of the Islamic concept of jihad (put aside the accurate but banal point that the word “jihad” can be used to describe non-violent action as well). This set of criteria is far too thin to support a meaningful analysis. Declaring jihad, after all, is ultimately nothing more than a claim to a certain kind of legitimacy. Some claims may be treated with more credibility than others, but the kinds of actors who may make such claims, the content of such claims and the audiences for assessing them vary so widely that one can question whether the idea of jihadism is even a useful analytical category. And without any clarity on the concept, the idea that such groups can somehow be ranked on a scale of moderate to radical is even more questionable.

Much of the research on jihadism, however, barrels past this basic problem. There are four major approaches in studying the jihadi enemy: doctrine, tactics, propaganda and members. Writing on jihad that traces genealogies of Islamic scholarship often seeks to explain how bad Muslims belong to one particular doctrinal school or pietistic orientation but not others. But one does not have to learn all of the interesting and important distinctions and relationships between Sufis, salafis, Ahl al-Hadith, Deobandis and Wahhabis to know that no doctrinal position or school can be identified as causing the actions of jihadi groups. Historically, the correlation between doctrinal position and armed jihad seems weak at best. In the nineteenth century, Sufis frequently led anti-colonial jihads, Sufis from the same orders that today are celebrated (often by authoritarian regimes) as pacifist. At the same time, a great many salafis worldwide are uninterested in organized politics of any kind, let alone armed action. The point is not that these doctrines are unimportant or ideological smokescreens for other social forces. Instead, ideas must be situated with respect to movements, organizations and structures to identify the elec-
tive affinities that may make one school or another associated with radicalism at specific points in time. It is impossible to write good intellectual history without good history in general, which is missing for the transregional migratory worlds in which many of these groups emerged. As a result, this type of writing on jihad often strings together names like Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam and Osama bin Laden to get to September 11 with all the sophistication of explaining the Holocaust by skipping from Hobbes to Nietzsche to Hitler.

In contrast to focusing on the ideas of jihadi groups, others attempt to understand them through their violent tactics, especially whether they target non-combatants. Classifying groups on the basis of some kind of atrocity scale leads only to confusion, because the relationship between means of violence (such as suicide bombings and torture) and political goals is at best underdetermined. “Extreme” violence such as torture or deliberate targeting of civilians can be undertaken for “moderate” political goals such as seeking a share of state power and vice versa. This approach often ends up conflating normative and analytical approaches: Groups are classified according to how bad we think they are.

A third major approach is to analyze media output, especially imagery of martyrs or the gruesome snuff films of torture and murder. This study can yield some helpful insights, but no political movement should ever be understood primarily through its own propaganda, especially when the analyst and the movement in question have different cultural references. Without a clearer sense of how people take up, interpret, modify, criticize or parody this media production, this brand of analysis will tend to play up everything that seems exotic
or bizarre. Moreover, these approaches often have little of insight to say about the vast amount of jihadi media output that appears unrelated to armed activity or other lurid ends—at most, they are noted simply as ways to lure potential recruits.

Fourth, and finally, there are studies of why individuals join jihadi groups, a process often called “radicalization.” These studies are often based on interviews with incarcerated individuals or on media reports and prosecutorial documents. This work has occasionally yielded some sound findings, mostly of a negative nature, like the apparent lack of a clear correlation between socio-economic status and jihadi activity or the diversity of motivations from humiliation and disaffection to positive desires to help others. The problem with these studies is that the factors identified are often shared across much broader swathes of the population, so they hardly explain why those specific individuals joined jihads as opposed to other armed groups or even state militaries. Moreover, focusing on recruitment tends to leech out the political dynamics of the groups themselves; one would never write a cogent analysis of the invasion of Iraq by focusing on why soldiers volunteer to join the US military. Radicalization literature tends to ask why people fight with little if any regard to what they may be fighting for. The absence of politics leaves accounts rather empty.

Terrorism studies, even in a more evolved form claiming to transcend Islamophobia, remains trapped in an unwillingness to raise challenging questions. Without rendering legible the political nature of jihadi projects, its focus on doctrine becomes deterministic; its analysis of propaganda tends toward voyeurism; its study of tactics redounds to incoherent moralism; and its focus on individual motivations is atomistic. This is not a matter of the failings of individual analysts but rather is a feature of this body of work as long as its raison d’être remains raison d’état.

Jihad in a World of Sovereigns

In order to start writing intelligible accounts about contemporary groups invoking jihad, one needs to engage and understand the political struggles at work by understanding the social forces driving them, the worldly goals they pursue and the antagonisms that they face. An important starting point is to recognize that groups claiming to wage jihad today operate in a world organized formally along nation-state lines. Jihadi groups may invoke an authority above this formal legal system (and they are hardly alone in doing so), but such universalist messages must always contend with and often work through actual institutions such as states.

The first thing to note is that a great many of the groups operating under the banner of jihad have been largely oriented toward capturing state power and recruit primarily from a single national group, even if geographically dispersed. Some of these groups have sought to overthrow existing regimes, such as the Gama’a Islamiyya in Egypt or the Groupe Islamique Armé in Algeria. Others, such as Hamas and Hizballah, arose in response to foreign occupations. Yet others emerged in situations where prolonged civil war led to a near-collapse of state institutions, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Islamic Courts Union
in Somalia. Their claims to being “Islamic” notwithstanding, there is no obvious reason why these groups should be analytically clustered together and segregated from non-Muslim insurgencies in other parts of the world.

Claims to jihad have also been raised by groups whose goals, areas of operation or memberships do not fit into the nationalist mold. These groups are often glossed as “global jihad,” a free-floating, rootless and more radical counterpart of the nationally oriented jihads. This shorthand reflects the tendency to treat the “global” lazily as a catch-all appellation for things that are not readily understood in local or national terms and its unqualified use should raise red flags for any attentive reader. For even so-called global jihad movements must contend with the locally grounded politics and the state order.

The first type of such movements includes the various pan-Islamist jihad mobilizations of the past quarter-century (what jihadologists sometimes misleadingly call “classical” jihad). The best-known was the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, followed by those in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Iraq and, finally, Syria. These mobilizations were attempts to enact some idea of a global Muslim community, but they always claimed to support some local organized movement. Roving Marxists and anarchists of previous generations faced similar dilemmas. In some situations—such as in Bosnia or during the 1994 Yemeni civil war—foreign volunteers fought on the side of recognized governments. More often—as in Kashmir, the Philippines and Chechnya—they sided with independence movements. Some of these situations were conventional wars with clearly demarcated front lines, others were guerrilla conflicts, and the relationships between foreign and local fighters varied accordingly. These mobilizations were not based on solid permanent organizations: Fighters would move on to other wars, settle down and marry in their adopted countries, or simply return home.

Al-Qaeda emerged from the Afghan jihad but was distinct. While pan-Islamist jihad mobilizations were amorphous and decentralized movements, al-Qaeda eventually became a relatively small, self-contained organization. And unlike pan-Islamist jihads, al-Qaeda sought to mirror Washington’s ability to strike anywhere in the world at a time of its choosing—East Africa, Yemen, Indonesia, Spain. Yet despite this aspiration, al-Qaeda’s goals were largely state-oriented. It sought to end US support for Arab clients, in particular Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and thereby help to topple those regimes. Despite occasional talk of supporting a return to the caliphate, al-Qaeda’s program would also have been compatible with these states simply asserting their independence from the West and implementing some form of “Islamic” rule. Al-Qaeda’s project could be read as a shallow anti-imperialism, employing spectacular acts of violence against an overstretched hegemon to induce regime change without any interest in mass mobilization or organizing—and, not unrelatedly, with little concern for the consequences borne by its Afghan hosts.

The latest chapter in the story of jihadism is the self-declared Islamic State that has emerged in Iraq and Syria. What makes ISIS distinct is not its attempt at enacting “Islamic” governance, its incorporation of foreign fighters or its apparent willingness to sponsor attacks outside its territory, although these aspects are all important in their own right. Instead, based on what little solid information exists, one can say that the basic political dynamic of ISIS on the ground stems from its emergence in the wake of not one but two adjacent and prolonged processes of partial state collapse, in regions deemed peripheral from both Damascus and Baghdad. By openly exercising authority on both sides of the border, ISIS can lay claim to a kind of supranational authority that the Taliban and Islamic Courts Union could not. (Other groups such as the Afghan mujahideen were also constituted by a cross-border existence, but in the mold of using one side as a haven against the other.) Yet despite boasting of having erased the Sykes-Picot borders between the two countries, ISIS in many ways remains constituted by the border and the arbitrage opportunities it presents. ISIS authorities remain partially dependent on local administration in both countries, especially for infrastructural needs. Foreign resources and fighters coming through Turkey destined for Syria can find their way into Iraq; US-made weapons and equipment captured in Iraq can be taken to Syria. On one side of the border, the US and Iran can be de facto allies; on the other they are at loggerheads. ISIS is therefore best thought of as a sectarian double secessionist movement that has skillfully seized the opportunities available to position itself as an enemy to all but a priority to none, with the possible exception of the Syrian Kurdish rebels who have similarly exploited power vacuums to carve out an autonomous zone. This dynamic makes ISIS distinct and interesting, but not unique or apocalyptic.

None of the foregoing is to deny the newness of the ISIS phenomenon or the genuine difficulty of understanding it. Rather, it is to insist that the newness of ISIS springs from the historical conjuncture at which it appeared. The group’s claims to religious legitimacy have precedents but none with such renewable financial resources and (thus far) such diffident military opponents. Its stylized killings are familiar from Hollywood productions but rendered grotesquely novel by the real-world knowledge that this plot has no necessary beginning, middle and end. Its rapid rise to prominence on the regional stage is stunning but quite comprehensible as a consequence of the authoritarian rule, maldistribution of wealth and power, external intervention and other crises that have bedeviled this part of the world for so very long.

Endnotes
3 One of the few non-racist forms of satire here plays on the theme of terrorists as regular Joes plodding away at meaningless office jobs. A slightly smarter version of this joke deprecates al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as a vapid Silicon Valley entrepreneur. The Onion, March 29, 2013.
5 Patrick Cockburn, “Al-Qa’ida, the Second Act: Why the Global ‘War on Terror’ Went Wrong,” The Independent, March 18, 2014.
7 On the many problems with this argument, see the two-part article by Sara Parsley, “Lines Drawn on an Empty Map: Iraq’s Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State,” Jadaliyya, June 2 and 3, 2015.
Regional Responses to the Rise of ISIS

Curtis Ryan

Many states in the Middle East claim to be waging determined war against ISIS. But no one, save the Kurds, seems to be doing so. Threatening as it is, ISIS is not the top priority of any member of the coalition arrayed against it.
Regional responses to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, have varied depending on regime perceptions of threat, not only from ISIS itself, but also from other potential rivals, challengers or enemies. Despite the jihadi group’s extensive use of violence in Syria and Iraq and its claims of responsibility for bombings and attacks in Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen—as well as France in mid-November—it was not necessarily the top security priority for any of these states. And this level of priority, in part, explains the seemingly scattered, incoherent and decidedly disparate responses to ISIS, even as the organization expanded its territorial control in 2014 and into the next year, before losing some ground in the later months of 2015.

Within the discipline of international relations, ISIS generally fits the mold of a non-state actor. It is a jihadi organization with affiliates in several countries, but which emerged from a marriage of previously opposed elements in Iraq—al-Qaeda in Iraq, on the one hand, and security and intelligence personnel from the toppled Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, on the other. But when ISIS declared itself a revived caliphate, and took control of Mosul and other cities, towns and territories, it started to look more like the state that it aspired to be. Those rapid conquests triggered considerable alarm across the region, for ISIS suddenly seemed like a contender for real power. Yet the bloody rise of ISIS was but the latest in a series of jolts to the regional system. And the timing of these events matters in understanding the regional responses.

**A Series of Jolts**

The ill-fated US invasion of Iraq in 2003 delivered a shock to the region, leading to a radical rise in terrorism, and reinvigorating al-Qaeda and its ilk. The unintended, yet all too predictable, effects of the US invasion did not end there, however. The destruction of Iraq also enabled the continuing rise to regional prominence and the greater foreign policy activism of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a state run largely by Shi’i Muslim clerics and whose rival states mostly identify with Sunni Islam. Iran’s ascent fed the existing narrative of many Sunni Islamist organizations, and especially jihadi ones, that the region was embroiled in a struggle for control and survival between the two main branches of Islam. Of the states in the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been particularly guilty of aiding and abetting this sectarian narrative, actively encouraging prejudice when it favors them, but also vocally decrying the other for sowing this same inter-communal distrust.

In 2011, the region was shaken to its roots again. This time, the challenges came from below, in the form of the populist pro-democracy movements across the Arab world. After initial successes, however, and unfortunately for the region’s many grassroots activists, reactionary forces subsequently came to dominate and destabilize regional politics still further. The uprisings took a dark turn toward civil war, insurgency and resurgent authoritarianism, despite the efforts of millions of Arab citizens to the contrary. When ISIS emerged, ostensibly challenging all states in the region, it provided an excuse for already security-obsessed regimes to hunker down still more, further damaging the democratic goals of the movements of 2011. The regimes, in short, were already in the midst of reestablishing themselves.

But ISIS also emerged at a moment in regional international relations that has been described as a new Middle East cold war, not in the sense of the global Cold War that ran roughly from 1945 to 1990, but more akin to an earlier regional rift known as the Arab cold war. Like the current version, the earlier conflict saw authoritarian regimes wrestle with each other to remain in power and to dominate the internal affairs (and even regime types) of their neighbors. The earlier version, associated with Egyptian political ascendancy under Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, coalesced around two struggles—one between nominally leftist military-backed republics and conservative hereditary monarchies, and a second among the radical republics themselves (often taking on Nasserist versus Baathist dimensions).

Today’s regional cold war has many similarities to the past. In both eras, an alignment of conservative monarchies banded together to fend off challenges to the rule of royal families. In both eras, the struggles took place within the weakest states, including in the form of military interventions and civil wars and backing alternative local contenders for power from Syria to Yemen. In the current version, however, there is no coalition of radical republics and no equivalent to the figure of Nasser, for that matter. The closest approximation might be the self-styled “axis of resistance” that links Iran and Asad’s Syria to Lebanese Hizballah and (at least at one time) Hamas. But each of these actors is itself a polarizing force for much of the rest of the region. And also unlike the earlier era, this time there are multiple jihadi movements, from al-Qaeda to ISIS, challenging regimes, states and borders.

The new version also includes a pronounced sectarian dimension. This fact should be seen not so much as a cause in itself, but rather as an element in regional identity politics that major powers—Saudi Arabia and Iran, in particular—have manipulated in order to rouse support for themselves and counter their opponents. Similarly, Islamist movements from the Society of Muslim Brothers on the Sunni side to Lebanese Hizballah on the Shi’i side have also in effect marketed their own material power struggles as ideological and existential. It is into this volatile mix that ISIS expanded, establishing a kind of anti-Westphalian state in parts of both Syria and Iraq.

**ISIS, Syria and Iraq**

As ISIS emerged, Syria’s regime was immersed in war with rebel factions, but the civil war had already turned into
something of a multi-sided melee including outside proxies. In that sense, ISIS was but the latest entrant into a war that had enlisted foreign fighters, including Lebanese Hezbollah and forces from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. The brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad had survived the war mainly through extensive Iranian and Russian support, yet it seemed paradoxically to value—at least instrumentally

**ISIS emerged as Arab regimes were reconsolidating their power after the 2011 uprisings.**

and temporarily—the entry of ISIS and other jihadi organizations into the fray. Assad’s forces appeared to prefer attacks on elements of the Free Syrian Army, the set of armed organizations that comprised a diffuse rebel military front, even as ISIS, too, battled rebels it derided as tools of Western imperialism.

The role of jihadi elements in the Syrian civil war—from Ahrar al-Sham to Jabhat al-Nusra to ISIS itself—also buttressed the dictatorship’s overall narrative of a secular state defending itself and the notion of a pluralist Syria against violent and uncompromising Sunni Islamist chauvinism. When Assad originally claimed that the Syrian revolution was a foreign and jihadi conspiracy, it was utterly ludicrous. But as the war dragged on, jihadi elements loomed ever larger on the battlefield. And here, too, the very brutality of both the regime and ISIS each fed the other’s self-image as champion of the Syrian people against a particularly barbaric force. Both were indeed ruthless, but neither could reasonably be seen as defenders of public safety, let alone popular sovereignty or social welfare.

In Iraq, unlike in Syria, the regime was no longer an avowed Baathist state. But the post-invasion Iraqi state remained under construction or reconstruction, and leaders like Nouri al-Maliki had proven to be both authoritarian and sectarian in their modes of operation. Maliki had jealously guarded his personal power for several years, but simultaneously undermined the writ of the state, which became increasingly identified in Iraq as an amalgam of sectarian actors—the government and army included—rather than a set of national institutions. When in 2014 the army yielded town after town and city after city to advancing ISIS forces, it only reinforced perceptions of its frailty and partisan nature. Indeed, to date, the main military successes against ISIS in Iraq have been achieved by Kurdish peshmergas and/or Shi’i militias, the latter often with the direct backing of Iranian forces, which now operate relatively openly.

It is the very weakness of the Syrian and Iraqi states vis-à-vis their respective “nations” that has made them vulnerable to the sectarian narrative emanating from embattled grassroots movements, but also from state capitals and the capital of an aspiring state, namely, Raqqa, the center of the ISIS “caliphate.” In 2006 Jordan’s King ‘Abdallah II referred to a “Shiite crescent” stretching from Lebanon across Syria and Iraq to its cusp in Iran. But, as political scientist F. Gregory Gause has argued, the real dynamic is not an arc of Shi’ism or of Iranian power, but rather an arc of weak states that are each prone to manipulation by other states. And at present, these states include regional powers that prefer to hide their own political agendas behind a veneer of sectarianism.

As the Syrian uprising of 2011 turned into a protracted civil war, it was quite complex in real terms—yet like Iraq, the Syrian situation fit into the existing Saudi-Iranian power struggle and the narrative of sectarian conflict that both powers, and indeed many domestic Islamist movements, were already using. Iraq’s “new” military frequently seemed to crumble in the face of the ISIS threat, yielding the field to Kurdish and Shi’i irregulars and Sunni tribes to fight sometimes against ISIS, sometimes against others, but always over the future of the Iraqi state itself.

**Responses of Regional Powers**

The Syrian civil war seemed to drag in a host of foreign powers, most of whom decried external meddling, even as they attempted to intervene covertly or otherwise to affect the outcome of the war. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran seemed to regard the Syrian war as vital to their own struggle, and backed opposing sides, helping to lead to a relentlessly bloody stalemate. They would reproduce this same disastrous formula as they backed rival Yemeni groups, helping to plunge Yemen, too, into civil war in late 2014. This calculus only makes sense in the context of cold war dynamics—that is, fomenting instability and violence elsewhere in order to preserve power and regime security and survival at home. Yet here, too, security priorities differed. Iran appeared to give pride of place to the war in Syria, with only limited support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen, while a new Saudi regime seemed almost to have panicked, reading in Yemen a far greater role for the Islamic Republic, and hence leading a military intervention that far surpasses what Iran has done.

The focus of Riyadh and Tehran on one another explains at least in part the confused and delayed responses to ISIS. For Iran, the territorial conquests of ISIS took place in largely Sunni Arab or Kurdish parts of Syria and Iraq, but in all cases they interfered in Iran’s self-styled sphere of influence. While the situations in Syria and Iraq were dramatically different, Iran put forces on the ground in both countries to support the regimes against domestic opponents and now also to counter ISIS. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, did not send its own troops into combat and had
no equivalent ally to Hizballah to back in its stead. It did, however, support various Syrian rebel factions, funnel arms and money into the conflict, and continue to cast Iran—not ISIS—as its main regional opponent. In the aftermath of the Iranian nuclear deal (between Iran and six major powers, including the US), and the Russian airstrikes that commenced in September, that orientation has intensified. Saudi Arabia remains the wealthiest Arab state, but the largest Arab army belongs to Egypt. Would that army be part of an anti-ISIS coalition? No, for Egypt is no longer the regional power it once was, and its focus remains decidedly internal rather than regional.

In Egypt, regime change did mean foreign policy change. The government of President Muhammad Mursi, of the Muslim Brothers, had difficult relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, but established a close alignment with both Qatar and the Islamist government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. After the 2013 military coup, and the rise of the regime of President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, Egyptian foreign relations changed dramatically, leading to immediate estrangement from Qatar and Turkey, and an equally immediate new alignment with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—with the latter two allies providing the new regime with considerable largesse.

While vehemently anti-Islamist, and viewing almost all policies through a counter-terrorism lens, the Sisi regime nonetheless seemed to put crushing the Muslim Brothers far above any concern with ISIS. Even as more militant Islamist movements, such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, emerged to challenge the regime for control of Sinai, the regime continued to insist that the Brothers were the real enemy, intimating that it was the Brothers who were really behind various attacks, even those claimed by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis or ISIS. When ISIS militants murdered Egyptian Copts in Libya, the state did respond with airstrikes. But the focus on the Brothers remained.

Beyond the Arab states, the major non-Arab regional powers—Israel, Iran and Turkey—each took very different approaches to the challenge of ISIS. Israel remained largely neutral, in the sense of not being a direct participant, but not in the sense of being a disinterested party. Israeli security officials were focused on the Syrian war, and had launched airstrikes within Syria against alleged Hizballah targets, but not yet against ISIS. But for the Israeli government, all outcomes were negative: Any ISIS or even alternative Islamist regime was likely to be hostile, and hence appeared perhaps less threatening than the survival of an embattled Baathist regime. In contrast, Iran comprised part of the forces...
confronting ISIS directly, in an often odd and uncoordinated de facto coalition with the United States and several European powers, while Turkish policy seemed to be in a bit of a muddle. In the early days of the Arab uprisings, Turkey's government had seemed triumphant. As Islamist regimes emerged in Tunis and Cairo, Erdoğan even participated as an honored guest in meetings of the Arab League—a highly unusual circumstance for a Turkish leader. Yet in short order, old feelings of mistrust reasserted themselves. The Islamist moment seemed short-lived, after all, as Ennahda suffered electoral setbacks in Tunisia while the Muslim Brothers were ousted in Egypt and later banned there, as in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

As the Syrian civil war deepened, Turkey opposed Asad, supporting rebel movements, but refusing to directly intervene. While the state steadfastly denied it, countless reports charged Turkey with arming key factions, including jihadi elements like Jabhat al-Nusra, while also allowing Islamist fighters to cross its borders to join the Syrian opposition. But Turkish policy was, as always, complicated also by the Kurdish question. Local Kurds battled ISIS over the city of Kobane, but Turkey was accused both of facilitating and preventing the flow of Kurdish forces to the front lines against ISIS. After suffering an electoral setback of their own in the summer, Turkish officials began reassessing their approach to the entire ISIS question. When ISIS began bombing Turkish border towns, the policy seemed to shift, with Turkey now more explicitly against ISIS, and being pressured by allies to cross the border to at least create some kind of "safe zone" for refugees and perhaps to intervene even more directly. Turkey's response, however, only underscored the differing priorities of regional regimes, since Erdoğan's government spoke in terms of combating ISIS, while directing most Turkish military attacks at Kurdish forces and especially at the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. Similarly, when Russia intervened even more directly. Turkey's response, however, only underscored the differing priorities of regional regimes, since Erdoğan's government spoke in terms of combating ISIS, while directing most Turkish military attacks at Kurdish forces and especially at the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. Similarly, when Russia intervened even more directly in the Syrian war, with extensive airstrikes, it too claimed to be bombarding ISIS, while unleashing most of its munitions against US-backed rebels fighting the Russian-allied Asad regime.

**Next in Line?**

To the south of Syria, Jordan faced similar pressures to those of Turkey—including the idea of potentially advancing across the border to create some kind of security zone in southern Syria. Like Turkey and Lebanon, Jordan hosted hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. Indeed, it was not the regional powers, but the geographically proximate and decidedly weaker states—Lebanon and Jordan—that seemed to grasp the urgency of the ISIS threat. Both states saw nationals captured or kidnapped and ultimately murdered by ISIS, but neither was in a position to counter ISIS on its own. Both states claimed to have absorbed more than a million Syrian refugees each, and were politically, economically and militarily vulnerable, even as they had both managed to avoid the revolutionary impulses of 2011.

It was only after the murder of American hostages that the US began a campaign of military strikes against ISIS, first in Iraq and later in Syria as well. Jordan, a close ally of the US, agreed to join in the airstrikes. King ‘Abdallah II insisted that the fight against ISIS was vital to Jordan and to the region, and that it was not at all akin to the deeply unpopular US war in Iraq that began in 2003. And indeed for Jordan, bordering both Syria and Iraq, the fight was urgent indeed. But while most Jordanians were opposed to ISIS, they differed over whether Jordan should play a direct military role against the group. That debate swung wildly when a Jordanian fighter pilot—Muadh al-Kassasba, was shot down over ISIS-held territory. Jordan suspended its role in airstrikes as it negotiated for the pilot's release from captivity, only to find out that ISIS had burned Kassasba alive weeks earlier. A gruesome video documenting the killing was released, leading Jordan, in response, to execute several high-profile convicted jihadi bombers in its own prisons, and then engage in a renewed series of airstrikes on ISIS targets. Within Jordan, the overwhelming public response was horror at the ghastly ISIS acts. But many voices—albeit quietly—still questioned whether Jordan should be engaged militarily at all.

Even as the Jordanian state attempted to take a lead in forming an Arab coalition against ISIS, with Western backing, many Jordanian officials were frustrated by their own allies' differing views regarding preeminent threats. Saudi Arabia seemed still focused on Iran above all. Qatar remained supportive of Muslim Brother movements, but worried about Iran, even as Egypt and the UAE appeared to see the Brothers, not Iran or ISIS, as the main strategic danger. Indeed, in another major shift in regional international relations, no Arab state seemed to identify Israel as the top anxiety. As alignments continued to shift in response to domestic and regional insecurities, the Israeli and Saudi governments continued to sound ever more similar in their critiques of their US ally and even more so in their near obsession with Iran as the primary enemy, with ISIS decidedly secondary.

When ISIS bombed mosques in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, or slaughtered tourists on the beaches of Tunisia, regional regimes were compelled to confront ISIS as a serious
threat. But another question remained: Which ISIS? Multiple branches of the group had popped up, as with al-Qaeda before. For each regime, fears were partly internal—to what extent did ISIS have a following inside a particular country’s borders? Tunisia, for example, has often been said to supply more ISIS recruits than any other Arab country.

The Jordanians, however, attempted to rally regional support for a campaign against what remained “ISIS central”—the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. At the Arab League summit in March in Egypt, the regimes acknowledged that militant Islamism and jihadi extremism were their greatest and most immediate challenges. They even agreed, in principle, to form a pan-Arab military coalition. The Joint Arab Force was supposed to comprise at least 40,000 troops, to be drawn mainly from Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Gulf Cooperation Council countries. These were to include land, air and naval contingents in a kind of rapid reaction force. But the Arab League has long been a forum whose solemn communiqués and bluster produce little action, and is hardly a real alliance, or a military coalition. Even when Saudi Arabia did manage to assemble a military coalition of Arab states, it was deployed to Yemen, not against ISIS.

In addition to lagging in meaningful military cooperation, the regimes tellingly differed in regards to what they meant by extremism or militancy. Regimes individually decried groups and states varying from the Muslim Brothers to al-Qaeda to ISIS to Iran. Regime opponents and critics in some of these same states pointed to the authoritarian brutality of many of the regimes themselves as the main security threat to the peoples of the region, and one that enabled violent challengers like ISIS to emerge in the first place.

As ISIS, meanwhile, continued to rule swathes of Iraq and Syria while urging and sponsoring attacks across the region and beyond, it remained striking that unlike every regional power before it, this one had no regional or global backer (despite countless conspiracy theories to the contrary). At face value, ISIS had alienated almost every state in the region and every global power. One would think that would lead to a countervailing coalition that would make short work of ISIS. Yet each regime remained focused on different domestic and external security concerns. ISIS had appeared in part because of state failure. Further expansion would depend on ISIS being able to visit that formula on other places. It was for that reason that the governments and publics in both Lebanon and Jordan remained deeply concerned that regional and global allies had, thus far, proved unwilling or incapable of countering ISIS, while they themselves could not do so alone, but also feared that they were next in line. In November 2015, ISIS suicide bombers struck Baghdad, Beirut and Paris, with devastating effects. Countries in the region and well beyond—including the United States, Russia, France and other European states—spoke of the urgent need finally to unite against ISIS. But, in order to do so, they would have to overcome their considerable differences in security priorities and more.
“ISIS Is One Piece of the Puzzle”
Sheltering Women and Girls in Iraq and Syria

Yifat Susskind is executive director of MADRE, an international women’s human rights organization based in New York. Jillian Schwedler spoke with her on October 28, 2015, the week after Yanar Mohammed, head of MADRE’s partner group the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), testified before the UN Security Council about women’s vital role in sustainable peacebuilding and about the task of sheltering women fleeing sexual violence, including from areas controlled by ISIS.

What are the basic challenges for your work in Iraq, where the state does not fully function?

In places where governments are either unable or unwilling to meet their obligations regarding social and economic human rights, local grassroots organizations step into the vacuum. And when we are talking about basic, life-sustaining services—food, water, shelter, health care and education—it is often community-based women’s organizations that provide these essentials. Small women’s organizations are doing the work of the state—it happens in the United States as well—but it should not fall to small NGOs to provide food and shelter in situations of mass displacement.

The challenge is compounded by the anti-terrorism financing regulations in the US and in Europe. These laws are designed to prevent money from ending up in the hands of terrorist organizations, but they are not very fine-tuned, so it becomes impossible to send money to places like Iraq or Syria. In the summer of 2014, after the ISIS invasion of northern Iraq, private banks like Chase just stopped wiring money to Iraq, because they didn’t want to run afoul of regulations. So we had to be very creative and do what MADRE is set up to do, which is to get money to grassroots women’s organizations, no matter what the conditions. Grassroots organizations, especially progressive women’s groups, are at the front line, not just defending communities under attack, but also preventing violent extremism. The irony is that US counterterrorism finance regulations are getting in the way of supporting the very people who are countering terrorism.

There is another problem: The activities of OWFI, in particular the operation of shelters for battered women, are not legal in Iraq. The shelters stayed illegal even though the need for them grew a great deal after the mass displacement of 2014. And there was the gender-based violence of ISIS and of local sectarian militias, including frankly the Iraqi government-affiliated Shi’i militias as well. If you’re a woman or an LGBT Iraqi, there is a big overlap between needing shelter because of armed conflict and needing shelter because of the kind of violence you face every day from within your own family and community. Those forms of violence are on a continuum. So we try to point out to the Iraqi government—both at the municipal and national levels—that there is a tremendous need and the government shouldn’t get in the way. “Why don’t you make an exception,” we say, “because this really is an emergency.” Once they make an exception, and allow women’s groups to run shelters due to displacement, we’ve created the
precedent to argue that these shelters should remain in operation even once mass displacement subsides.

Why did the government disallow the shelters in the first place?

There is no modality of women living independently. In the very conservative mindset that prevails, the only interpretation of a house where single women live is that it’s a brothel. There is widespread acceptance of everything from blocking women from making independent decisions to domestic violence to honor killing for transgressing social norms. Tolerance of honor killing is institutionalized in the Iraqi constitution that the US brokered. Someone escaping the threat of honor killing is seen as a fugitive who has done something wrong. Therefore, a shelter is not seen as providing sanctuary to innocent victims; it’s seen as harboring people who have broken social norms and deserve punishment.

And even as encouraging them to defy social norms.

Right, and our partners at OWFI are in fact encouraging women to change social norms. They’re not just running a shelter. This work is part of a whole feminist and human rights norm-building program. And to say that it’s frowned upon is an understatement. The shelters have faced different degrees of harassment, from police raids to the appearance of OWFI activists’ names on the “kill lists” of militias affiliated with the government.

Including Yanar Mohammed.

Yanar received death threats earlier, in 2003, when she started the shelters. Both the shelters and the OWFI radio station, the only women’s station in Iraq, which reached a listenership of 7 million in Baghdad, have come under attack. The radio station was shut down in the summer of 2014, and its frequency given to al-Haqq, an Iranian-backed Shi’i militia that has acted as the strike force for the government.

I don’t think it was a coincidence that the frequency was taken away from a self-described left-wing, non-sectarian, progressive organization—the only organization in the history of Iraq to stand publicly for LGBT rights, for instance. In part, it’s a reaction to the ISIS invasion, and the same thing we experienced here after September 11, 2001—an uptick in conservatism and a reactionary turn inward. Space for
dissent closes down as people feel under attack and right-wing extremism is fueled.

In Iraq, that dynamic has created a whole new level of threat to progressive activists, to trade unionists and to LGBT folks. LGBT Iraqis aren’t enjoying a social movement in Iraq, per se, but for the first time are starting to think about how they might begin to organize themselves and how they might want to understand themselves in political terms. That nascent work has happened almost entirely because of the courage of individuals (like Amir Ashour, founder of the new LGBT organization, Iraqueer), and the support of OWFI, which recognizes that LGBT people are strong potential allies for the women’s movement there.

Is any organization that receives foreign funding automatically suspect?

It’s always an issue when a local organization is seen to be pushing the envelope and has outside support. That makes them vulnerable to accusations of having a “foreign agenda.” And frankly it’s an issue that we navigate everywhere we work in the world because we are based in the US. We have a model of listening very closely to what our partners say, in Iraq and other places, so as to position MADRE to help clear the path in support of local women’s organizing without putting itself at the center of the narrative.

Another narrative is that women were better off under Saddam Hussein or Bashar al-Asad.

Better off is a relative term without a lot of nuance. Some things were better, some things were worse.

I think the difference lies in the fact that the Iraqi Baathist regime—and this is somewhat the case in Syria, too—for a long time suppressed civil and political rights, but to some degree protected social and economic rights—certainly more than its successor does now. Arguably, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq have few civil and political rights now, because of the sectarian nature of the government that the US boosted into power. But the whole balance has shifted, and today most people are much worse off in terms of social and economic rights. For women, there were previously much higher levels of health care, education, safe public transportation and participation in the public-sector work force. It was a repressive, but high-functioning state. The US destroyed that and replaced it with a sectarian government with strong theocratic leanings. It also put significant obstacles in the way of the Iraqi government providing social services, trying instead to turn Iraq into a
neoliberal laboratory. That created tremendous poverty and hunger, and it contributed to sex trafficking, militia violence and entrenchment of reactionary authority as people became more dependent on tribal leaders for jobs and other resources. I have a lot of sympathy for people in Iraq and Syria who say that things were better before. They weren’t living through this war, and that’s the biggest difference.

But we should remember that whatever social services the Baathist regime provided, including for women, didn’t come from commitment to feminist values. The regimes offered these services because it is easier to control women as citizens when they are benefiting from the state and not under the control of their fathers and husbands. So they provided free higher education, state-sponsored child care, paid maternity leave—all these services that women need and, in the US, have not won. They wanted women to participate equally in the work force and also fulfill their responsibilities as wives and mothers. But they didn’t do it for women; they did it to consolidate state power.

The shelters were not permitted under Saddam’s regime, either.

No. Saddam’s government did the same thing that the US did after the invasion: Use women’s rights as a bargaining chip with self-appointed clerical and tribal leaders. Whenever these men were agitating for more state power, Saddam would chip away at women’s rights as a concession to them, allowing, for example, reactionary religious interpretations of the country’s marriage, divorce and child custody laws. Women’s rights are always easy to concede because women have no representation in government and there is no one to argue on their behalf. Saddam Hussein also mounted “social cleansing” campaigns, systematically killing women who worked as prostitutes, among other atrocious human rights violations.

How are women identified and moved to safe locations where they can receive support?

OWFI runs a program that we call the Underground Railroad for Iraqi Women—an escape and support network for women facing the threat of honor killing, which rose dramatically after the 2003 US invasion.

The name “Underground Railroad” took on a renewed and horrifying significance when systematic sexual slavery at the hands of ISIS became entrenched in the north of Iraq. In those places, OWFI was able to offer the only safe houses for women, thanks to a diffuse network of activists and a corps of male allies, and with support from MADRE. To a significant extent, everyone is at risk, but people who are known to be progressive activists, who do not follow ISIS orders as to dress, behavior and conduct at work—those people are at real added risk. We have had occasion to do what we hope is temporary emergency relocation, for example, getting people out of Mosul and into some other parts of Iraq.

We also will soon be opening the first rape and crisis center for women and girls—mostly Yazidis, but others as well—escaping conditions of sexual slavery. That will be located in Kurdistan. At this center, we hope, women and girls will eventually be able to heal from what has happened to them. The center will offer everything from reconstructive surgery for really young girls who have terrible internal injuries from multiple rapes, to trauma counseling, to reintegration, support services and job training, in order to help women rebuild their lives. A lot of these women are the sole surviving members of their families, so the rebuilding has to happen on every level—physical, psychic, social, cultural.

At this moment of terrible crisis, we may also be able to modify the social norms surrounding women who are survivors of rape. As in the US, women are routinely blamed for being raped and carry the stigma for the rest of their lives. In Iraq, the stigma is so strong that women can be killed for having been raped. Now, however, both in Iraq and in Syria, there are small but critical indicators that change may be possible, because of the sheer numbers of women who are being identified as rape survivors. It’s almost like the community is reaching a tipping point where it is hard to blame a woman for being raped because it’s happening to everybody. It’s both horrifying and a very important opportunity for local women’s rights activists to entrench this shift in attitude, to make it permanent. This isn’t something outsiders could ever do, but we can support it, for instance by facilitating strategic conversations between women who are experiencing this moment in Iraq with women in Congo and Bosnia, who have valuable lessons to share. This is part of what MADRE does.

Entrenching this shift to end stigma is particularly urgent in the Yazidi community. Earlier this year, the main Yazidi cleric issued a declaration, saying that people who are returning from ISIS captivity should be welcomed home. It was very clear to Yazidis and all Iraqis that he was saying—without
coming out and saying it—that girls and women who had been raped should not be killed by their families. It was completely unprecedented.

Are there others, perhaps religious women, who are more open to such change, because of the scale of the crisis?

We just convened in Istanbul the second in a series of meetings of about a dozen Iraqi women’s organizations and a dozen Syrian women’s organizations. We talked about a range of issues—among them, how to survive under ISIS, but also how to move a women’s rights agenda forward in a context of failed states and armed conflict. And they are figuring that out. There is a range of ethnic-religious identity and political views, and a growing coalitional sensibility. Compare that to a time earlier where many of these women’s groups would not have wanted to sit down with OWFI, for example, because they are perceived as so radical.

Has that change occurred because ISIS is so bad?

It’s a combination of things. The international advocacy work that OWFI has done with MADRE has raised their credibility and visibility, to the point that they cannot be dismissed. Moreover, sometimes the basis of working together is not mutual agreement, but the hope of building greater common understanding through the work.

Anything else we should know?

There is a lot of frustration about how women’s rights are being exploited by the US and Europe to mobilize public support for their war on ISIS and the “war on terror” more broadly. We’re very aware that the only reason that Yanar was chosen to speak in front of the UN Security Council this year was that she would condemn ISIS, a common enemy of Council members. For many years, we were extremely vocal in our opposition to the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, and believe me, she was not invited to express that view in front of the Security Council.

We know—and so do Syrian and Iraqi women—that our work is given visibility right now because the women are under attack by enemies of the US and its allies. There’s not the same sympathy for communities that are under attack by Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Israel, for example. And all of the focus on ISIS is taking away from what should include a focus on the atrocities of the Syrian government. ISIS is one piece of the puzzle.

