

ISIS: Sectarianism, Geopolitics and Strong/Weak Horses

Written by Simon Mabon

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SIMON MABON, APR 10 2015

The Renaissance of the Foreign Fighter

On the 21st March 2015, it was reported that 9 British medical students who had been studying in Sudan travelled to Syria to work in hospitals in ISIS controlled areas. On the 2nd of April, they were followed by a further 9 (3 men, 2 women and 4 children), although this group was detained on the Turkish border. Both groups followed in the footsteps of a number of Britons who had travelled to Syria, some to fight for ISIS, but others to take part in the fight against the group. Scholars and practitioners have begun to refer to those who travel to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters, drawing parallels with those who travelled to Afghanistan to fight against Soviet forces in the 1980s.

The number of people travelling to Syria has “risen sharply from a few thousand [...] a decade ago to more than 25,000 today”. Much like Afghanistan in the 1980s, Syria and Iraq appear to be international finishing schools for extremists. While the majority of the people fighting in Syria and Iraq are from those states, there is an increasingly large number of people who are travelling to the area from across the world to fight. It is difficult to correctly identify the number of different nationalities fighting in Syria, although a recent UN report suggested that more than 25,000 people from 100 different nations were involved in the fighting. Of this number, a large percentage are from neighbouring Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, many of whom feel a sense of loyalty to their co-religious kin and find the radical interpretation of Islam appealing.

Foreign fighters from Europe have a number of reasons for leaving their homes and families, ranging from a perceived humanitarian obligation to a loss of identity within their host states. Of those travelling from Europe to join ISIS, Shiraz Maher, a research associate at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, identifies two main types of people that travel to Turkey before crossing into Syria. The first are those with known connections to radical organisations while the second group are those without those connections, but who come from conservative families. Yet despite the prominence given to this issue, clearly not all Muslims from conservative families travel to Syria to join ISIS; actually, the number is incredibly small when put into this context. But still, questions remain as to what motivates an individual to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight. This article suggests that there are two prominent reasons for this: the first is borne out of concerns; the second stems from an insecurity of identity within the West coupled with the perception that the radical interpretation of Islam propagated by ISIS provides a degree of certainty and security for their identities.

The Emergence of ISIS

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS), or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or in Arabic, *daesh* (al Daw, a al Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham) was brought about by the fragmentation of Iraq and Syria. Tracing the roots of the fragmentation of Iraq back to the US led invasion of 2003 and the dismantling of the Ba'ath party infrastructure, the sovereignty of the Iraqi state was eroded, with authority and power becoming increasingly decentralised (Dodge, 2013). Similar events took place in Syria with the outbreak of civil war after the Arab Uprisings. The failure of both Damascus and Baghdad to protect citizens, along with the cultivation of sectarian identities to ensure regime survival meant that a process of othering took place. The concept of “othering” has long been at the heart of political philosophy, with scholars such as Said (1978) and Bauman (1991) amongst many others discussing the concept. In essence, the idea of “othering” suggests that the self is constructed against an

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“other,” who possesses characteristics that are the binary opposite of the self. In referring to the “other,” a regime is able to strengthen relations across the in-group in the face of an other who was increasingly framed as an enemy. In light of this, in order to ensure that basic needs were met, individuals turned to other actors to provide security.

Born out of the ashes of Al Qa’ida in Iraq and facilitated by the American prison, Camp Bucca, ISIS brought together a group of former members and supporters of AQI under the leadership of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. The camp allowed a network of fighters and ideologues to be created that was then mobilised when the prisoners were released.

Geopolitics, Sectarianism and Catastrophe

Within the context of an increasing geopolitical conflict that harnessed sectarian identities (see also: Mabon, 2013), ISIS flourished. The fragmentation of Syria and Iraq and the redrawing of institutions and societies along increasingly sectarian lines meant that large numbers of people were excluded from political systems and began to fear for their survival. With the denial of basic needs and exclusionary politics along sectarian lines, the humanitarian situation across both states was deteriorating.

