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## ISIS: the Birth of a Terrifying New State

*A Counter-Revolutionary Caliphate*

by PATRICK COCKBURN

AUGUST 12, 2014

As the attention of the world focused on Ukraine and Gaza, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Isis) captured a third of Syria in addition to the quarter of Iraq it had seized in June. The frontiers of the new Caliphate declared by Isis on 29 June are expanding by the day and now cover an area larger than Great Britain and inhabited by at least six million people, a population larger than that of Denmark, Finland or Ireland. In a few weeks of fighting in Syria Isis has established itself as the dominant force in the Syrian opposition, routing the official al-Qaida affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, in the oil-rich province of Deir Ezzor and executing its local commander as he tried to flee. In northern Syria some five thousand Isis fighters are using tanks and artillery captured from the Iraqi army in Mosul to besiege half a million Kurds in their enclave at Kobani on the Turkish border. In central Syria, near Palmyra, Isis fought the Syrian army as it overran the al-Shaer gasfield, one of the largest in the country, in a surprise assault that left an estimated three hundred soldiers and civilians dead. Repeated government counter-attacks finally retook the gasfield but Isis still controls most of Syria's oil and gas production. The Caliphate may be poor and isolated but its oil wells and control of crucial roads provide a steady income in addition to the plunder of war.

The birth of the new state is the most radical change to the political geography of the Middle East since the Sykes-Picot Agreement was implemented in the aftermath of the First World War. Yet this explosive transformation has created surprisingly little alarm internationally or even among those in Iraq and Syria not yet under the rule of Isis. Politicians and diplomats tend to treat Isis as if it is a Bedouin raiding party that appears dramatically from the desert, wins spectacular victories and then retreats to its strongholds leaving the status quo little changed. Such a scenario is conceivable but is getting less and less likely as Isis consolidates its hold on its new conquests in an area that may soon stretch from Iran to the Mediterranean.

The very speed and unexpectedness of its rise make it easy for Western and regional leaders to hope that the fall of Isis and the implosion of the Caliphate might be equally sudden and swift. But all the evidence is that this is wishful thinking and the trend is in the other direction, with the opponents of Isis becoming weaker and less capable of resistance: in Iraq the army shows no signs of recovering from its earlier defeats and has failed to launch a single successful counter-attack; in Syria the other opposition groups, including the battle-hardened fighters of al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, are demoralised and disintegrating as they are squeezed between Isis and the Assad government. Karen Koning Abuzayd, a member of the UN's Commission of Inquiry in Syria, says that more and more Syrian rebels are defecting to Isis: 'They see it's better, these guys are strong, these guys are winning battles, they were taking territory, they have money, they can train us.' This is bad news for the government, which barely held off an assault in 2012 and 2013 by rebels less well trained, organised and armed than Isis; it will have real difficulties stopping the forces of the Caliphate advancing west.

In Baghdad there was shock and terror on 10 June at the fall of Mosul and as people realised that trucks packed with Isis gunmen were only an hour's drive away. But instead of assaulting Baghdad, Isis took most of Anbar, the vast Sunni province that sprawls across western Iraq on either side of the Euphrates. In Baghdad, with its mostly Shia population of seven million, people know what to expect if the murderously anti-Shia Isis forces capture the city, but they take heart from the fact that the calamity has not happened yet. 'We were frightened by the military disaster at first but we Baghdadis have got used to crises over the last 35 years,' one woman said. Even with Isis at the gates, Iraqi politicians have gone on playing political games as they move ponderously towards replacing the discredited prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki.

'It is truly surreal,' a former Iraqi minister said. 'When you speak to any political leader in Baghdad they talk as if they had not just lost half the country.' Volunteers had gone to the front after a fatwa from the grand ayatollah, Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most influential Shia cleric. But these militiamen are now streaming back to their homes, complaining that they were half-starved and forced to use their own weapons and buy their own ammunition. The only large-scale counter-attack launched by the regular army and the newly raised Shia militia was a disastrous foray into Tikrit on 15 July that was ambushed and defeated with heavy losses. There is no sign that the dysfunctional nature of the Iraqi army has changed. 'They were using just one helicopter in support of the troops in Tikrit,' the former minister said, 'so I wonder what on earth happened to the 140 helicopters the Iraqi state has bought in recent years?'