What’s more, the violence that women and girls face under ISIS is on a continuum of violence that they faced before and are going to face afterward. This moment is distinguished only by the brazenness and scale of the ISIS violence. It’s difficult for the international community to know what the hell to do about ISIS—or the Syrian war, for that matter. But there are a lot of eminently doable and not particularly expensive policy changes that would go a very long way toward protecting women’s rights—before, during and after these crises—that would make women much better able to survive and resist in moments like the ISIS onslaught. Allow women to run women’s shelters, for example. Make it legal for a woman to get an ID card without her husband’s permission so that she can get food and health care, or get her kids into school if she’s displaced. Currently, if your husband dies and he’s not there to vouch for you, you can’t get an ID card.

There’s a counterpart in Syria—all these kids born stateless because the mother cannot pass on her nationality. Who knows what the state is going to look like, or if there will be multiple states? What will happen to this newest generation born without adequate documents, unless we take action to solidify their legal status? This situation gives us a real opportunity to demonstrate precisely how gender discrimination undermines prospects for society as a whole, and certainly for any kind of genuine democracy.

Also, we and our local partners are doing a lot of documentation of human rights violations, in particular against women and LGBT folks. OWFI is the only group taking testimony from LGBT people. In general, effective documentation of sexual violence in armed conflict is still rare. But it’s critical, because one of the lessons of Bosnia is that we can’t go back afterward and build that evidence base to prosecute war crimes. Through several years of training from MADRE, the activists of OWFI now have both the skills and the sensitivity to collect legally viable documentation and do it in a way that empowers the survivor of violence. They have a methodology that avoids re-traumatizing or endangering that person and offers the psychological support and broader social services that a person may need to give testimony safely. There are some organizations, MADRE and others, who have developed and advanced that skill set. We are only able to do this, though, because the women and men of OWFI are willing to risk their lives in places like Mosul and Tikrit (when that city was under ISIS). We do the training, and they actually do the documentation. The idea is to build a base of evidence now, so that violations against women and LGBT folks are part of any transitional justice process that emerges to address and heal from these wars.

This work is happening because grassroots women and their allies are putting their lives on the line to defend their communities and the possibility of a peaceful and progressive future.
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The Invisible Alienation of Tunisian Youth

Benoît Challand

The mood in Tunisia was tense after Ramadan, a month after 38 tourists were killed in the beach resort of Sousse at the end of June. Key buildings on the capital’s main boulevard, Habib Bourguiba Avenue, including the Ministry of Interior, were surrounded with barbed wire and conspicuous police protection. Parliament had just passed a counter-terrorism law criticized by local and international human rights associations for granting extraordinary powers to security agencies.

It is still possible to glimpse the euphoria of the 2011 revolt that toppled President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Bourguiba Avenue and other locales bustle with activity—demonstrations and political meetings at which Tunisians mingle with Libyans and other foreigners. Yet there are dark clouds on the horizon.

There are undoubted signs of improvement in formal political life: two parliamentary elections, in 2011 and 2014; a new constitution with nearly full support from an otherwise divided constituent assembly; the election of a new president in December 2014; a law allowing, at least until passage of the counter-terrorism law, almost total freedom of association; and soon, for the first time in Tunisian history, the creation of a constitutional court meant to give credence to the notion of separation of powers. Tunisia is governed by an alliance between a large secularist coalition, Nida’ Tunis, and the Islamist party Ennahda. The former won the election in October 2014 (with 37 percent of the popular vote), but did not have enough seats to govern on its own. While some see the resulting coalition as a guarantee that radical wings on both sides will neutralize each other, thus avoiding a return to a one-party system, one astute commentator described it as a “rotten compromise.”

It has, among other problems, widened the generation gap between political leaders and youths who feel further alienated from politics by the seemingly unnatural alliance. This sentiment is strong, for instance, among young Islamist militants active in newly founded charitable associations.

Tunisian youths were hailed as heroes for their creative, front-row engagement in the 2011 uprising. But they are paying a heavy price amidst the political volatility and economic gloom in the aftermath. It can be misleading to think of youths as a given age group, though the range 18–34 is frequently used. Youths are better conceived as all those who are semi-autonomous, that is, striving for economic and social independence but still closely tied to family elders. Understanding youths as a group with a tormented relationship with authority figures helps to make sense of headlines that Tunisia has supplied the largest number of volunteers to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. It is estimated that 3,000 persons left Tunisia in 2014 to join ISIS.

The economy has been ailing since the latter years of Ben Ali’s rule, and remains very much dependent on European economic performance. The new wave of politicians has struggled to clean up corruption and alleviate high unemployment.

And there is what seems to be the mounting storm of ISIS. The jihadi extremists have established a firm footing in neighboring Libya, first in the east, near Derna, and, over the summer, not far from the capital, Tripoli. As elsewhere, the ISIS militants thrive in a place with no functioning state and a gray economy. The smuggling routes between Libya and Tunisia carry everything from sub-Saharan African or Middle Eastern refugees heading toward Italy to weapons, drugs and such mundane goods as gas and powdered milk.

How the threads interweave is evident in the story of the 23-year old Tunisian man who carried out the killings in Sousse, and apparently, was trained in Libya. Many have interpreted the attacks, claimed by ISIS, as an attempt to reverse Tunisia’s democratic steps forward. The Tunisian government hastened not only to pass the counter-terrorism law, but also to renew the state of emergency and build a sand wall along the Libyan border. Such barriers have been ineffective in the past and, in this case, Tunisians living on the border perceived the measures as interference from the capital in the regular trade on which they rely.

Support among Tunisians for salafi groups (whether quietist or jihadi, like ISIS) has clear domestic and material roots. A sociological study led by Olfa Lamloum and Mohamed Ali Ben Zina in Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, two neighborhoods with high youth unemployment and reputations as hotbeds of salafi militancy, offers a particularly grim picture of what faces poor Tunisians aged 18 to 34.

Education is abysmal and jobs are scarce. Ninety-three percent of the people interviewed for the Lamloum and Ben Zina study are forced to live with their parents because they cannot provide for themselves. Nearly 54 percent of young men (as opposed to 34 percent of young women) had to drop out of school to help the household financially. Young men feel especially constrained by, and resentful of, this obligation. Forty-four percent of interviewees said that daily life has not improved since the fall of Ben Ali, and 46 percent even think that their condition has been degraded.

The youths from these two neighborhoods complained of having no clubs, cultural centers or parks in which to gather. The few public spaces are often mosques, and it is no surprise that they are so popular (53 percent of the youths interviewed pray regularly). When venturing outside their neighborhoods, young men not infrequently encounter violence: 30 percent said they had suffered physical abuse, mostly from police, but also from people from other neighborhoods.

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Around the capital, there is a profound stigma attached to residents of the poor neighborhoods. Teachers discriminate against children from these locations, jeopardizing their chances to complete basic schooling; police routinely target the buses and trams coming from these areas as security risks. All of this mistreatment reinforces feelings of exclusion. Borrowing from Loïc Wacquant, Lamloum and Ben Zina note that the youth of these neighborhoods have been “symbolically disqualified.”

Each of the problems identified in the study is gendered, with young men much more exposed to police harassment, petty humiliation at school and professional dead ends than young women.

These youths have no faith in the economic or political system—98 percent distrust political parties and think that politicians fight merely to advance their own interests, starting with getting rich. Ennahda lost big in these neighborhoods between the 2011 and 2014 parliamentary elections, with its rate of support falling from 50 percent in Ettadhamen and 53 percent in Douar Hicher to 35 and 30 percent, respectively.

For the youths here, the present alliance between Nida’ Tunis and Ennahda is not a puzzle, but confirmation of preexisting beliefs. It is hardly surprising therefore that youths in these neighborhoods tend to support political groups that are outside the parliamentary order, such as the salafi Ansar al-Shari’a, a party that has been outlawed. A majority of the youths interviewed for the book said they knew someone who had left, either for Syria to join ISIS or to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. They departed in search of economic opportunity or reassertion of their frustrated masculinity, perhaps through violent means, a path encouraged by ISIS recruiters, with their promise of otherworldly redemption.

The flip side of this coin is a problem for Tunisian politics—not just for the big parties or the government, but for civil associations as well. The constitutional court and the new laws may well anchor future democratic practices in Tunisia, but many lament the fact that so little has been done to improve the economy. Regardless of what the compromise between Nida’ Tunis and Ennahda holds in store, according to Lamloum and Ben Zina’s study, many youths are simply voting with their feet.

Endnotes

2 Author’s interviews with three activists, Tunis, July 23–25, 2015.
6 Ibid., p. 11.
7 Ibid., p. 115.
Two quiet but revealing developments related to Middle East water were announced in the spring and summer of 2015. On February 26, Israeli and Jordanian officials signed an agreement to begin implementation of the long-awaited and controversial Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance Project. And, on June 9, a civil society-based coalition led by EcoPeace, a regional environmental NGO, released the first ever Regional Master Plan for Sustainable Development in the Jordan Valley.

The two schemes represent very different approaches to solving water problems in the region—the first is an old-school engineering fix requiring massive new infrastructure, while the second is a river restoration project rooted in sustainable development principles. While proponents praise both projects as innovative and cooperative solutions, a closer look indicates that the water crisis is still far from alleviation.

Project Origins

Both projects were born out of rising concerns about water shortages amidst the Arab-Israeli peace processes of the

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Negotiations and documents associated with the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan prepared the way for cooperation in transferring water northward from the Red Sea into the Dead Sea via a channel or canal built through Jordan. Both the Israeli-Jordanian agreement and the Israeli-Palestinian accords of 1993 and 1994 included provisions for coordinated regional economic development and environmental protection along the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea basin. EcoPeace, formed in 1994, brought together Israelis, Palestinians, Egyptians and Jordanians to encourage states to undertake the anticipated regional development, especially around the Dead Sea basin, in an integrated and environmentally sustainable manner.

Jordanian and Israeli government officials made the first formal public announcement of the water conveyance project in 2002 at the UN Earth Summit in South Africa. In 2005, with the Palestinian Authority on board, the World Bank agreed to coordinate donor financing and manage the feasibility and impact studies. The $10 billion plan involved transferring 2 billion cubic meters of Red Sea water along a 110-mile conveyance structure to the Dead Sea where a combination of hydroelectric and desalination plants would generate hundreds of millions of cubic meters of freshwater to be shared among the three parties. The leftover brine was to be discharged into the Dead Sea to help offset the rapidly declining water level that had resulted from decades of diversion of the Jordan River to its north and mineral extraction at the southern end by Jordanian and Israeli mining companies.

Advocates of the Red-Dead, as it came to be known, pushed for the project on several grounds. They argued publicly that the Red-Dead was first and foremost an environmental project, the best way to halt the shrinking of the Dead Sea and stave off the ecological disaster that would result if it disappeared. Behind the scenes, however, the Jordanians were especially interested in the freshwater to be generated through desalination, while the Israelis looked forward to the development potential and the opportunity to demonstrate their willingness to work with Arab neighbors. Proponents of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including some American politicians, touted the project as a “peace conduit.”

Given this scale and ambition, it is not surprising that critics quickly lined up against the project. Some questioned the cost and feasibility, while others, including environmentalists, scientists and representatives of the tourism and mining industries along the Dead Sea shores, worried about the impact of pumping on the Red Sea and of introducing its brine into the unique chemistry of the Dead Sea, as well as damage to ecologically sensitive areas from building a pipeline through Wadi ‘Araba. EcoPeace, which had become Friends of the Earth Middle East after joining the international network (it has now left), led the campaign against the Red-Dead by offering what they described as a more sustainable and less costly alternative plan to address the crisis of the Dead Sea—restoration of the depleted and polluted Jordan River, a key source of freshwater for the riparian countries and the natural feeder of the Dead Sea. In March 2005, they launched the Jordan River Rehabilitation Project, marking the start of a regional campaign of education and advocacy to stop the demise of the lower Jordan River.

Competition between the two projects intensified in the latter 2000s as canal advocates deflected criticism with regular reminders that the acute water crisis could only be alleviated with large-scale solutions, and environmentalists and their allies continued to highlight the major risks of the Red-Dead and the benefits of their alternative. One result of this contest, which played out in the regional and international press, was to bring much attention to the problem of the Dead Sea. It also served to turn the Red-Dead into an international controversy and the EcoPeace leadership into minor celebrities.

Death of the Red-Dead?

In recent years, the two projects have traveled on separate tracks toward very different outcomes. The Red-Dead scheme has undergone various feasibility and impact studies and has been the subject of contentious public meetings held in Amman, ‘Aqaba, Ramallah, Jericho, Jerusalem and Eilat. At points, the project has stalled and even appeared to die, only to be revived. Realizing the difficulties of carrying out such a large and costly project, members of its steering committee prepared to break up the implementation into phases. Finally, in June 2013, the study phase was completed. Six months later, a memorandum of understanding was signed at World Bank headquarters in Washington, laying the groundwork for the 2015 announcement. When unveiled in February, the implementation plan was lauded as a milestone in regional politics and the realization of long-held visions. Israeli regional cooperation minister Silvan Shalom claimed it was “the most important agreement since the peace agreement with Jordan.” An official from the Jordanian Ministry of Water and Irrigation insisted, “We will have solved Jordan's problems at least for the next 30 years.”

