

ISIS: A History

Fawaz A. Gerges

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Fawaz Gerges identifies four factors which were crucial to the Islamic State's (IS) expansion across Iraq and Syria in his well-researched and insightful account of the history of the group and its individual members. He writes that IS itself can and should be considered the direct progeny of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which is clear for those who trace the organization's lineage, and argues that the fragmentation of Iraq after the 2003 invasion allowed the group to flourish (first as AQI and then as IS). The other two factors he identifies are concerned with other countries: Gerges contends that the group would not have been able to carry out its headline-grabbing military conquests without the safe refuge afforded by the collapse of Syria, and that the military gains it made in part due to said collapse could not have been tenable were it not for the derailment of the Arab Spring revolutions during the first few years of the decade.

Gerges develops his explanation of these four factors through eight chapters, neatly bookended by an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter contextualizes the book, touching on topics ranging from the group's worldview to its reality on the ground in Syria and Iraq through the end of 2015. The second chapter traces the history of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the founder of Tawhid and Jihad, which became AQI and later, after his death, IS. This chapter also discusses the transitory period which AQI went through following the loss of its founder, focusing on the further alienation of the group's social base during the 2006-2010 period. With this Gerges establishes that IS is indeed the progeny of AQI.

The book's third chapter examines the ways in which national politics in Iraq led to the re-emergence of IS in 2014. He traces the successful cooperation and the later fragmentation of the fragile coalition between the United States, the central Iraqi government, and Sunni tribes during what is known as the Sahwa (Awakening), which saw the Sunni tribes of Anbar and other provinces drive AQI from their communities in 2007 and 2008. He lays the blame for the coalition's collapse at the feet of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose divisive sectarianism and authoritarian tendencies pushed the newly-marginalized Sunnis even farther away from the centers of political power. This further marginalization, which came in addition to the Sunni community's loss of primacy due to de-Baathification

and the disbanding of the Iraqi army, pushed many Sunnis to accept IS' narrative, which presents it as the sole force capable of defending them from the Shi'a-dominated and Iran-controlled central government in Baghdad, as well as Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus. Gerges argues that the marginalization felt by Sunnis after 2010, when Maliki's dictatorial inclinations became visible, led formerly disparate groups including Baathists, Salafi-jihadists like IS, and tribal militias to join together, with all three playing large roles in the seizure of Mosul in 2014.

Gerges details Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's improbable rise to power in the fourth chapter, and provides a useful and mostly complete vision of the caliph-to-be's life. He explains how Baghdadi was radicalized in prison, and became even more bloodthirsty and willing to excommunicate fellow Muslims than IS' founder, al-Zarqawi. Gerges concludes this chapter by examining the popular claim that Baghdadi was installed by ex-Baathists as a figurehead, to mask their control of the organization. He spends the fifth chapter of the book on the connection between IS and former members of Saddam Hussein's intelligence forces and military, concluding that the former officers did not hijack the organization, as many have claimed, but were instead converted en masse to a Salafi interpretation of Islam prior to joining the organization, many during imprisonment under the US occupation of Iraq.

This argument is convincing and well-supported, but does not necessarily explain all of the evidence which has surfaced regarding former members of Hussein's regime. For example, liquor has been recovered from the abode of an ex-Baathist IS leader after his death, which certainly does not fit with the group's strict ideology. It seems most likely that the truth lies somewhere between Gerges' claim of mass conversion and the idea put forth by others that these former military officers conducted a shadowy coup and have only adopted a veneer of piety; one imagines that each case can be true as regards some former Baathists who came to make up the group's middle-tier and even upper levels of leadership. We may never have conclusive evidence in the matter as IS commanders have been quite effectively targeted by the US-led coalition in recent years.

The sixth chapter examines how the group benefitted from the chaos in Syria, and quite effectively traces the establishment of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, which had strict orders to present itself as unaffiliated with IS or Al-Qaeda. The formal schism between the two groups did not occur until 2013, though as Gerges points out tension existed between the two organizations since the beginning of their association. He also paints a picture

of life under IS domination, and explains how the group's provision of basic services allowed it to insert itself into daily life and, therefore, seem inescapable and impossible to resist. Syria, furthermore, provided fighters and a place for the weakened AQI to coalesce after it had been beaten back in Iraq by the Sahwa movement; its cross-border territory allowed it operational flexibility which was crucial to its military successes in recent years.

Gerges then begins an examination of the Arab Spring, specifically the Salafist-jihadist narratives which have sprung up around it. He effectively debunks the al-Qaeda propaganda which portrays the Arab Spring as both a natural result of al-Qaeda's activities and one which they anticipated. In this section he also discusses the disappointment felt by those who now term the events the "Arab Winter" and how these feelings have provided significant fodder upon which IS has fed. This chapter leads nicely into the final one, which compares and contrasts IS and al-Qaeda in depth. Gerges postulates that Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda, is biding his time until the ferocity of IS plays itself out and the group's territory is stripped away. As of the writing of this review it seems that al-Zawahiri's bet was the right one, as IS has been driven from the vast majority of its territory in Iraq and Syria, though the recent Turkish offensive in northern Syria may yet provide the group with some breathing room. Gerges notes how the group's bloodthirsty ideology is deeply rooted in identity politics—particularly what IS frames as the existential struggle between Sunni and Shi'a, as personified by Iran, a narrative which is greatly bolstered by that country's meddling in Baghdad and outright participation on behalf of Assad in Syria's civil war. This sectarian framework, which creates a collective Sunni identity, has taken root among some Sunni communities, says Gerges, because of the decades-long failure of Arab states to provide economic opportunity to the majority of their citizens.

Gerges' book is a must-read for anyone interested in the rise of the Islamic State organization, layperson and specialist alike. It does not include an extensive analysis of the group's theology, but this is to be expected given that the book is presented as a political history and written by a professor of International Relations. Gerges' expertise makes itself evident throughout the book, but particularly in his astute analysis of the structural factors within both Iraq and Syria's political institutions and among these countries' various communities which allowed IS to surge back into the spotlight in 2014. Though his analysis of the future of the movement is grim, it includes

a call to Arab societies to attempt reform in the interest of dissuading their youth from extremist ideologies, which is a position that rational readers will heartily endorse.

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