Probably the money for the missing 139 helicopters was simply stolen. There are other wholly corrupt states in the world but few of them have oil revenues of \$100 billion a year to steal from.

The sole aim of many officials has long been to get the largest kickback possible and they did not much care if jihadi groups did the same. I met a Turkish businessman in Baghdad who said he had had a large construction contract in Mosul over the last few years. The local emir or leader of Isis, then known as al-Qaida in Iraq, demanded \$500,000 a month in protection money from the company. 'I complained again and again about this to the government in Baghdad,' the businessman said, 'but they would do nothing about it except to say that I could add the money I paid al-Qaida to the contract price.' The emir was soon killed and his successor demanded that the protection money be increased to \$1 million a month. The businessman refused to pay and one of his Iraqi employees was killed; he withdrew his Turkish staff and his equipment to Turkey. 'Later I got a message from al-Qaida saying that the price was back down to \$500,000 and I could come back,' he said. This was some time before Isis captured the city.

In the face of these failures Iraq's Shia majority is taking comfort from two beliefs that, if true, would mean the present situation is not as dangerous as it looks. They argue that Iraq's Sunnis have risen in revolt and Isis fighters are only the shock troops or vanguard of an uprising provoked by the anti-Sunni policies and actions of Maliki. Once he is replaced, as is almost certain, Baghdad will offer the Sunnis a new power-sharing agreement with regional autonomy similar to that enjoyed by the Kurds. Then the Sunni tribes, former military officers and Baathists who have allowed Isis to take the lead in the Sunni revolt will turn on their ferocious allies. Despite all signs to the contrary, Shia at all levels are putting faith in this myth, that Isis is weak and can be easily discarded by Sunni moderates once they've achieved their goals. One Shia said to me: 'I wonder if Isis really exists.'

Unfortunately, Isis not only exists but is an efficient and ruthless organisation that has no intention of waiting for its Sunni allies to betray it. In Mosul it demanded that all opposition fighters swear allegiance to the Caliphate or give up their weapons. In late June and early July they detained between 15 to 20 former officers from Saddam Hussein's time, including two generals. Groups that had put up pictures of Saddam were told to take them down or face the consequences. 'It doesn't seem likely,' Aymenn al-Tamimi, an expert on jihadists, said, 'that the rest of the Sunni military opposition will be able to turn against Isis successfully. If they do, they will have to act as quickly as possible before Isis gets too strong.' He points out that the supposedly more moderate wing of the Sunni opposition had done nothing to stop the remnants of the ancient Christian community in Mosul from being forced to flee after Isis told them they had to convert to Islam, pay a special tax or be killed. Members of other sects and ethnic groups denounced as Shia or polytheists are being persecuted, imprisoned and murdered. The moment is passing when the non-Isis opposition could successfully mount a challenge.

The Iraqi Shia offer another explanation for the way their army disintegrated: it was stabbed in the back by the Kurds. Seeking to shift the blame from himself, Maliki claims that Erbil, the Kurdish capital, 'is a headquarters for Isis, Baathists, al-Qaida and terrorists'. Many Shia believe this: it makes them feel that their security forces (nominally 350,000 soldiers and 650,000 police) failed because they were betrayed and not because they wouldn't fight. One Iraqi told me he was at an iftar meal during Ramadan 'with a hundred Shia professional people, mostly doctors and engineers and they all took the stab-in-the-back theory for granted as an explanation for what went wrong'. The confrontation with the Kurds is important because it makes it impossible to create a united front against Isis. The Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani, took advantage of the

Iraqi army's flight to seize all the territories, including the city of Kirkuk, which have been in dispute between Kurds and Arabs since 2003. He now has a 600-mile common frontier with the Caliphate and is an obvious ally for Baghdad, where Kurds make up part of the government. By trying to scapegoat the Kurds, Maliki is ensuring that the Shia will have no allies in their confrontation with Isis if it resumes its attack in the direction of Baghdad. Isis and their Sunni allies have been surprised by the military weakness of the Baghdad government. They are unlikely to be satisfied with regional autonomy for Sunni provinces and a larger share of jobs and oil revenues. Their uprising has turned into a full counter-revolution that aims to take back power over all of Iraq.

At the moment Baghdad has a phony war atmosphere like London or Paris in late 1939 or early 1940, and for similar reasons. People had feared an imminent battle for the capital after the fall of Mosul, but it hasn't happened yet and optimists hope it won't happen at all. Life is more uncomfortable than it used to be, with only four hours of electricity on some days, but at least war hasn't yet come to the heart of the city. Nevertheless, some form of military attack, direct or indirect, will probably happen once Isis has consolidated its hold on the territory it has just conquered: it sees its victories as divinely inspired. It believes in killing or expelling Shia rather than negotiating with them, as it has shown in Mosul. Some Shia leaders may calculate that the US or Iran will always intervene to save Baghdad, but both powers are showing reluctance to plunge into the Iraqi quagmire in support of a dysfunctional government.

Iraq's Shia leaders haven't grappled with the fact that their domination over the Iraqi state, brought about by the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein, is finished, and only a Shia rump is left. It ended because of their own incompetence and corruption and because the Sunni uprising in Syria in 2011 destabilised the sectarian balance of power in Iraq. Three years on, the Isis-led Sunni victory in Iraq threatens to break the military stalemate in Syria. Assad has been slowly pushing back against a weakening opposition: in Damascus and its outskirts, the Qalamoun mountains along the Lebanese border and Homs, government forces have been advancing slowly and are close to encircling the large rebel enclave in Aleppo. But Assad's combat troops are noticeably thin on the ground, need to avoid heavy casualties and only have the strength to fight on one front at a time. The government's tactic is to devastate a rebel-held district with artillery fire and barrel bombs dropped from helicopters, force most of the population to flee, seal off what may now be a sea of ruins and ultimately force the rebels to surrender. But the arrival of large numbers of well-armed Isis fighters fresh from recent successes will be a new and dangerous challenge for Assad. They overran two important Syrian army garrisons in the east in late July. A conspiracy theory, much favoured by the rest of the Syrian opposition and by Western diplomats, that Isis and Assad are in league, has been shown to be false.

Isis may well advance on Aleppo in preference to Baghdad: it's a softer target and one less likely to provoke international intervention. This will leave the West and its regional allies – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – with a quandary: their official policy is to get rid of Assad, but Isis is now the second strongest military force in Syria; if he falls, it's in a good position to fill the vacuum. Like the Shia leaders in Baghdad, the US and its allies have responded to the rise of Isis by descending into fantasy. They pretend they are fostering a 'third force' of moderate Syrian rebels to fight both Assad and Isis, though in private Western diplomats admit this group doesn't really exist outside a few beleaguered pockets. Aymenn al-Tamimi confirms that this Western-

backed opposition 'is getting weaker and weaker'; he believes supplying them with more weapons won't make much difference. Jordan, under pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia, is supposed to be a launching pad for this risky venture but it's getting cold feet. 'Jordan is frightened of Isis,' one Jordanian official in Amman said. 'Most Jordanians want Assad to win the war.' He said Jordan is buckling under the strain of coping with vast numbers of Syrian refugees, 'the equivalent of the entire population of Mexico moving into the US in one year'.