For those who paid attention to the December 2013 memorandum, it is no surprise that the 2015 document looks very different from its antecedent ten years ago. According to the current specifications, one tenth of the water originally predicted will be pumped from the Red Sea to a desalination plant near the coastal city of ‘Aqaba, rather than next to the Dead Sea, after which the much reduced amount of desalinated freshwater will be distributed to Israel and to southern Jordan, not to the country's northern cities. Instead, Jordan will have the option to buy an additional 50 million cubic meters of freshwater that Israel will release from Lake Tiberias in the north. This scaled-down version also means that a smaller amount of brine will be discharged into the Dead Sea, and it will still have to travel 110 miles to get there. In this version, the hydroelectric plant powering the desalination process has disappeared. Finally, though the agreement still offers the Palestinian Authority the option to buy some of the freshwater, PA officials were notably absent from the February ceremony.
Considering the disparity between the original and current version, it is hard to see the Red-Dead as a solution to any of the problems it purports to address. According to Maysoun Zu’bi, former secretary-general of the Jordanian Ministry of Water and Irrigation and member of the Red-Dead Steering Committee, and a strong advocate of the earlier version, the latest iteration has numerous shortcomings. First, she notes, it will not generate nearly enough freshwater to meet Jordanian needs. “Our shortage is in the hundreds of millions. The 50 million cubic meters is nothing.” Nor does the project direct the freshwater where it is needed most—in the north of the country. “There is plenty of water in the south of Jordan,” she contends. “It is not needed there.” Nor will the current Red-Dead generate enough brine to offset the recession of the Dead Sea, which was the main purpose of the original project, according to the World Bank. Without the hydropower component, the project will not produce the energy that was supposed to fuel the desalination. And without the Palestinians on board, it is hard to call the project a “peace conduit” any longer. Zu’bi also worries about the arrangement with Israel for water in the north, in part because Israel could refuse to distribute that portion but also because Jordan would have to build a treatment plant it cannot afford in order to make the water from Lake Tiberias drinkable. The current Red-Dead, she concludes, is “-risky for Jordan.”

Jordanian officials try to get around these disparities by dubbing the plan Phase I, with more to come later, but others reject that characterization. Zu’bi, who worked on the plan to break the project into phases during her time at the Water Ministry and on the project’s steering committee, exclaimed, “This is not the Phase I we proposed! This is not the Red-Dead at all. It is a water trade bilateral agreement.” EcoPeace leaders agree, referring to the project now as a simple “water swap.” In a press release, Israeli director Gidon Bromberg described the plan as “a conventional desalination project with a regional water exchange’. . .not the ‘Red-Dead canal’ project.” In fact, EcoPeace staff, who were the leading critics of the Red-Dead not long ago, now raise little objection to the project.

At best, the rationale for the project now seems confused and misguided. As Batir Wardam, a Jordanian writer and expert on environmental issues, wondered worriedly, “Why desalinate and then sell the water to Israel while we can potentially link the resulting desalinated water to the already existing Disi project pipeline?” Most likely, keeping the project alive is serving other purposes, mainly saving face for the signatory parties. From the perspective of the Jordanian government, it may be better to have a small project to show for the many years of work, resources and political capital invested than no project at all. From an Israeli government perspective, and that of its US allies, signing on to the Red-Dead in any form keeps the parties at the table and helps demonstrate Israel’s willingness to cooperate with Arab neighbors, something they have been unable to do in the last 20 years and something they are under increasing pressure to show, as the peace process dies and the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign gains traction around the world.

Transformation of the Jordan Valley

If the trajectory of the Red-Dead disappoints, that of the Master Plan impresses. In recent years, EcoPeace has focused more pointedly on the Jordan River and crafting a comprehensive plan for its restoration. Staffers have traveled the region and the world looking for partnerships, and lessons learned from successful trans-boundary water restoration initiatives. In 2012, two major international organizations, the Stockholm International Water Institute and Global Nature Fund, helped them launch the process of producing a master plan for the Jordan Valley. Other European partners—Dutch company Royal Haskoning and the European Union—joined the effort. They have received support from some local communities in the Jordan Valley and regional faith leaders. In April, EcoPeace won the endorsement of the mayors of 114 American and Great Lakes cities who signed on to help with efforts to rehabilitate the Jordan River.

The June 2015 unveiling of the Master Plan, at a conference center on the Jordanian shore of the Dead Sea, brought together an array of attendees. Hosted by EcoPeace, the meeting was organized under the patronage of the Jordanian water minister, Hazim al-Nasir, a principal advocate of the Red-Dead for many years. Other officials from various Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli ministries, some of whom were once pitted against EcoPeace over the issue of the canal, were also there. Zu’bi, the canal advocate turned critic, participated as a consultant for the Master Plan project after agreeing to help EcoPeace prioritize the myriad tasks involved in implementing it. The inauguration of both projects in 2015 thus reveals an interesting realignment of forces.

As for the Master Plan document, it is an understatement to call it ambitious. The overarching goal of the project is to “promote peace, prosperity and security in the Jordan Valley and the region as a whole” through the restoration of the river environment, an idea that aligns with the “blue peace” paradigm of using shared water management as a tool for peace and cooperation. The strategic objectives of the Master Plan cover everything from pollution control, agricultural redevelopment and sustainable water management to protection of cultural heritage. As an example of the scope of the project, it seeks to “eliminate all sources of environmental pollution in the Jordan Valley by 2025.” The Plan identifies 127 interventions to be undertaken in pursuit of these objectives, some of which it argues can move forward now. Otherwise, the timeframe for achieving the objectives extends to 2025 and 2050. The overall cost of the project is estimated at $4.5 billion. Proponents call it a new Marshall Plan, a project that can achieve everything from overcoming boundaries to fighting poverty and terrorism. According to EcoPeace Israeli director Bromberg, it is a “game changer” for

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the region. Munqidh Mihyar, Jordanian director of EcoPeace, insists that all that is left is to “put a shovel in the ground.”

But, frankly, that is the hard part. EcoPeace has major hurdles to clear in rehabilitating the Jordan River valley. First and foremost is the unforgiving political environment in which they work. The Master Plan assumes a future independent state of Palestine and a final peace accord to initiate even some of the interventions. It counts on recognition of Palestine’s full participation as one of the three riparian states, as well as free access to the valley for all peoples. But two thirds of the lower Jordan River runs along the border between Jordan and the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority has little control, Palestinian communities are increasingly constrained and Israeli settlements reap most of the benefits. As the occupation persists and the prospects of a sovereign Palestinian state dim, so too does the potential for authentic Palestinian involvement in the redevelopment of the valley that makes them an equal partner in the costs and benefits that come with the project. It is thus difficult to initiate any kind of coordinated action in much of the river valley. Politics also poses challenges for winning promises of funding and investment for large-scale interventions such as building sewage treatment plants. The plan seems likely to remain a conceptual document as long as the occupation persists.

Relatedly, EcoPeace will have a hard time gaining buy-in for the Master Plan from Palestinians and Jordanians of Palestinian descent, many of whom want nothing to do with projects that channel resources and benefits to the Israeli government and the settlement regime it supports in the West Bank. Many Palestinian and Jordanian environmental groups consider EcoPeace “normalizers” and refrain from working with them. In fact, EcoPeace has had to adjust to these pressures. After many years of operating as Friends of the Earth Middle East, they left the Friends of the Earth International network in 2014 and reverted to using their original name, EcoPeace. The break occurred after the network published a “statement on water apartheid in Palestine” in December 2013, in which it expressed solidarity with PENGON/Friends of the Earth-Palestine, a coalition of Palestinian environmental organizations that joined the international network in 2008, and in support for “the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel.” According to Israeli EcoPeace director Bromberg, Friends of the Earth International is voicing extremist positions. Jordanian director Mihyar adds that being part of the network imposed constraints on the organization, and that leaving it gives EcoPeace more flexibility. Nevertheless, Mihyar admits, the anti-normalization movement is one of the organization’s biggest obstacles to achieving its goals.

In a way, the ceremonious launch of the Master Plan points to a shift in EcoPeace’s focus away from its origins in the peace process. The group set out to sow peace through environmental cooperation. It drew a map of trans-boundary cooperation that incorporated the entire ecosystem of the Jordan River valley and Dead Sea basin. Just as that ecosystem linked together the riparian states around it, the bodies of water within the system were linked together as well. These linkages, grounded in the political complexities of the region, were the centerpiece of their work for many years. As they move more narrowly along the track of Jordan River restoration, and toward implementation of the Master Plan, they seem to eschew politics and to try to make environmental cooperation work in spite of them. The Dead Sea has also moved to the background of the organization’s work. There is little mention of it in the Master Plan or EcoPeace press releases. And the organization links its work on the Jordan River more and more with rivers and trans-boundary water systems in other parts of the world, such as the Great Lakes and in India and Pakistan, than to regional waters. As Mihyar affirms, they are moving in a more international direction.

As is the case with the Red-Dead, one is left wondering about the EcoPeace rationale for expending so much energy on the Master Plan. Maysoun Zu’bi insists on the need to work cooperatively with the Israelis to protect Jordanian interests. “We have to be there to get our rights,” she says. She points to the importance of having water management frameworks ready to go when a peace deal does materialize. And, she contends, projects that decrease the development gap between Israelis, on the one hand, and Palestinians and Jordanians, on the other, make them more equal partners and more likely to see the benefits in forging a peace agreement. Excitement around the Master Plan may also be a function of dwindling confidence in state-led efforts to manage the water crisis, especially in water-poor Jordan where the national water strategy has hinged on the success of mega-projects such as the Red-Dead, where ministries do not cooperate and where the government is popularly viewed as corrupt. From the Israeli side, the Master Plan is another opportunity to demonstrate a capacity to work with Arab neighbors on fundamental issues such as water.

While it is tempting to view the two water-related developments of 2015 as advances, and even as signs of victory for a more sustainable, comprehensive and cooperative approach to addressing the region’s water problems, it is more likely they highlight other realities, including the failings of national water strategies, the growing capacity of the BDS campaign to exert pressure on Israel and the limits of the “blue peace” paradigm. Finally, if neither project does much to arrest the decline of the Dead Sea, who or what is left to save it?

Endnotes
1 Time, September 24, 2008.
7 Interview, Amman, May 25, 2015.
8 Christian Science Monitor, June 12, 2015.
Leadership Gone Awry
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Two Turkish Elections
Ümit Cizre

If election results are any indication, the popular will in Turkey changed radically over the course of 140 days in 2015. In June the ruling party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since 2002. But coalition talks failed and, in new elections in November, the president’s party won back its majority. What happened?
In representative democracies, elections allow the peaceful replacement of leaders, infuse government with new blood, legitimize both winners and losers, and restore public faith in democracy. More importantly, “the people’s voice” is cast as the ultimate check on national leaders whose power has grown too strong. In practice, there are a number of problems with this ideal—“the people’s voice” is identified with the majority, perhaps at the expense of minorities; it is inarticulate; and often it actually channels rather than challenges the wishes of rulers. Do the twin general elections held in Turkey over the course of five months in 2015 confirm or rebut these key assumptions about representative democracy? How can we account for the fact that the popular will changed so radically over 140 days as to yield two starkly contrasting outcomes?

The natural question to ponder is how the losers in the June elections could turn out to be the winners just five months later. The earthquake that had rocked the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (or AKP, the Turkish acronym), in June looked like only a slight tremor by November. What had been a relatively quiet and prosperous country was suddenly engaged in a “war on terror” against both Kurdish militants and ISIS, its government cracking down on free speech, opposition parties and the media, calling them threats to national security.

Turkey’s two elections in 2015 will go down in history as connected moments generating serious questions about the true strength, substance and depth of the institutions, procedures and norms of democracy in the country. More to the point, Turkey’s annus horribilis highlights the vulnerability of the rule of law as a means of sustaining basic freedoms and rights for Turkish citizens or ensuring the commitment of Turkish leaders to modern democratic rules.

**Erdoğan’s Pendent for Power**

In the parliamentary elections of June 7, 2015, traditional notions of representative democracy were affirmed and the “people’s voice” interrupted the inexorable 13-year rise of the AKP, seeming to bring its decade in power to an abrupt halt. In the 69 years since the beginning of the multi-party era in Turkey, “the people” have lived up to the representative democratic ideal more than once, thwarting several governments whose program had deviated from the original platform or become out of touch with reality. What, then, was special about the June 2015 elections? Two concerns were uppermost in the electorate’s consciousness: first, to block the ambitions of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to expand the nature of his “leadership” of the country; and, second, to enable the Kurdish party, the People’s Democracy Party (HDP), to act as a countervailing force to the AKP in Parliament. The voters succeeded in both respects, sparking widespread hope for change.

It is safe to say that the June elections were a referendum on the vision of Erdoğan, founder of the AKP, prime minister from 2002–2014 and, since August 2014, president of the republic. For a president who was elected with 52 percent of the vote, and who campaigned aggressively for the AKP, the results were shattering: The AKP won the most seats in Parliament, at 258, but lost 10 percent of the votes it had received in the 2011 elections, amounting to 69 seats. Thus the party fell short of the 276-seat majority it needed to form the government, as it has done since being swept into power in 2002. There was a long list of criticisms of Erdoğan and the AKP to which this loss can be partly attributed. These complaints included the concentration of power in the executive; the AKP’s growing antipathy toward oppositional politics and convergence with the nationalist, statist and security-driven priorities of old; purges of perceived opponents in the judiciary and police; the political capture of the National Intelligence Organization; and Erdoğan’s proclivity for meddling in the day-to-day affairs of government even after he became president. In Turkey, the president is head of state, but the prime minister holds the most executive authority. Meanwhile, civil liberties were eroding. In its 2015 annual report, Freedom House found that Turkey was drifting away from democratic norms in such areas as freedom of expression and belief, associational life, rule of law and personal autonomy.

