

Looking back at history: Isis and the management of savagery

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Two histories of Isis hope to shed light on the crisis in the Middle East.

For a group that only officially entered the Syrian conflict in 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Isis) can sometimes appear to have been around for much longer than it has. Indeed, so dramatic has its rise been that the group is now the synecdoche by which the entire opposition is known, and although accounts of its meteoric rise are plentiful, not all are strictly accurate.

One of the challenges of history is knowing where to begin. Conventional wisdom traces the origins of Isis to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi led the local chapter of al-Qaeda, known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). This is as good a starting place as any, even if the perfectly linear, teleological progression from Iraq 2003 to the Syrian uprising can sometimes feel like an object lesson in Whig history.

It is certainly the case that when the United States first invaded Iraq in 2003 AQI led a ferocious campaign of resistance against the Western coalition. By 2006 it was working in a broader movement called the Mujahedin Shura Council (*shura* meaning “consultation”), which brought together several of the most prominent Sunni groups to wage a unified insurgency. It was an important moment.

This coalescence of disparate groups – influenced to varying degrees by Islamic utopianism (and related ideas of jihad and the caliphate), Arab nationalism and Ba’athism – was underwritten principally by their sectarian identity. The triumph of these affiliations over a civic identity and, more broadly, over state institutions and the rule of law, is one of the central points in Fawaz Gerges’s *Isis: a History*, which offers a short overview of the movement as a whole.

One of the most important passages in Gerges’s work considers the interplay between the Ba’athists and jihadists. Many believe that their co-operation stems from the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, when disenfranchised Iraqi officials began collaborating with jihadists in a revanchist Sunni campaign. This line of thinking argues that their plan was to restore Sunni dominance in Iraq and simultaneously strike a blow against the United States, though Gerges rightly argues that such a view represents “the generalisation and simplification of a complex phenomenon”.

Gerges reaches further back to show how Saddam started cultivating links with Iraqi Salafis – Salafism being arguably the most literalist and strictured version of Islam – after invading Kuwait in 1990. His subsequent “Faith Campaign” was ostensibly aimed at conservative Sunnis, in order to pacify them after his humiliating defeat in Kuwait and the UN sanctions that followed. This strategy provided a useful counterweight to increasing restlessness among Iraqi Shias and Kurds, at the same time steeling them for the privations that accompanied sanctions. “Long before the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, a marked shift to communal identity occurred,” Gerges writes, “in a

country weighed down by war, social turmoil and economic sanctions.”

As the author closes his examination of the Ba’athist-jihadi nexus, he offers an interesting way of viewing the dynamics of this unholy relationship. Far from having Ba’athists in the driving seat, Gerges argues that it is in fact the jihadists who have pragmatically used their former adversaries from the Saddam era, first by accommodating them – and then by confronting them.

To understand the appeal of this approach for Isis, consider that the Islamists needed the Ba’athists to teach them organisation and administration: the hallmarks of totalitarianisms across history. The injection of Ba’athist discipline helped them transform an otherwise unremarkable network of irregular fighters into a formidable movement that has achieved both coherence within its own ranks and a high degree of social control over the areas it governs.

Out of the alphabet soup of groups in the Syrian civil war – from secular democrats to millenarian mullahs – it was the ability of Isis to professionalise itself that most distinguished it from the others. This conclusion is reinforced by my own fieldwork in the region, where Isis fighters have attested to the enveloping nature of the organisation. The disciplined professionalism instilled in recruits has helped drive the group’s staggering success, particularly contrasted with the patchy achievements of other rebel factions.

In this regard, Gerges suggests that Isis viewed its relationship with the Ba’athists as only temporary. Once it had what was needed, the alliance unravelled. “Within three weeks of taking over Mosul in June 2014,” he writes, “Isis began arresting senior ex-military officers and members of the Ba’ath Party . . . the honeymoon period between the Ba’athists and Isis’s Salafi-jihadists was short-lived.”

Isis: a History notably introduces a range of issues and ideas to non-specialist readers. Its strength stems from the sheer breadth of the survey offered by Gerges. Aiming at a popular audience, he tackles questions that do not usually receive significant treatment beyond the academy. For instance, he briefly examines three of the core doctrinal and ideological texts that have influenced Islamic State’s approach towards warfare and its embrace of ultra-violence.

Of these three texts, the best known is called *The Management of Savagery*. It presents the Isis world-view, provides a rationale for how the movement behaves today and also explains, among other things, the group’s desire to hold territory and its highly considered use of extreme violence as an asymmetrical tactic of warmaking. This subject has already been examined in depth in a superb book by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *Isis: Inside the Army of Terror*. But Gerges also brings out the lesser-known Introduction to the *Jurisprudence of Jihad* and *The Essentials of Making Ready* (meaning “ready for jihad”). These texts also play an important role within Isis, helping further rationalise what can seem like senseless and gratuitous violence and presenting it as an esoteric form of jurisprudence within the constellation of Salafi-jihadi thought: the form known as *fiqh al-damaa*, or the jurisprudence of blood.

I wish there was more of this in the book, but the main driver of the narrative is Gerges’s belief that “Isis would not have done as well as it has if it were not for the breakdown of state institutions in Syria and Iraq and rising sectarianism”. As a result, he attributes the current crisis to “decades of dictatorship, failed governance and development, and abject poverty, made worse by ongoing foreign intervention and the Palestinian tragedy”.