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The foster parents of Isis and the other Sunni jihadi movements in Iraq and Syria are Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey. This doesn't mean the jihadis didn't have strong indigenous roots, but their rise was crucially supported by outside Sunni powers. The Saudi and Qatari aid was primarily financial, usually through private donations, which Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, says were central to the Isis takeover of Sunni provinces in northern Iraq: 'Such things do not happen spontaneously.' In a speech in London in July, he said the Saudi policy towards jihadis has two contradictory motives: fear of jihadis operating within Saudi Arabia, and a desire to use them against Shia powers abroad. He said the Saudis are 'deeply attracted towards any militancy which can effectively challenge Shiadom'. It's unlikely the Sunni community as a whole in Iraq would have lined up behind Isis without the support Saudi Arabia gave directly or indirectly to many Sunni movements. The same is true of Syria, where Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to Washington and head of Saudi intelligence from 2012 to February 2014, was doing everything he could to back the jihadi opposition until his dismissal. Fearful of what they've helped create, the Saudis are now veering in the other direction, arresting jihadi volunteers rather than turning a blind eye as they go to Syria and Iraq, but it may be too late. Saudi jihadis have little love for the House of Saud. On 23 July, Isis launched an attack on one of the last Syrian army strongholds in the northern province of Raqqa. It began with a suicide car-bomb attack; the vehicle was driven by a Saudi called Khatab al-Najdi who had put pictures on the car windows of three women held in Saudi prisons, one of whom was Hila al-Kasir, his niece.

Turkey's role has been different but no less significant than Saudi Arabia's in aiding Isis and other jihadi groups. Its most important action has been to keep open its 510-mile border with Syria. This gave Isis, al-Nusra and other opposition groups a safe rear base from which to bring in men and weapons. The border crossing points have been the most contested places during the rebels' 'civil war within the civil war'. Most foreign jihadis have crossed Turkey on their way to Syria and Iraq. Precise figures are difficult to come by, but Morocco's Interior Ministry said recently that 1122 Moroccan jihadists have entered Syria, including nine hundred who went in 2013, two hundred of whom were killed. Iraqi security suspects that Turkish military intelligence may have been heavily involved in aiding Isis when it was reconstituting itself in 2011. Reports from the Turkish border say Isis is no longer welcome, but with weapons taken from the Iraqi army and the seizure of Syrian oil and gasfields, it no longer needs so much outside help.

For America, Britain and the Western powers, the rise of Isis and the Caliphate is the ultimate disaster. Whatever they intended by their invasion of Iraq in 2003 and their efforts to get rid of Assad in Syria since 2011, it was not to see the creation of a jihadi state spanning northern Iraq and Syria run by a movement a hundred times bigger and much better organised than the al-

Qaida of Osama bin Laden. The war on terror for which civil liberties have been curtailed and hundreds of billions of dollars spent has failed miserably.

The belief that Isis is interested only in ‘Muslim against Muslim’ struggles is another instance of wishful thinking: Isis has shown it will fight anybody who doesn’t adhere to its bigoted, puritanical and violent variant of Islam. Where Isis differs from al-Qaida is that it’s a well-run military organisation that is very careful in choosing its targets and the optimum moment to attack them. Many in Baghdad hope the excesses of Isis – for example, blowing up mosques it deems shrines, like that of Younis (Jonah) in Mosul – will alienate the Sunnis. In the long term they may do just that, but opposing Isis is very dangerous and, for all its brutality, it has brought victory to a defeated and persecuted Sunni community. Even those Sunnis in Mosul who don’t like it are fearful of the return of a vengeful Shia-dominated Iraqi government.

So far Baghdad’s response to its defeat has been to bomb Mosul and Tikrit randomly, leaving local people in no doubt about its indifference to their welfare or survival. The fear will not change even if Maliki is replaced by a more conciliatory prime minister. A Sunni in Mosul, writing just after a missile fired by government forces had exploded in the city, told me: ‘Maliki’s forces have already demolished the University of Tikrit. It has become havoc and rubble like all the city. If Maliki reaches us in Mosul he will kill its people or turn them into refugees. Pray for us.’ Such views are common, and make it less likely that Sunnis will rise up in opposition to Isis and its Caliphate. A new and terrifying state has been born.