ISIS gained support on the ground from people who lacked protection from – or feared persecution by – the state. The worsening humanitarian crisis was also a catalyst for individuals to travel to Syria and Iraq, horrified by what they were seeing and the stories that they were hearing.

It is estimated that 9 million people have been displaced from their homes as a consequence of fighting in Syria. Of this number, 3 million have fled Syria while a further 6 million have been internally displaced. Some 200,000 are estimated to have died since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and while in recent months it is the violence committed by ISIS that has received much attention, killings carried out by those sympathetic to Assad have not stopped. Rather, forces loyal to Assad are responsible for a large percentage of recent deaths in Syria.

In Iraq, it is estimated that 2 million people have been internally displaced from the north and sectarian driven violence that escalated in the mid 2000s continues to shape the conflict. Of course, sectarian divisions need not necessarily be violent, but when politically co-opted and manipulated, this is often the case (see Mabon, 2013 and Haddad, 2011). Furthermore, when the fighting is increasingly undertaken by sectarian militias, this becomes a self-perpetuating truth. Under the rule of Nouri al Maliki, we can see how Iraqi politics became increasingly sectarian and was shaped by both membership of a group and fear of the other. After decades of discrimination, Shi’a actors, led by al Maliki, sought to secure their position within the state. Ultimately though, this was at the expense of Sunni tribal groups who had historically occupied positions of power in Iraq. Thus, while not explicitly driven by religious difference, the political manifestation of sectarian identities resulted in escalating violence.

Iraqi militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haqq that were established in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion are now leading the fight against ISIS. The vociferously anti-Shi’a rhetoric employed by ISIS means that the severity of the threat posed by the group to Shi’a Muslims is undeniable. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the leading Shi’a cleric in Najaf, issued a *fatwa* that called on Iraqi citizens to “defend the country, its people, the honour of its citizens, and its sacred places.” This *fatwa* could also have a galvanising impact on Shi’a Muslims globally. As such, people travelling to Syria and Iraq are not only journeying to join ISIS. Similar humanitarian arguments are being made to justify going to engage in medical activities, to join Shi’a militias or to fight with the Kurds. The worse the situation gets, the more people will feel compelled to act. Clearly though, humanitarian concerns are not the only motivating factor.

Strong Horses and Weak Horses

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden suggested that when faced with a choice between a strong horse and a weak horse, people will ultimately choose the strong horse. While Al Qa’ida sought to position itself as the strong horse, it failed to adequately demonstrate its strength over time. In the past year, ISIS has sought to do just this, with the declaration of a caliphate a key part of this strategy.

A genealogical exploration of ISIS’ ideology shows that it is shaped by a fundamentalist reading of the Quran and

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that it shares similarities with the Wahhabist doctrine of Saudi Arabia and the Salafism of Al Qa'ida.

This fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran, or Prophetic methodology – literally, following the behaviour and example of the prophet – is one of the reasons why so many foreign fighters seek to join ISIS rather than other Syrian opposition groups.

Within the confines of liquid modernity as Baumann (2000) suggests, the fluidity and uncertainty of human life means that identity and human experience is rootless. As my colleague Matthew Johnson (forthcoming) argues in an article for Foreign Affairs, many in the UK from a range of backgrounds are struggling to find space for their identity. This uncertainty, rootlessness and struggle for identity is important in understanding why individuals find appeal in ISIS' message.

As Richard Barrett notes, many believe foreign fighters to be “disaffected, aimless and lacking a sense of identity or belonging. This appears to be common across most nationalities and it fits with the high number of converts, presumably people who are seeking a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives”. Facing a struggle to find a sense of belonging, or a security of identity amidst the chaos of modernity, the certainty of ISIS is appealing. Moreover, as Graham Wood argued in a piece entitled *What ISIS really wants* the message emerging from group ideologues rejects the weakness of modernity, offering something much stronger in its place.