These are contentious matters, which do help account, to varying degrees, for the rise of Isis. There is also a sense, however, that such developments have somehow been foisted on Levantine politics by outsiders, or that they exist as accidental by-products of historical events. It would have been

encouraging to see more responsibility ascribed to Arab regimes for having deliberately cultivated such disastrous and divisive approaches as tools of social control over their own people.

Moreover, those same regimes have long-standing ties to jihadist groups, which they have used strategically against regional rivals. Bashar al-Assad, the beleaguered Syrian president, understood this very well when his own Ba'athist government created semi-clandestine routes that allowed jihadists to move unhindered from his country into Iraq. In so doing, his aim was simple: to undermine the Western coalition in the Syrian war zone by fanning the insurgency. That Assad and his peers are now suffering a degree of "blowback", partly from their own policies, deserves recognition.

Where Gerges understandably focuses on the immediate crisis in Syria and Iraq, Joby Warrick trains his lens on the Jordanian dimension in his gripping account *Black Flags: the Rise of Isis*, first published in 2015 and now out in paperback. Coming from a journalistic background, he tries to unravel the tangle of issues engulfing the Levant in a zippy, atmospheric and character-led narrative. Warrick is well placed to tell this story – with strong contacts in Jordanian intelligence circles, he is able to piece together important and little-known facts about some of the main players who have assisted the rise of Isis.

In the years after the 11 September 2001 attacks, it was often said that Egyptian prisons had been the incubators in which the zealotry of al-Qaeda and its leaders, as in the case of Ayman al-Zawahiri, had been fed and grown. Just as that was true of the disaster that unfolded in the United States in 2001, and the wars that followed, so it is true that a great deal of culpability for what is happening in the Levant today can be traced to events in Jordan's prisons.

It is into that labyrinth of subterranean terror that Warrick takes his readers, helping them understand the experiences that formed the man who laid the groundwork for the creation of Isis. In that sense, *Black Flags* is a prequel to the horror now playing out before us. It offers a necessary and important backstory to the unfurling of black flags across Syria and Iraq today.

Understandably, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi features prominently (indeed, the entire first section is dedicated to him), not least because he led al-Qaeda in Iraq from 2003 until his death in 2006. There is much to learn here about Zarqawi's mercurial character, his encounters in prison with leading scholars of the Salafi-jihadi movement such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and his almost pig-headed defiance of civil authority. Zarqawi challenged and provoked prison guards constantly, but never spoke about his wife or their children. In contrast, he spoke incessantly about his mother and sisters, frequently writing letters to them filled with admiration, love and respect for their achievements. "He wrote gushing notes," Warrick notes, "adorned with poems and hand-drawn flowers in the margins."

Interspersed with all this is a detailed and intricate knowledge of Jordanian politics. Incoming kings of Jordan, for example, are expected to offer amnesty and pardons to petty criminals and political prisoners alike to "cleanse" the past and win favour with constituents. This was how Zarqawi won his freedom (though accidentally) when King Abdullah succeeded his father in 1999, allowing him to revive connections to the jihadist international with which he had previously been associated.

The consequences of that oversight were catastrophic for the whole region. Warrick tells of how Sajida al-Rishawi and her husband, Ali, walked into the upscale Radisson SAS hotel in Amman to detonate suicide vests in November 2005. It was part of a co-ordinated attack on three hotels that evening killed more than 60 people and shocked Jordanian society – Jordan's own 9/11. Rishawi survived the attack after her bomb failed to detonate, and she was later captured by the police.

Zarqawi was bringing his war home, targeting hotels that he believed “Israeli and American” intelligence officials were frequenting during the Iraq War. The bombings were also a snub to King Abdullah, who had freed him: payback for his supposed treachery in allowing the US to prosecute a war in neighbouring Iraq. Some readers will be vaguely familiar with these events, but Warrick explains why they still matter more than a decade on. When Isis captured the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh in December 2014 it offered to ransom him in exchange for Rishawi.

The terms of the offer are revelatory, in so far as they show how intertwined seemingly disparate events in the post-9/11 years have become across the Levant. Warrick points out that even though the rest of the world had forgotten Sajida, Isis had not. As it turned out, the group had already executed Kasasbeh when it proposed the ransom, yet its leaders wanted to make a point: Sajida was their woman, their soldier, and a representative of their founder, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

As Warrick and Gerges show in both of these excellent accounts, each event in the region seems to spawn a series of cascading, and unintended, consequences.

Shiraz Maher

Shiraz Maher is an NS contributing writer and a member of the war studies department at King’s College London. His book, “Salafi-Jihadism: the History of an Idea”, is newly published by C Hurst & Co

Isis: a History by Fawaz A Gerges is published by Princeton University Press (384pp, £19.95)

Black Flags: the Rise of Isis by Joby Warrick is published by Corgi (480pp, £8.99)

P.S.

* “Shiraz Maher on Isis: the management of savagery”:

<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2016/07/shiraz-maher-isis-management-savagery>

* Shiraz Maher is a contributing writer for the New Statesman and a senior research fellow at King’s College London’s International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation.