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The Rise of ISIS and the Origins of the New Middle East War

by TARIQ ALI and PATRICK COCKBURN

9/29/2014

Tariq Ali: I'm in conversation with Patrick Cockburn, who can only be described as a veteran reporter and courageous journalist who has covered the wars of the United States in the Middle East since they began with the invasion of Iraq, and was reporting from the region a long time before on the sanctions against Iraq, the Gulf wars. We're now at a critical stage where a new organisation has emerged.

Patrick has written a new book, [The Jihadis Return](#), which is an extended essay on the emergence of ISIS and its links to the Sunni population in Iraq and the likely consequences of this for the region. Because there's absolutely no doubt that what this opens up is yet another front in the unending war that has become a total misery for the people who live in the Arab world today. Patrick, let's begin by sort of inquiring about the origins of the Islamic State group, ISIS as they call themselves, where do they come out from and when did this start?

Patrick Cockburn: Well they come most immediately from al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was at the height of its influence in 2006 [and] 2007 when it was an element—but not the only element—in the Sunni resistance to a Shia government and the American occupation. Ideologically, it comes out of the Jihadi movement and actually its religious beliefs are not that much different from Saudi Wahhabism, the variant of the Islam which is effectively the state religion of Saudi Arabia with its denigration of Shia as heretics, [along with] Christians and Jews. It's just carrying

these beliefs to a higher and more violent level but it's very much in the context of the Jihadi movement *Tariq Ali: Can I just interrupt you there? This Jihadi movement did not exist in Iraq as such prior to the American invasion and occupation.*

Patrick Cockburn: No, it didn't. And Saddam arrested anybody who was an obvious Jihadi. I mean, it was always an absurd pretence at the time of the invasion of Iraq to say that Saddam had any connection with the Jihadis or 9/11. Though such was the volume of propaganda at the time that 60% of Americans believed that somehow Saddam was linked to 9/11

Tariq Ali: So following through on this, we have the American occupation, we have a Shia government, which they have effectively put into power, and we have the beginnings of an uprising in the early days of the occupation, which involved not just Sunnis but also Muqtada al-Sadr who was very hostile to the occupation. What happened to break up this sort of resistance, which was initially a combined resistance, such as Shia groups like Muqtada sending medical aid and help to the besieged Fallujah? Why did that break up?

Patrick Cockburn: The unity between the Sunni and Shia resistance to the Americans was always tentative, although taken very seriously by the Americans. I mean, the memoirs of American generals at the time said they were really worried that these two groups would unite in resisting the occupation. And it's perhaps one of the many disasters to have happened to Iraq that they didn't unite, that they remained sectarian, in fact remained more sectarian, on the Sunni side.

Tariq Ali: And so, if we come down to the speed with which this particular organisation swept through parts of Iraq, which you yourself talk about in the book, how do you explain the total collapse of the Iraqi army, Patrick? Is it in that sense not too much different from the army created by the West in Afghanistan, the fact that they are not prepared to fight and die for the United States? At that time it was, al-Qaeda and Iraq was only one of a number of serious resistance movements to the occupation but it was very evident in Baghdad at the time when I went to American briefings that anything that happened was attributed by the spokesman, the military spokesman, to al-Qaeda. Of course this played well back in the US, but in Iraq it had quite the contrary effect which people who were against the occupation think, oh it's al-Qaeda who's doing all this resisting, let's go and get a black flag and join them...

Patrick Cockburn: Yeah, and even more so. I mean I think this is, it's difficult to think of another example in history, where there are 300 or 350 thousand men in the Iraqi army, they'd spent 41.6 billion dollars on this army over the last three years. But it disintegrated because of an attack by maybe a couple of thousand people in Mosul. Why did it happen? Well, the army was rather extraordinary. I mean one Iraqi general I was talking to who'd been forcibly retired said at the beginning of the disaster was the Americans, [who] when they set it up, insisted that supplies and things like that should be outsourced, privatised.

So immediately a colonel of a battalion nominally of 600 men would get money for 600 men, [but] in fact there were only 200 men in it, and would pocket the difference, which was spread out among the officers. And this applied to fuel, it applied to ammunition... At the time of the fall of Mosul there are meant to be 30,000 troops there. In fact, it's estimated that only one in three was there. Because what you did was: you joined the army, you got your full salary and

then you kicked back half that salary to your officer, who spread it among the officers. So I remember about a year ago talking to a senior Iraqi politician, and who said look: the army's going to collapse if it's attacked. I said surely some will fight, he said: no no no, you don't understand. These officers are not soldiers, they're investors!

They have no interest in fighting anybody; they have interest in making money out of their investment. Of course you had to buy your position. So in 2009, you want to be a colonel in the Iraqi army, it'll cost you about 20,000 dollars, more recently it cost you about \$200,000. You want to be divisional commander, and there are 15 divisions, it will cost you about 2 million. Of course, there are other ways of making money. Checkpoints on the roads act as sort of customs barriers and a tariff on each truck going through would be paid. So that's why they ran away, led by their commanding officer, the three commanding generals got into a helicopter in civilian clothes and fled to Erbil, the Kurdish capital. And that led to the final dissolution of the army.

Tariq Ali: It is one of the most astonishing events in recent history, Patrick. I mean can you think of any other equivalent, even in the last century?

Patrick Cockburn: I can't think of any of such a large well-equipped army disintegrating. You could say that Saddam's army disintegrated in '91 when attacked by the Americans, and again in 2003. But then it was attacked by the largest military force in the world and was being bombed. So it's not a parallel. It of course shows that ISIS was quite effective in spreading terror through social media, by films of it decapitating Shia captives. So the soldiers were terrified of ISIS.

And also the whole Sunni community, about 20% of Iraqis, maybe 6 million in the Sunni provinces, were alienated by the Nouri al-Malaki's regime. They were persecuted, they couldn't get jobs, collective punishment, young men in villages around Fallujah - sometimes there aren't many young men because they're all in jail - and some were on death row going to be executed for crimes which somebody had already been executed for. It was completely arbitrary. So not surprisingly to this day it's one of the reasons that ISIS still has support, that for all its bloodthirstiness, for a lot of the Sunni community it's better than the Iraqi army and the Iraqi Shia militias coming back.

Tariq Ali: I mean this is something which apart from yourself and possibly one other journalist in the entire Western media is not being reported at all, that however violent and brutal this group seems and is, it does have some support among the population...

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, ISIS has a number of different kinds of support. It has support of the alienated Sunni community in Iraq and also in Syria. That at least their victors, after all these people have been defeated - they were defeated in '91 by the Americans, they were defeated again in 2003, they were marginalised, persecuted - so victory is important to them. I think also they appeal to jobless young men, I mean sometimes referred to as the underclass, but actually just the poor, poor young men.

Tariq Ali: Poor and unemployed.

Patrick Cockburn: Poor, unemployed young men with nothing in front of them: this does have an appeal for them. And the alternative is pretty bad. I mean, the few successful counterattacks made primarily by the Shia and Kurdish militias, that they've immediately driven out the Sunni from areas where ISIS had driven out the Shia. So from the Sunni point of view, they don't have much alternative but to stick with ISIS.

Tariq Ali: And is there no alternative Sunni organisation, which at least offers a different political programme apart from this sort of fanaticism shown by ISIS. I mean, what about the Association of Sunni Scholars?

Patrick Cockburn: Many sort of went along with ISIS trying to sort of ride the tiger. And ... it was believed in Baghdad, and I think really until about a month ago, that, yes, ISIS had appeared to have won these great victories but in fact they were simply the shock troops of the Sunni community. And there were tribes and there were former army officers and there were others like the scholars who would displace them once the Sunni had got what they wanted.

Tariq Ali: And we thought this was wishful thinking because ISIS tends to monopolise power just as soon as it can, even when it took power in an area in combination with others. It's also extremely paranoid, so it's going to kill anybody whom it thinks is preparing to stab it in the back or rise up against it. In Mosul for instance, they seem to have taken hostage about 300 people. But former generals, sort of Sunni dignitaries, the sort of people who they suspect might lead that sort of resistance. And in Syria, in Deir ez-Zo province, one tribe sort of rose up against them, they crushed it immediately and executed 700 of its members. So I think it's just wishful thinking to imagine that ISIS is going to be displaced in the areas it has conquered.

Let's come to the next point. A lot of people have speculated that the Saudis in some form or the other, if not the government directly, people close to the government in Saudi Arabia, were partially responsible for creating, helping and funding this force as a sort of proto-Saudi intervention against Shia domination in Iraq after the occupation. To what extent is this true, if at all?

Patrick Cockburn: There's some truth in it, but you want to avoid a conspiracy theory that the Saudis are the sort of master who moves the pawns on the board, which is sometimes believed in parts of the Middle East. The Saudis have always been behind the Jihadi movement in general, above all abroad, not within Saudi Arabia. And generally they will support those who oppose Shia governments, and don't really distinguish or didn't really distinguish who they were supporting. But it's also pretty clear that a lot of their support did go to ISIS, did go to other groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, this was all through private donors, not just Saudi Arabia, but Kuwait and Qatar, and Turkey.

The US and Britain would [try to] distinguish between the moderate Syrian opposition in this corner and the Jihadi extreme opposition in the other corner. But actually the two were together, I mean there was a report this very week by a research organisation itemising various weapons in the hands of ISIS that appear to have been supplied by Saudi Arabia last year to the supposedly moderate Syrian opposition, but were immediately transferred because the gap between the two is much more limited than you'd imagine...

Tariq Ali: Yeah. And there's a report in, I think, in the newspapers today as we speak, that Steven Sotloff was sold to ISIS by a supposedly moderate Syrian organisation who captured him.

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, his family are saying this. And it's also interesting that immediately the American spokesmen say: no no no that didn't happen, because they can see how far this undermines what may be their policy to be announced today by Obama of building up a moderate opposition, a third force, which is going to supposedly fight Assad and fight ISIS simultaneously

Tariq Ali: It's pure fantasy

Patrick Cockburn: It's fantasy ... in that form. But I mean it's interesting that the commanding general of the Free Syrian Army says that the Free Syrian Army commanders in Syria, now get their orders directly from the Americans. He said he and the other officers in Turkey were meant to be the headquarters and the leaders of the Free Syrian Army. He said I think it's 16 commanders in northern Syria and some other, about 60 of the smaller groups in the South, now get their equipment, advice and instructions directly from the Americans

Tariq Ali: But Patrick, this again is pretty astonishing. That here we had, not so long ago, the entire Western world led by the United States determined to get rid of Assad, arming all these people, and as you've pointed out arms flowing from one group to the other in the battle against Assad. And now we are facing a situation where the United States might actually be bombing ISIS sites inside Syria. Is this possible?

Patrick Cockburn: Well I think so. I think they've gone so far down this road to suggesting this that I think it'll certainly happen at some point. One of the strengths of ISIS is being able to operate in Iraq and Syria

Tariq Ali: At the same time...

Patrick Cockburn: At the same time. And in fact its potential constituency in Syria is bigger than Iraq, because only 20 percent of Iraqis are Syri, are Sunni Arabs and 60 percent of Syrians are Sunni Arabs. So potentially they could dominate the Syrian opposition and not all of course of Syrian Sunni Arabs support the opposition, quite a lot support the government. But they can have a far bigger reach there and they are still expanding. I mean they are 30 miles from Aleppo. They inflicted some of the biggest defeats, in fact the biggest defeats, which the Syrian army has suffered in three years. [These] were inflicted in Raqqah province within the last month by ISIS.