The ideological message propagated by ISIS is one of certainty. Understanding this certainty helps us to understand the appeal of the group to Muslims in the West who feel insecure about their identity in light of the crisis of modernity and increased discrimination. Fundamentalist ideologies provide certainty in the chaos of modernity and ISIS' vision is no different. The millennial belief that ISIS will defeat the army of Rome at Dabiq (whose name was adorns the English propaganda magazine) and initiate the countdown to the apocalypse only furthers this certainty.

These ideas feed into two basic psychological needs, identified previously on this website by Arie Kruglanski, who suggested that the need for cognitive closure and personal significance can shape an individual's behaviour. The quest for closure relates neatly to this idea of certainty, a rejection of ambiguity and uncertainty – found within the crisis of modernity – and ultimately, residing in the strong horse.

The strength of the ISIS message supports this notion of certainty. While organisations such as Al Qa'ida and AQAP have historically used strong rhetoric in their messages, this was seen by many to be just words, with deeds often lacking. Yet for ISIS, their message of strength is comprised of both word and deed. The brutal violence used by the group seeks to demonstrate this and the carefully constructed images contained within the videos only serves to stress a message of certainty.

As Hassan Hassan notes, there is a clear logic in the strategy employed by ISIS. Rather than justifying action through individual *fatwas*, the group has created an all-encompassing ideology, grounded in early Islamic history, fusing word and deed. For Hassan,

Savagery is at the core of Isis ideology. But it is crucial not to play down that brutal acts have to be justified through sharia texts. Islamic fundamentalism is Isis's ideology, so to speak, and every act has to be grounded in religious traditions.

This is supported by Jason Burke who argues that ISIS is following a strategy of terror, polarise and mobilise, with symbolic executions a means of achieving it.

Clearly though, different people find meaning in different aspects of the ISIS message, with meaning contingent upon both endogenous and exogenous factors. The internet has provided fertile ground for spreading different messages that serve to recruit different cohorts to the ISIS cause. Sara Khan, head of the counter-extremism charity *Inspire*, argues that the media arm of ISIS, Al Zawra, targets women and children. It “romanticises the notion of the jihadi fighter seeking the ultimate goal of martyrdom, and sells the role of a wife to a martyr as the next best thing.” She suggests that we should view this as “grooming, a child safety issue [...] These are normal teenage girls

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who should be in school, with their families, and have sacrificed everything to run off and join this crazed group.” Clearly, the appeal to young girls is different to that of men and responding to the different messages and appeals is increasingly difficult.

The Returning Fighter?

Increasingly, the security services are concerned about those fighters who return. In July 2013 Charles Farr, Director of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism suggested that Syria was a profound game changer, significance of which is still emerging. A little over a year later, Farr warned that blowback from events in Syria will pose the biggest threat to the UK since 9/11.

More recently, Andrew Zammit identified at least 11 attacks that were linked to people fighting in Syria, although as Maher notes, the number of people who want to return from Syria is low, even within the context of fighters returning to the homeland after engaging in similar conflicts. Thus, Teresa May’s threats to strip the nationality from anyone who goes to fight in Syria would appear to have limited use and raise a number of questions: Should distinctions be made between those who go to fight with ISIS and those who go to fight against ISIS? What about the difference between men who travel to fight for ISIS and women who go to marry members of ISIS but don’t take part in the fighting directly? Distinctions must also be made between those who go to fight with ISIS and those who go ostensibly for humanitarian reasons.

One size fits all?

There are many reasons, both endogenous and exogenous as to why people would travel to fight in Syria and Iraq. Creating a one size fits all policy to respond to ISIS is problematic. Theoretical *fatwas* condemning the actions of Al Baghdadi and ISIS have fallen – and will continue to fall – on deaf ears. Hassan’s argument that the strength of ISIS is its ability to tell a story through words and actions means that just rejecting the theological basis of the group isn’t enough. Ultimately though, we are all responsible for making sure that the right stories are told – and heard – to ensure a sense of belonging and to demonstrate that the “weak horse” is much stronger than initially thought.

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