The issue that eclipsed all the others, however, was Erdoğan’s persistent calls for an “alla turca” system of government, one closer to the Ottoman than the Western model, and wherein the powers of the president would be enhanced to the detriment of the prime minister and Parliament. This aspiration alienated a vast number of voters, including within the AKP’s constituency, for the Turkish constitution lays out a role for presidents that is “above politics.” Erdoğan deepened popular suspicions by heading up the AKP’s campaign personally, lobbing spiteful charges at the AKP’s competitors with the titular head of the party, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, taking a back seat. Erdoğan fought to achieve three numerical objectives in Parliament: Ideally, he wanted the two-thirds majority (367 seats) needed to change the constitution as he desired; failing that, he sought the three-fifths majority (330 seats) needed to call a referendum on the issue; and, as a last resort, he aimed for the 276 seats required to form another majority government. He failed on all three counts.

Erdoğan retains a certain mass appeal that has helped to underpin the AKP’s resilience under his leadership. But this grassroots strength has an enormous downside: Playing by no rules other than his own, accountable to no one, Erdoğan helped to portray the party as a personal vehicle, impotent in his shadow, rather than an institution. In fact, Erdoğan’s leadership style obscured deep divisions within the party, some of which emerged over the summer as the AKP licked its wounds. A party elder, Bülent Arınç, hesitantly led the way,
Erdoğan’s penchant for power cannot simply be said to be in the Turkish state’s DNA.

The Spell of More Power

The AKP was entrenched from 2002 onward through three spectacular electoral victories with no serious competition and no debate that was not completely leader-driven. As the AKP fulfilled its core mission, the party became a state-like institution with increasing neo-patrimonial power. Erdoğan became the most powerful “chief executive” since the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, ruled the country under a single-party system from 1923–1938. Erdoğan’s endless utterances are always made to friendly crowds or media cartels. No one can remember a public appearance in which he was challenged in a genuinely democratic way. Nor does the Turkish legislature have the British-style question time, where the prime minister must respond impromptu to the deputies’ queries. The Turkish people have no idea how the indomitable Erdoğan would perform in such a freewheeling setting.

The Politics of Redress

Erdoğan’s reversal of his own democratic reforms is related to the real nature of his original mission. The grand purpose of the AKP was to restore freedom of expression and social standing to the religious conservative sections of the population, who were failed first by the secular state’s exclusionary policies and second by the recklessness of the AKP’s predecessor, the more overtly Islamist Refah Party. Refah’s brief tenure in power was terminated by military intervention in 1997. The AKP’s efforts to redress these wrongs have raised many party constituents into the respectable middle classes. But the AKP’s success in this regard did not inject a craving for universal democratic rights and norms into the bloodstream of Turkey’s Islam-sensitive sectors. Since Erdoğan himself was not committed to those rights and norms, the politics of redress produced further opportunities for the AKP leader in his quest for power. It bifurcated the political field into “victims” of the past system and everyone else, making it necessary to erect barricades to guard the interests of the new pious middle classes. This genre of politics, in other words, reproduced the cleavages of the Ottoman-Turkish polity between secular and Islamic sectors, in a different modality but with even more segregation, animosity and anxiety between them.

In hindsight, the liberal, democratic and state secular critiques of Erdoğan and the AKP tended to assign their authoritarian traits to an “Islamist” character rather than purely political prerogatives of power, citizenship, state, society and exercise of popular will, independent of religion. Busy denouncing the AKP as religious reactionaries, critics did not digest the bitter reality that the AKP’s original reforms were instrumentally motivated by the grievances of the masses. Especially for the state secular critics, whose own commitment to democracy is dubious, religion served to explain everything.

The leader-as-party-and-country understanding of politics runs deep in Turkey, where the secular republican political tradition is built on a cult of personality. This tradition promotes an ideology of obedience among the citizenry; is intolerant of identities that are non-ethnic Turkish or non-Sunni; is obsessed with the security of the state; and depends on a party machine devoid of internal democracy. In other relatively democratic periods since 1946, memorable leaders like Süleyman Demirel, Bülent Ecevit and Turgut Özal set the national agenda, framed policy and ruled their respective parties with an iron fist.

But Erdoğan’s penchant for power cannot simply be said to be in the regime’s DNA. In his early years as prime minister, the AKP upended the old politics, curbing its authoritarian mentality and reducing the role of extra-political institutions like big business, the military, the judiciary and the civilian bureaucracy as the premise of a program for a new Turkey that could qualify to join the European Union. Why go to such lengths to turn Turkey into a regional model, welcoming Islam but distant from jihadi militancy, with greater prosperity and better public services, only to reinvigorate the traditional dogmas and fears? Why first reform and then recreate the past? Why not follow the trail that Erdoğan himself blazed in 2002?

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But it was evident that there were plenty of other doubters who could not “out” themselves for fear of reprisal.

A vivid illustration of the dynamics of Erdoğan’s leadership comes from the foreign policy arena. Using an Islamic lexicon and drawing on ideas of Ottoman revival, Erdoğan speaks of restoring dignity and confidence not just to Turkey’s Muslims but also to the long-suffering Muslims of the entire Middle East. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, however, Turkey has advanced no meaningful or credible ideas for solving the problems of the region, and so the country’s stature has fallen. Meanwhile, Erdoğan’s apparent disregard for basic values of democracy and his brash, confrontational rhetoric have raised eyebrows in the West. He pulls no punches regardless of his audience, confusing the rough-and-tumble battles of domestic politics with the hard, careful compromises of international relations.

The leader-as-party-and-country understanding of politics runs deep in Turkey, where the secular republican political tradition is built on a cult of personality. This tradition promotes an ideology of obedience among the citizenry; is intolerant of identities that are non-ethnic Turkish or non-Sunni; is obsessed with the security of the state; and depends on a party machine devoid of internal democracy. In other relatively democratic periods since 1946, memorable leaders like Süleyman Demirel, Bülent Ecevit and Turgut Özal set the national agenda, framed policy and ruled their respective parties with an iron fist.

But Erdoğan’s penchant for power cannot simply be said to be in the regime’s DNA. In his early years as prime minister, the AKP upended the old politics, curbing its authoritarian mentality and reducing the role of extra-political institutions like big business, the military, the judiciary and the civilian bureaucracy as the premise of a program for a new Turkey that could qualify to join the European Union. Why go to such lengths to turn Turkey into a regional model, welcoming Islam but distant from jihadi militancy, with greater prosperity and better public services, only to reinvigorate the traditional dogmas and fears? Why first reform and then recreate the past? Why not follow the trail that Erdoğan himself blazed in 2002?
Leaving principled objections aside, it is hard to understand Erdoğan’s insistence on maximizing presidential authority. The chief argument the president and his team have put forward is that this measure would eliminate “the multiple centers of power” that preclude efficient decision-making and hinder Turkey’s progress toward global economic might. But the bulk of “the multiple centers of power” to which the president refers—state bureaucracies, the courts, the police, the domestic intelligence agency, the military—have already been coopted, purged or packed with partisan appointees. The only other “center” that has some oppositional weight is the parliament with its legislative and investigative capacities. It seems clear that Erdoğan wants to craft a system that can bypass the parliament, where the AKP’s majority is not a given. The AKP leader has called the checks and balances of the parliamentary system a “multi-headedness” that disrupts effective governance.

On another level, an argument could be made that Erdoğan favors a stronger presidency because his style of rule has produced social protest. In June 2013, the government’s top-down attempts to restrict personal liberties and media freedoms as well as design urban renewal projects with little or no input from residents were resisted in Istanbul’s Gezi Park by a new cadre of young urban activists forming a bloc with liberals, democrats, leftists, secularists and Kurds. These protests compelled the government to revise its assumption that Turkey’s youth are anti-political, transfixed by social media and lacking in ideas of their own. Erdoğan’s crackdown on the demonstrators and finger pointing at the West were harbingers of his demand for more “discretionary” dispatch.

Running the country with a small coterie of bureaucrats and advisers, becoming distanced from society, making no time for reading and contemplation, disguising his lack of intellectual curiosity and disconnection from democratic values with pragmatism and arrogance, the only thing that could humble Erdoğan was the ballot box. There was little prospect of smashing the unhappy status quo, but the AKP’s opponents hoped the June 7 elections would at least warn...
The Kurdish Party Becomes More Turkish?

The second significance of the June 2015 elections was the change in the trajectory of Kurdish identity politics and Turkish responses to it. During the campaign, Erdoğan explicitly asked the electorate to help him reach two interdependent ends: Give the AKP the number of seats in Parliament necessary to amend the constitution, and keep the vote of the Kurdish HDP under the 10 percent threshold required for seats. Instead, the HDP passed the 10 percent threshold, winning 80 seats, on par with its nemesis, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which doubled its percentage of votes and number of seats. Not only did some Turks overcome their nationalist reflexes and vote for the HDP, but they also enabled the HDP to make a historic break from its narrow Kurdish nationalist posture and move toward a more progressive discourse embracing the totality of Turkey.

Kurdish deputies from a series of parties representing the Kurdish nationalist movement have sat in Parliament since 1991, but they had to run either as independents or on other parties’ lists. Kurdish demands evolved over time, but in general entailed greater cultural freedoms, as well as full equality and citizenship rights. The power of these claims is rooted in their opposition to the republican system that has long defined the Kurds as the “other.”

The HDP began to reinvent itself even before the June votes were tallied, adopting a broader and “Turkified” allegiance to democracy with its stand against Erdoğan’s scheme to strengthen the presidency. In so doing, the HDP showed itself to be a serious contender for power, either as an active partner in a coalition government or a passive outside supporter. Although it was not yet clear whether the party could forge a new identity without abandoning the specific needs and preferences of the Kurdish population, the campaign of Selahattin Demirtaş, the HDP’s leader, helped to fashion a new profile for the party and presented a much-needed inspiring leader for Turkey. From a provincial Kurdish background, Demirtaş turned into a star performer by exhibiting qualities opposite to Erdoğan’s: He came across as humble, not proud; honest, not prone to secrecy; cool and collected, not angry at the world; democratic, not autocratic; calm, not aggressive; articulate, not tripped up by poor grammar.

Turkey’s Podemos

The label “Kurdish nationalist” does not do justice to the HDP that emerged from the June balloting. In fact, the HDP storm can be likened to the unexpected rise of Podemos (in Spanish, We Can) on the left in the local and regional elections in Spain on May 24. Podemos was hailed as an expression of mounting outrage, during an economic recession, against the outdated order of Spain’s two established parties, the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and the Popular Party, as well as against corruption, inequality and the incompetence of the political class. Parallel to the strategy of the HDP, Podemos represented a new progressive coalition rekindling the leftist spirit that was extinguished within the PSOE when it adhered to EU-imposed austerity measures. Just like the HDP in June, Podemos finished behind the two established parties but ahead of the right-wing Ciudadanos (Citizens) Party, which resembles the Turkish nationalist MHP ideologically.

Another point of convergence for the tales of Podemos and the HDP is that although the two social democratic parties, PSOE in Spain and Republican People’s Party (CHP) in Turkey, got larger pieces of the electoral pie, it was Podemos and the HDP that were perceived as energizers of the leftist political imagination and agents of hope and change. The HDP’s rise to replace the CHP, the main opposition party on the left for the 13 years of AKP rule, confirms that Erdoğan’s undermining of key democratic freedoms cannot be blocked by the CHP’s stale party structure and ideology despite the symbolic corrections of its mandate.

The June elections came at a critical juncture in the peace process the AKP initiated with the Kurds in 2009. It is probably safe to say that Erdoğan’s governments launched this process out of necessity rather than genuine engagement with democratic ideals, which require granting cultural rights to the Kurdish community. The AKP felt it had to address a relentlessly violent and intractable conflict that could damage the image of the new Turkey they were intent on creating. The big question has always been whether the legacy of violence and mistrust could give way to authentic reconciliation. Judging by Erdoğan’s intensified negative rhetoric about the Kurdish movement during the spring campaign, the leader’s commitment to a peace process is cyclical, depending on if, when and how much he needs the votes of the Turkish conservative-nationalist bloc. He denigrated the HDP and the peace process, showing that despite his promises to end the conflict with the Kurds, he still subscribed to the same old one-dimensional logic.
of state security. Small wonder that when the votes were counted the AKP was wiped out in the southeast, the majority-Kurdish region.

The Road to November

Although in June voters did forcefully reject leadership based on a cult of personality, it was hard to imagine Erdoğan abiding by this outcome for his four remaining years as president. When it became clear that the June elections had wrecked Erdoğan’s grand presidential project, he began steering the country toward another round of general elections. Soon the coalition talks with opposition parties ground to a halt, and elections were indeed scheduled for November 1. “We want early elections; we will make you the head” was the chant that echoed in the square where Erdoğan addressed his diehard loyalists in his hometown of Rize on August 12. Two years earlier, he had received 93 percent support from Rize in the presidential race. The chanters captured their favorite son’s fundamental motive. In a TV appearance on September 6, seeing no reason to stay “above politics,” the president blurted out: “If a political party had been able to secure 400 deputies to make a new constitution, the situation would be very different today.”

Indeed, Erdoğan’s pitch for snap elections was predicated on simple math, which told him that the party lost its parliamentary majority due to the defection of some of its conservative-nationalist voters to the hardline nationalist MHP. More importantly, conservative Kurds and the liberal-democrat opposition had voted for the HDP en masse. As the MHP and AKP share more or less the same conservative-nationalist voter base, the government and the AKP leadership (dominated by Erdoğan) has always thought that pursuing peace with the Kurds means losing votes to the far right.

Erdoğan made calculated moves to win back conservative Kurdish and Turkish nationalist votes. The armed forces resumed extensive operations against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) militants, ostensibly because the peace process had become impossible for the state to sustain. Turkish warplanes struck PKK bases in the southeast and in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq, causing massive destruction and fatalities estimated in the hundreds. The PKK retaliated in bloody fashion, killing at least 100 members of the security forces between June 7 and late August. Special security zones were declared in 15 provinces in southeastern Turkey, where nearly 100,000 people were said to have fled their homes to escape the violence.

The reignition of the three-decade conflict was clearly an attempt to link PKK militants, who are branded as terrorists by the US and many European countries, to the HDP. As the tenuous two-year ceasefire and, more importantly, the peace process in the region fell apart, Erdoğan was out to discredit and demonize the HDP, particularly in the eyes of conservative Kurds who had voted for the AKP in the past. He hoped thereby to push the HDP back below the 10 percent threshold needed for parliamentary representation.

The HDP vehemently denies accusations that it favors armed struggle as the way to achieve Kurdish demands. On August 23, Selahattin Demirtaş called for a ceasefire with no “ifs or buts,” to no avail. For those Kurds worried by the renewal of violence, events testified to the chilling reality that although the HDP has some affinity with the PKK, neither actor controls or is controllable by the other.

The “Red Phones” of ISIS and the PKK

The government’s decision to launch an offensive against the PKK was made almost simultaneously with its decision to take a more active role in the fight of the US-led coalition against ISIS. To justify the two-pronged war, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu claimed that the PKK poses a threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity equal to that posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Davutoğlu added that though ISIS and Kurdish militants “seem to be fighting against each other, they went into action together to disrupt Turkey’s peace as if connected by red phones.”

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This assertion needs some fact checking, to say the least. It is common knowledge that the Turkish government dragged its feet when faced with Western demands to stop foreign fighters from crossing Turkey’s borders to join ISIS. Although the government had no real sympathy for ISIS, it was reluctant to act due to fear of ISIS retaliation and its policy that Bashar al-Asad’s regime must be overthrown by any means necessary, including turning a blind eye to jihadi extremism.

And the most compelling reason why Ankara took its time was that it considered ISIS a force that could weaken the PKK. The PKK and its Syrian Kurdish allies were fighting hard—notably in Kobane—to push ISIS away from Turkey’s southern border. When they began to succeed, and to carve out autonomous zones for the Syrian Kurds, the government saw Kurdish nationalist forces becoming stronger rather than weaker. A suicide bombing by ISIS in the Turkish town of Suruç in July finally ended the wait-and-see policy regarding the ISIS-PKK link.

Many feel that the decision to wage war on two fronts was designed to conceal the president’s strategy regarding the November 1 elections: The stand against ISIS was meant to neutralize any Western criticism of scrapping the peace talks with the Kurds and starting an all-out war against the PKK.

At the same time, Erdoğan was pulling strings during the coalition negotiations led by Davutoğlu. It did not take long after June 7 for the CHP, MHP and HDP to find out that they were up against the president’s machinations. Only two weeks after those elections, the president hinted at his impatience: “If egos take priority then the coalition negotiations will be prolonged. If the politicians cannot resolve the issue of forming a government, then, as the president, I will have to take it to the nation.” Erdoğan made this statement knowing that the CHP and HDP were willing to enter into a coalition government with the AKP. Only the MHP rejected negotiations outright, because it is focused singly on the Kurdish issue, and thought it could chip away at AKP support as the conflict escalated.

After the talks collapsed, the president was constitutionally obligated to ask the leader of the runner-up, in this case, the CHP, to start a second round. But Erdoğan handed back to Davutoğlu a mandate to form an interim power-sharing government pending new elections on November 1. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP leader, called it a “civilian coup.”

The president’s efforts to derail the coalition talks confirm the constructed nature of the post-election impasse. In a speech in Rize on August 14, he stunned the public once more by saying that far from accepting the June 7 results as binding, he was as determined as ever to advance the idea of an imperial presidency. “Whether it is accepted or not, Turkey’s system of government has changed”—because the president is now elected by popular vote unlike in the past. “What needs to be done now is to clarify and confirm the legal framework of this de facto situation with a new constitution.”

The Twilight Zone

As the November 1 elections approached, pollsters predicted that the balloting was unlikely to alter the balance of political power created by the June contests. But when the results started to roll in, it became clear that the AKP’s support had spiked from 40.9 percent of the electorate to nearly half, while voters had turned away from both the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP. The MHP’s share of the vote plummeted from 16.5 to 11.9 percent (from 80 deputies to 40), with most of the defectors shifting to the AKP. The HDP barely passed the 10 percent threshold, dipping from 12.7 percent of the vote to 10.7 (from 80 deputies to 59). The CHP was stuck with the same result as in June.

The AKP, meanwhile, increased its number of deputies from 258 to 317. Although still lacking the muscle required to pass a constitutional amendment on its own, the AKP was able to form a majority government.

In a way, the explanation for the reversal of fortune is shockingly simple: President Erdoğan, stung by his party’s loss in June, manipulated the system to produce a victory in November. The fact that he was able to do so points to the main malady of Turkish politics: the absence of strong, independent institutions—notably in the judicial system—that can stand up to unchecked power and antidemocratic practices.

The AKP victory in November raises concerns about whether the elections were free and fair—particularly in view of the clampdown on newspapers and television stations and restrictions on freedom of expression in general. Such concerns were expressed by Ignacio Sánchez Amor, head of the OSCE observer mission. Many felt that the absence of a vibrant media and the unequal distribution of resources among the parties impeded the access of voters to the information they needed to choose between political alternatives. In the southeast, the ongoing army operations threw up additional obstacles, such as curfews, and created security concerns for politicians on the campaign trail.

There is also a debilitating polarization in Turkish politics. It is widely acknowledged that many AKP supporters rally around the party out of existential fear: If the party were to fall short of the majority it needs to form a government, the anti-AKP forces would engage in retribution. The twin elections of 2015 also expose the absence of competent opposition parties capable of moving beyond the safe zone of identity politics to focus on issues, the HDP being a partial exception. Campaigns in Turkey are a crude war of words between party leaders.

But the stunning renaissance of AKP power on November 1 would not have occurred without the stimulus of the dual war with the PKK and ISIS. The president’s electoral strategy was based on the notion that the alternatives facing Turkish voters were an AKP majority government or
PKK and ISIS terrorism. Fears about public safety sidelined concerns that the leader had overstepped his constitutional bounds. The prospect of returning to the 1990s—when incompetent, divided coalition governments seemed overwhelmed by war with the PKK—convinced even the most critical AKP voters to overlook Erdoğan’s obvious disregard for democratic practices. Then came the shock of two massive suicide attacks mounted by ISIS at a pro-Kurdish peace rally in Ankara 20 days before the elections, taking 102 lives. The CHP and MHP accused Erdoğan of security lapses, while HDP leader Demirtaş suggested that the Ankara bombing was the work of a conspiratorial “deep state” serving the president’s interests. He connected it to July’s deadly attack in Suruç, a mainly Kurdish town on the Syrian border, which killed 33 Kurdish activists. “The state is a serial killer,” Demirtaş charged. Nonetheless, the Ankara atrocities probably secured the elections in favor of the AKP and Erdoğan.

What of the HDP’s hemorrhage of about 1 million votes in November, the biggest losses coming in the provinces where it had made the strongest gains in June? There seems to be consensus among critics that “some Kurds who voted for the HDP on June 7 moved to supporting the AKP on November 1.” Despite the HDP’s efforts to dissociate itself from PKK violence, the PKK’s escalation over the summer seems to have served Erdoğan’s purpose of labeling the HDP as controlled by ruthless militiants. It is worth noting that on the day of the Ankara bombings, the PKK pledged to suspend all the offensives it had launched since mid-July. The move was viewed as designed to boost the electoral chances of the HDP. It is clear, however, that even before the Ankara bombings, the PKK’s killings of civilian security forces had already done irreversible damage to the peace-loving, cheery image that the HDP had carefully cultivated. But the PKK ceasefire proved too little, too late.

A related view is that “the HDP was made to pay for the problems” caused by the PKK’s youth wing in predominantly Kurdish cities, where the youths disrupted business by digging ditches and erecting barricades to prevent security forces from entering their neighborhoods. According to one shopkeeper, “At least half of the vote loss in Diyarbakır was because of those ditches. People suffered, lost much financially because of them. They blamed the HDP for their losses and penalized it by not voting for it.”

The HDP embodies the new “civilian version” of the rebel spirit that historically has animated the Kurdish movement. Whatever the root causes of the HDP’s election day disaster, the question is whether the party will continue to move toward being a “Turkified,” multi-issue party when the head of the Turkish state seems uninterested in reviving the peace process. More serious than the HDP’s electoral fortunes is its own existential question: Can the party carry out an effective pro-Kurdish policy independent of the PKK, which seems to be unhappy about the HDP’s new global image? The answer will emerge amidst the dilemma facing the Turkish government, which now has to sustain its balancing act of siding with the US-led anti-ISIS coalition while fighting the PKK and its Syrian brethren—the key partners of the anti-ISIS alliance on the ground.

**A New Catalyst?**

There is a sense in Turkey that, in the big picture, the November elections were the AKP’s last hurrah. For one thing, there are huge leadership problems: Prime Minister Davutoğlu is overshadowed by the president, and the premier’s quiet struggle to chart his own path ensures that he will not have free rein to blaze a new trail for Turkey. Though Davutoğlu is seen as more moderate and thoughtful than the president, his future is far from certain. The outcome in November also made it next to impossible for party elders who dislike Erdoğan’s heavy-handed style to reel him in. No party figure since Bülent Arınç has risked defying the leader for fear of destroying his or her career. Thus, rather than confining himself to his constitutional role, there is every reason to think that Erdoğan is reheating the project of an executive presidency. In a crisis-ridden region, it seems more than likely that the president’s restrictive policies at home will be linked to his search for a more assertive role abroad. But the shift in focus to foreign policy spotlights the weakening hold of the party on the popular imagination. Once a symbol of hope and democratic reform, the AKP has turned into a party with no vision or substantive ideas. Its November victory cannot disguise the larger truth that it has lost its position at the center of the political spectrum. That is why, in contrast to the aftermath of the June 7 elections, there is not much palpable excitement in the country about the November outcome—even among AKP loyalists.

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**Endnotes**

1 For a comprehensive critique of representative democracy, see Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).


3 *Hurriyet*, August 20, 2015. [Turkish]

4 *Milliyet*, June 21, 2015. [Turkish]


7 Yahoo News, November 2, 2015.


9 *Express Tribune* (Pakistan), October 25, 2015.


Two stories, two dreams: one realized, the other dashed. A boy born to a fragmented, impoverished refugee family living under harsh military rule is mesmerized by the sound of a violin and vows not only to master the instrument but also to start a school to share its liberating beauty with others. And he does it.

An occupied people beaten down by conquest and subjugation finds its voice and asserts itself in a largely non-violent popular revolt that touches the imaginations of people around the world and generates hope that a just peace may be within reach—only to find itself utterly stymied and, in many respects, worse off than before it rose up.

*Children of the Stone* tells these interlocking tales in a page-turning narrative that brings both alive in all their wrenching and often confounding and heartbreaking complexity. You know much of this story and how it ends, but you read it as if for the first time. That is its power.

Neither story is simple. Ramzi Hussein Aburedwan is a hero who is often not heroic—at times driven to the point of obsession and exasperatingly insensitive to those who join him in his impossible dream—but his (and their) achievement is nonetheless impressive. Which makes the grinding setbacks and defeats of the Palestinian national movement in these years all the more poignant, as we witness the relentless strangling of another dream—two states for two free and independent peoples—despite the heroic efforts of thousands in the Occupied Territories, within Israel and around the world.

But neither seemingly disparate story ends any more simply than it began. This book is not a novel, after all, even if it reads like one. Nor are they at all separate arcs, as is clear from the alternating narratives. The unifying theme is resilience in the face of loss.

**Ramzi’s Dream**

We first meet 6-year old Ramzi in the summer of 1985 at his paternal grandfather’s home in the al-Am’ari camp, outside Ramallah. He has been dumped there, along with his brother Mohammad, who was uprooted with his family and driven into exile in the 1948 war, soldiers on with a dignity and determination that provide both an alternative role model and a lifeline, which the boy, bright-eyed and willful despite the turbulence around him, seizes upon.

At dawn one morning he sneaks out of the house and follows Sido to work hauling garbage, cleaning sidewalks and scavenging for recyclables. Before long Ramzi is a regular on the route; a hard worker from the start, he is rewarded by Sido’s discovery of an abandoned teddy bear that plays Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” when he pulls a plastic string. The music provides solace as Ramzi listens to it over and over again before falling asleep.

As he grows up, music is a frequent companion. Evenings are often spent listening to recordings of Umm Kulthum’s haunting contralto on the family radio. But it is his first-grade teacher’s impromptu performance on the violin in 1986—the first live performance he has ever seen—that he later says changed his life and placed music forever at its center. His dream is not only to make music himself but also to build a school to teach it to others so they, too, can experience its transporting power.

**The Palestinian Dream**

Meanwhile, by the late 1980s, the prospects for Palestinians under Israeli occupation have never been so bleak. Their economy is in deep decline, and they have no control over it or much else in their lives. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is in disarray, the Arab regimes are preoccupied with the Iran-Iraq war, and the broader international community is either indifferent to the Palestinian plight or paralyzed. With no other options, the people take matters in their own hands.