Tariq Ali: Okay, now let's come to the third factor in the situation, not discussed seriously but often referred to. The Kurdish parties in Syria and in Iraq are clearly opposed to all this and are fighting ISIS as best they can. The Kurds in Syria are under siege from them, the Kurds in Iraq are determined to fight them. To what extent is this effective and why was the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq not capable of dealing with them in a tougher way at the very beginning?

Patrick Cockburn: I think probably the reputation of the Peshmerga in Iraq was exaggerated anyway. They haven't fought anybody apart from their own [separatist] war and that was in the 90s, for many years. They were always good at mountain ambushes and at public relations, but otherwise it was always a bit exaggerated. I mean maybe it's not their fault, they were fighting Saddam's enormous army. But that was exaggerated. And also it has become an oil state...many Kurds are just interested in making money and so forth. Now they say they weren't properly equipped.

Well, you know, you can buy arms ... it doesn't all have to come from America. Why are there all this big hotels in Erbil their capital, and why didn't they have some heavy machine guns? And they also have got a 600 mile border to defend. And also they took advantage of the fall of Mosul to extend their territories into territories [that are] disputed with the Arabs. This made the Arabs in these mixed areas much more anti-Kurdish than they had been previously. So there was acceptability to what ISIS did in advancing among the Arabs, and one of the many toxic effects of this is that the populations are now separating. First of all the Yazidis and the Kurds and others fled, and now the Sunni Arabs are fleeing these areas to avoid revenge attacks

Tariq Ali: And what about the Syrian Kurds?

Patrick Cockburn: Well, that's different because they are 10% of the population in Syria. They're in enclaves mostly in the North East and the North.

Tariq Ali: And Assad has given them autonomy, this is true?

Patrick Cockburn: Not quite, but they've sort of [made an] opportunistic withdrawal, because he knows that ... ISIS is going to attack them ... and actually you know, the people that are attacking them are not just ISIS but Jabhat al-Nusra. All the other opposition groups suddenly come together to attack the Kurds in these areas. I mean it also undermines that idea that there is a moderate opposition and a Jihadi opposition. That the Free Syrian Army and all these others come to attack the Kurds. The [dominant] Kurds there are ... the PKK which is basically the Turkish Kurdish opposition. But they are much more effective fighters than the Iraqi Peshmerga. In fact, they rescued quite a lot of the Yazidis in Sinjar in Western Kurdistan

Tariq Ali: The Syrian Kurd state....

Patrick Cockburn: The Syrian Kurds, yeah. Somewhat to the embarrassment of the [Kurds] of Erbil

Tariq Ali: Yeah. So, coming to the key thing now. You've written that the Skykes-Picot agreement has probably finally finished. This was the agreement after the First World War whereby Ottoman lands in the Arab world were divided up between France and Britain. But Patrick, you may be right. In 2006 I felt that there was no future for Iraq as a state because of what had happened and you'd probably have a Shia state and a pro-Saudi Sunni state and a Kurdish state. Do you think this is going to happen now in some shape or form over the next five years?

Patrick Cockburn: In some shape, but not exactly, you know I don't think map-makers are going to sort of have the borders of their new states there. But I think you'll effectively have three sovereign states in Iraq. And you do have that already. I mean, you're a Shia in Baghdad. If I'm in Baghdad, I can't go an hour North of Baghdad without having my head chopped off. Likewise a Kurd in the North and likewise any Sunni who tries to come through any checkpoint in Baghdad or into Kurdistan is likely to be arrested...

Tariq Ali: Well you've been visiting Baghdad for years, Patrick. Are you telling me that effectively there are ethnic borders now in Baghdad and you can't move from one part of the city to the other?

Patrick Cockburn: No. Between Baghdad and the rest of Iraq you can't. I mean there are Sunni parts of Baghdad, but you had a sectarian civil war 2006-7 in which the Sunni basically lost. So they have quite small enclaves in Baghdad. There aren't many mixed areas left, the Shia dominate the city. Now these Sunni areas could rise up, but they're also vulnerable to counterattack from the Shia majority. There could be a battle for Baghdad but the Sunni in the city are likely to lose it, which is one of the reasons why they are terrified.

Tariq Ali: And there's a Kurdish population in Baghdad too, let's not forget...

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, but a lot of them are, have melted into the local population.

Tariq Ali: Intermarriages?

Patrick Cockburn: Intermarriages.... There's never been sort of hardcore Kurdish areas or enclaves in Baghdad with their own militia, which is true of the Shia, and in a covert way is true of the Sunni as well.

Tariq Ali: If we just move to Syria for a bit. What is your impression of the current state of play with the sort of emergence of ISIS, not just the emergence but the successes of ISIS, with the Americans in NATO now trying to work up some sort of a plot or, not a plot, but openly debating how to destroy the organisation. Surely this is going to, I mean, immediately strengthen the Assad regime, regardless of what is intended or not...

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, I think that's absolutely true. And that's of course what has put them in such a muddle. I mean ISIS controls about 35, 40% of Syria. In eastern Syria, they control the oil fields. They're very close to Aleppo, which was the biggest city in Syria. They could take over the rebel held part and then maybe they could take over the whole city. This would be more significant than taking Mosul in Iraq. Jihadi organisations, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra, but also ISIS, are close to Hama, the fourth biggest city in Syria. So they're in a strong position. It wouldn't take much for ISIS to reach the Mediterranean there, where they were before they did a tactical withdrawal earlier in the year.

So it's rather an extraordinary situation that you have America and the other Westerners and powers saying we're going to intervene against ISIS but we're not going to do anything to help Assad. But Assad is the main enemy of ISIS and if they're trying to weaken Assad then they help

ISIS. And it's the result of their, to my mind, catastrophic policies over the last two years. It has been evident since the end of 2012 that Assad was not going to go, previous to that there was a presumption that in 2011 and 2012, in the Western capitals and elsewhere, that he was going to follow Gaddafi—he was going to go down. But they've sort of pretended that he was going to go. [In] negotiations in Geneva earlier this year it was said ... that the only thing worth talking about was transition, Assad going.

But Assad obviously wasn't going to go, because there are 14 provincial capitals in Syria and he held 13 of them. So if you said that, in fact, you were saying: well, then the war will go on because he wasn't going to go. And I think for a time, they - Washington, and the others, and the Saudis - were not unhappy with this. It was something they could live with because he was there but he was weak and was probably going to stay there. And then the Jihadis were there, but they were involved in their own civil war. But the great miscalculation was that on the Jihadis side one group would win out, which was ISIS. And secondly, this wasn't going to remain Syrian on Syrian, or Iraqi on Iraqi, or even Muslim on Muslim, that after all the new caliphate claims the allegiance of all Muslims and claims the allegiance of the world. So its ambitions....

Tariq Ali: Are global...

Patrick Cockburn: Are global.

Tariq Ali: And its prospectus, which is very similar to the NATO prospectus, if you see both organisations' prospectuses together, it's obvious that ISIS has copied the NATO model. They have pictures like that one in their prospectus saying this is what we do, this is how many people we killed here, there. There's no shame at all about what they are doing. So in a weird way, despite the ideology which is Wahhabi and sort of born-again Muslimism, literalism, they are quite modern in their approach in some ways are they not?

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, I mean rather amazingly so. You know, at the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011, blogging, new Twitter, YouTube, were considered progressive instruments that would erode the power of police states and authoritarianism and so forth. But in fact, the people that have put them to greatest use have been Jihadi organisations, and ISIS in particular, to spread their views, to spread terror, very effectively. The families of an Iraqi soldier in Baghdad, you know, a soldier's wife, his mother, they've all seen this stuff so, they say: don't go back to the army, you'll be killed. So this is pretty effective

Tariq Ali: Patrick, what is the United States going to do now, what are its options? I mean do you think they can have any success in wiping out ISIS, which seems to be their plan. I mean how the hell are they going to do it without ground troops and all the available reports suggest that the Pentagon is opposed to putting in ground troops. I mean are they going to find some Arab countries to act as their auxiliaries?

Patrick Cockburn: Well, yes, ... auxiliaries. I don't think they're going to commit troops. I mean look what happened: the Iraqi army fled, the Syrian army fought, it still lost. It lost an important air base in Raqqah province a few weeks ago although it fought very hard. So I think they'll be very nervous of fighting ISIS. The US is looking, Obama says, for local partners. It's a bit

unclear what this means. Local partners in Baghdad, the parties have sort of come together because they're all terrified of ISIS but when you look more closely the Kurds have agreed to nothing. The Sunni leaders have taken some jobs in Baghdad, but these are Sunni leaders who dare not go back their own cities and towns because they'd get their heads chopped off. So it's still very disorganised and divided and has only sort of happened under pressure from the US and Iran who have parallel interests there.

Tariq Ali: Well they know exactly the obvious ally in this, were they looking for serious allies in the region, would actually be Iran. Which they're not prepared to consider because they've demonised Iran to such a level and the Israelis would probably be hostile to any such notion. Because the Iranians could use any alliance with the Americans now to get a bomb quickly like General Zia did during the war against Afghanistan. But apart from Iran, who else is there with the firepower?

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, and also this applies to Syria as well. the Americans and the others are sort of refusing to make a choice ... Say we put a coalition backed by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. These people have money, they have influence on the Jihadis maybe, on the Sunni community, but they're avoiding changing relations or ending confrontation with Iran and in Syria Russia matters a lot. They're still hostile to Hezbollah ... and the Kurds in Syria who are fighting ISIS rather effectively. So what is it? It's really a recipe for a very long war in a very confused situation.

And, you know, what are they going to do if ISIS advances into Aleppo? Are they going to bomb it there at the same time as the Syrian Air Force is bombing ISIS? How do they know that Syrian Air Force planes are not going to try to shoot down American planes? Of course, what they will do, I think, is have covert relations with the Assad government. In fact, I'm told they already do—not to do a public U-turn but have a sort of an understanding with them, as to some degree happened in Iraq after 2003... Iraqis always used to say that Iran and the US wave their fists at each other over the table, but they sort of shake hands under the table

Tariq Ali: Which they did.

Patrick Cockburn: Oh absolutely.

Tariq Ali: Without the Iranian green light it would have been difficult for them to take Iraq just like that.

Patrick Cockburn: Oh yes. Why did we have Nouri al-Maliki as the disastrous Prime Minister of Iraq for eight years and then reappointed in 2010? And I remember an Iraqi friend of mine, a diplomat, rang me up when Maliki ... basically got back as Prime Minister and said, you know, the great Satan America and the axis of evil Iran have come together with ... catastrophic consequences for Iraqis.

Tariq Ali: Exactly. So Patrick, overall the situation is pretty grim and likely to remain so?

Patrick Cockburn: Yes, it's grim because there are so many players involved. There are so many different crises entangled with each other that this is now likely to go on for a long time. There might have been a moment two years ago when they could've prevented ISIS taking off. Because really the war in Syria that changed the fortunes of ISIS. Previously in Iraq, it benefited from the alienation of the Sunni community, but suddenly the war in Syria relaunched ISIS, because it destabilised Iraq. It reignited the war in Iraq which had died down, but never quite ended. And Iraqi politicians, I remember Hoshiyar Zebari, the foreign minister saying to me at that time, if the West allows the war in Syria to go on, that will inevitably destabilise Iraq and that is what has happened.

Tariq Ali: On that pessimistic note, we end this conversation. Thanks very much Patrick and we will talk again no doubt.

Patrick Cockburn: Great, thank you.