On December 8, 1987, after an Israeli truck smashes into two cars full of Palestinian migrant workers at the entrance to Gaza, killing four, angry Gazans gather to protest what they take to be a deliberate act of murder. The next day rioting breaks out. Israeli soldiers fire live ammunition at fleeing children in the Jabalya refugee camp, killing one. This shooting lights the powder keg. Protests quickly spread to the West Bank. Over the next several days they grow. It remains only for a political leadership to emerge to channel the spontaneous protests into what becomes a sustained revolt.

In January the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising, a coordinating body that included all the major factions, issues its first directive, a milestone in itself. For the next two years, it provides a dynamic local leadership to the resistance, which functions as a coherent national movement for perhaps the first and only time in Palestinian history. They issue leaflets twice a month that provide both a political overview and instructions for action. They call strikes, promote boycotts, organize tax resistance and urge other forms of civil disobedience. They also mediate conflicts within the society—urging landlords and merchants to hold down rents and prices, for example, or exempting certain factories from the strikes to keep people employed in shaky industries.

Popular committees spring up to organize community responses to the uprising and address local needs. The first ones are spontaneous, set up to organize the storage and distribution

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of food in communities under curfew. Soon they take on other tasks, such as organizing guard duty, health care and small-scale self-help projects, cleaning the streets and arranging visits to hospitalized or incarcerated residents. Many collect funds to support projects and care for the families whose members were wounded or arrested. Community-based mediation and judicial committees settle disputes and enforce punishment of local lawbreakers. Together, these institutions become alternative administrations, even taking on the organization of clandestine education when the Israelis close all the schools. In doing so, many say they are laying the groundwork for a democratic Palestinian state.

But the Israelis are not the only ones appalled at this prospect. The absent PLO leadership is, if anything, more anxious. The Israeli response is brutal, as if the intifada’s largely non-violent character is itself an affront. This revolt, after all, began with kids taking to the streets to confront the Israeli army with nothing but stones and the singular audacity of youth. Ramzi is one of them, and he becomes a local hero when he is photographed in early 1988 hurling a hunk of curbstone. Before he knows it—and without intending it—he becomes “a potent symbol of his people’s national uprising.”

Over the coming months, hundreds are arrested. Most endure vicious beatings and torture, often in the vehicles used to cart them away, and their scars become badges of honor. When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin calls for “force, might, beatings,” the international community is treated to the sight of heavily armed Israeli combat troops wielding wooden 2x4s to break the arms and legs of youths whose “crime” is often little more than taunting their adversaries, as resistance continues to build.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian national movement remains deeply divided, not only among competing factions but increasingly between officials sitting outside the Territories and the people resisting inside. Almost from the beginning, the external leaderships of Fatah and the Popular and Democratic Fronts struggle to head off the formation of new, popular power centers that threaten to sideline them. Then Jordan’s move to sever its administrative responsibility for the West Bank gives them an unexpected opportunity.

PLO leaders quickly declare Palestinian independence and proclaim Yasser Arafat president of the new state. They also vote to accept all UN resolutions on the conflict, renounce all forms of terrorism (required by the United States for a dialogue with the PLO) and, for the first time, go on record in support of a “two-state solution.” In doing so, they establish Arafat as the only interlocutor for Israeli negotiators. Next, they move to harness the uprising to their diplomatic agenda in what amounts to a coup from above. As one close observer puts it, “The PLO in Tunis successfully captured power in the West Bank and Gaza not because it led the revolution but because it promised to end it.”
And they did. The 1993 Oslo accords are the result—an agreement that raises hopes across the political spectrum but so lacks substance, in terms of final outcomes, that it is easily stalled and then derailed by its opponents over the decade that follows. That trajectory is at the heart of this book.

The Dreams Diverge

Two years after the accords are signed, Ramzi gets the break that will change his life unalterably: He is chosen for viola lessons with violinist Mohammed Fadel, an exile who returned to help build a new National Conservatory of Music, part of what the founders hope will be a “cultural renaissance of an independent Palestinian state.” Ramzi’s awakening to both the beauty and complexity of classical music is a story within a story that takes the reader—this reader, anyway—into a world only dimly apprehended before.

Tolan’s evident excitement at this journey is contagious. We witness the blossoming of an artist out of the most unlikely circumstances and are drawn into the experience alongside him. By 1997 he is attending a summer music school in New Hampshire with young musicians from around the world, including Israel. A year later he is enrolled at the Conservatoire d’Angers in France where he relearns the basics from a master who starts by showing him how to stand, how to breathe, how to hold his bow, how to move his fingers and how to stay still while he plays. Over the next two years, his improvement is steady. If only that was the case back home in Palestine.

At this point the two arcs diverge, as hope triumphs for one strong-willed and single-minded boy while it fades to black for a people no less determined but frustrated at every turn by both their occupiers and their political representatives. In 2000, seven years after Oslo, all semblance of a “peace process” breaks down and the second intifada erupts with a fury drawn as much from dashed expectations as from the suffocating experience of continued occupation, which has gotten more and more constricting with each year. By June 2002, when Ramzi comes back to Ramallah, the intifada has descended into low-level war.

For the rest of the book—more than half—we travel with Ramzi on his quixotic but remarkably successful effort to create music schools where he can share his gift with his community, spreading it as far as refugee camps in Lebanon. We also watch the accelerating erosion of not just the dream but also the viability of a “two-state solution,” as the West Bank is colonized by new settlers whose expanding communities are linked by a web of bypass roads that carve up what is left of the 22 percent of historic Palestine the Israelis captured in 1967—Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem—and reduces it to a disconnected patchwork of enclaves that resemble the bantustans of apartheid-era South Africa.

I confess that I started this book still clinging to the hope that two interdependent but distinct states could emerge from this conflict, perhaps due to just how far-fetched the prospect of a unified state for Jews and Palestinians living as equals seemed. But I finished fairly sure that the door to two states has been closed and that one state of equals is the only option left—assuming wholesale expulsion or permanent apartheid are off the table.

Tolan’s particular gift to his readers is his juxtaposition of the realization of Ramzi’s impossible dream with the setbacks and defeats of the Palestinian people. You just never get to a place where you throw up your hands and say, “All is lost,” because he keeps surprising us with Ramzi’s ability to rebound from catastrophe. In this respect, Ramzi’s story is both parable and possibility.

There are some ironies in the fact that ISIS, with its avowed contempt for borders and its expansionist ambition, is pursuing what in many respects is a conventional state-building project. First, ISIS could only have emerged in its current form in places where the writ of the existing state had eroded. Indeed, in Iraq and Syria ISIS has spread into the vacuum left not by one unitary state but by two imploding states—the first of which is enervated by three decades of war, economic isolation, destruction of infrastructure, brain drain and partisan fiefdoms and the second of which is in the throes of catastrophic civil strife. Much is made of the artificiality of the state in the Fertile Crescent, due in part to the colonial pedigree of the borders and in part to the ethnic and religious diversity of the countries those boundaries delineate. Western commentators say, and ISIS might agree, that the jihadis’ conquests are proof that the Iraq and Syria of the twentieth century were never destined to last or even that that today’s front
lines are somehow more natural borders than those etched before. As we wrote after the US invasion of Iraq, when pie-eyed plans for “three-state solutions” were floating around Washington, to say that the Middle Eastern state is artificial is a canard. No state’s borders are natural—all were manmade at some point in the past and many were marked on parchment by war and displacement. If, in Iraq and Syria, plural communities were poured into the mold of states, those states have proven much more durable than expected. Today the fact that ISIS is ensconced in a territorial seat is backhanded testimony to the resiliency of “stateness” in the region.

The rise of ISIS has also jumbled the calculus of jihadi groups around the world. With its call for a transnational caliphate, ISIS poses a direct threat to al-Qaeda’s preeminence among the jihadis with such ambitions. It has forced various al-Qaeda franchises to choose sides. Other jihadi groups have experimented with governance, sometimes toeing a less draconian line with the locals in order to draw a contrast with ISIS, as has happened with the al-Qaeda branch in Mukalla, Yemen. A major challenge for transnational jihadi groups over the past quarter-century has been to strike the right balance between global and local agendas, with the former seen as “more radical.” ISIS upends this dynamic by showing that strong local roots can lead to more effectiveness but do not necessarily inhibit other demonstrations of “radicalism,” such as displays of brutality or visions of globe-spanning glory.

Lastly, for all the impassioned speeches equating ISIS with evil, its state-building project could not exist if its most powerful neighbors were not willing to tolerate it, at least for the time being. The Syrian army, Hezbollah and Iranian troops have stalled ISIS offensives in several spots; other Islamist militias in the Syrian opposition have wrestled with ISIS over towns and villages. But in Syria the group’s most effective adversaries are the Kurds, who rebuffed the ISIS assault on Kobane and retook other areas along the Turkish border. Russian and Syrian bombing is directed mostly at other rebels whose bases are closer to Damascus and other districts that are sensitive to the regime. Turkey, despite declaring war on ISIS over the summer, has dispatched most of its warplanes to hit the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), who have waged armed struggle on behalf of Turkey’s Kurds for decades and who Turkey worries have been empowered by the Syrian Kurdish achievements. US, French and allied airstrikes are thus far more punitive than strategic. Even for Jabhat al-Nusra, the jihadis in Syria linked to al-Qaeda, ISIS is a problem, but the regime is the bigger problem. In Iraq, the Kurds, Shi’i militias and some combination of Iraqi and Iranian soldiers, often with US air support, have made more progress in reducing the size of ISIS territory, retaking Tikrit and possibly soon Ramadi, but ISIS is elsewhere firmly entrenched. ISIS is benefiting from being everyone’s number two enemy but no one’s number one.

More to the point, the enormous regional conflagration into which ISIS was born continues to burn. The civil war in Syria is now a proxy war, further complicating the task of reaching a ceasefire, let alone a lasting peace. None of the succession of Iraqi governments after the demise of Saddam Hussein has seriously pursued national reconciliation—to the contrary, to one extent or another, all have sought centralized power as the spoils of victory. Both the Syrian and the Iraqi conflicts are rooted in the persistence of authoritarian rule, despite attempted revolution or regime change, and the breakdown of the old social contract by which the state supplied a modicum of social and physical security in exchange for the citizens’ surrender of most civil and political rights. That bargain has been bankrupt for decades now, but little has taken its place besides venality and neglect in the guise of neoliberal nostrums.

The scale of the predicament recalls the famous words of Antonio Gramsci: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: Now is the time of monsters.” The ISIS phenomenon is ultimately one monster among many, a particularly lurid manifestation of the structural problems of the region—the frustration of participatory politics, the fixation upon state security at the expense of freedoms, the stubborn growth of inequality amidst great wealth, the lack of investment in education and other public goods, all in the shadow of outside interference and, now, imminent destruction.

All of which returns us to the question of how ISIS is being discussed in the West, particularly in the United States. It was predictable, but dispiriting that the Paris attacks elicited a bellicose reaction from American politicians across the board. The chest-thumping rhetoric drowns out any circumspection about how ISIS came to be in the first place and, more importantly, any evaluation of how disastrously counterproductive the various iterations of the “war on terror” have turned out to be. It reveals the limits of President Barack Obama’s supposed downsizing of the US footprint in the Middle East—what critics from Henry Kissinger to the House of Saud call a “retreat.” Only by comparison to the overweening adventurism of the first

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**ISIS is everyone’s number two enemy but no one’s number one.**
George W. Bush administration do Obama's interventions look small-bore. The dramatic increase in the drone strikes suffices as an example. In the bigger picture, Obama could have used the post-Bush malaise to talk honestly to the American people about the contradictions of US grand strategy in the Middle East, the imperatives that, for instance, push Washington to safeguard a “special relationship” with the same Saudi Arabia that has long funded the dispersion of arid versions of Islam adapted by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and, now, ISIS. The rollout of the nuclear deal with Iran was another opportunity for such frankness. But Obama has never disputed the fundamentals of the US approach, either to grand strategy or terrorism, and so it is no surprise that the post-Paris conversation focuses on military force, surveillance and suspension of civil liberties, just like in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 hijackings. The curdled prejudices against Islam and Muslims are another sobering feature of the political landscape.

To his credit, Obama has spoken out against the wave of xenophobia that crashed over America in November. Spurred by the false clue of the Syrian passport, Republican presidential candidates called for a “pause” in the nation’s already stingy program for admitting Syrian refugees (Jeb Bush made an exception for Christians) and Republican governors blustered that no Syrian refugee would cross their state line. On November 18, to their deep shame, 47 Democrats joined 242 Republicans in the House of Representatives to pass a bill that would require the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence to vouch for each and every refugee. (Vetting of Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers already takes 18–24 months.) The bill may die in the Senate, and Obama has promised a veto, but the message is plain: The very people fleeing ISIS are to be blamed for ISIS’ crimes. Where it holds sway, ISIS is the ultimate anti-pluralist actor. Where it is only a specter, it gets invoked against pluralism, too.

Whatever it is, whether its domain is expanding or contracting, and whatever it intends with its atrocities, ISIS has thrown into sharp relief the multiple dilemmas that beset the Middle East, the West and the tangled relationship between the two. It has done all it can to guarantee that the powerful will try to vanquish it by resorting to the same arsenal that has blown up in the world’s face. In this time of monsters, as in the fall of 2001, the weapons of the weaker are knowledge of history, empathy and common sense. There is no option but to use them.
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