

INTRODUCTION by Simon Stafell and Akil N Awan

In Jihadism Transformed: al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas, Hurst: London (2016)

On 17 December 2010, a young Tunisian street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, doused himself in gasoline and set himself ablaze in silent protest against the petty bureaucratic tyranny with which Tunisians had been forced to contend for decades. Bouazizi's self-immolation, which captured a mood of impotent rage against authoritarianism and lack of upward social mobility for the youth bulge, sparked historic protests that swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), removing long-rooted dictators from power within a matter of months.

As the protests continued to rage throughout the region, halfway around the world, on 2 May of 2011, an elite team of US Navy SEALs made a clandestine incursion into Pakistani territory, raiding an affluent compound in Abbottabad to assassinate al-Qa'ida's infamous leader and global terrorist mastermind, Osama bin Laden. The death of an ageing, cloistered and largely impotent bin Laden, nevertheless left al-Qa'ida bereft of its towering, charismatic and symbolic leader – one who had provided a rallying cry to generations of Islamic militants the world over.

Triumphalism over the end of bin Laden, and by extension, the scourge of jihadism, would prove to be sorely misguided. Barely three years later, on the first day of Ramadan at the end of June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, adorned in the regalia of Caliphate-dom, ascended the pulpit of the Grand mosque in Mosul. As he addressed the congregation, he demanded obeisance from the Ummah, in his new incarnation as the self-anointed Caliph Ibrahim - ruler of the newly established Islamic State - in recognition of the Jihadists' spectacular success in staking claims to large swathes of territory straddling Syria and Iraq.

These three events have, in their own ways, fundamentally transformed the Jihadist movement. They have caused seismic shifts both in practice, and in narratives and worldviews. This volume gathers a panel of renowned experts to identify, track and explore the changes that have taken place. We ask how these shifts have come about, and how jihadist narratives and discourses have evolved in the context of these and other turbulent events in the Middle East and beyond. The contributions consider the current state of the jihadist narrative, mapping its

trajectories and assessing its impact, not just inside the Middle East and North Africa, but further afield in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and indeed the West too.

THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB SPRING

Early responses

The dramatic self-immolation of the young Tunisian, Mohammed Bouazizi, in 2011 signalled the advent of the Arab Spring – a social movement that heralded momentous change as it swept through much of the MENA region. In short succession, the Arab Spring had mobilised a whole swathe of young people in popular local uprisings that sought to remove their autocratic leaders from power through largely peaceful protests. Al-Qa'ida and other jihadists were initially blindsided by the advent of this organic grassroots, and initially largely secular, social movement which was not only directed at the very same opponents that animated the Jihadists - the 'near enemy', autocratic dictators who held sway over the Muslim world – but appeared to draw from a similar constituency and support base; the youth bulge throughout the MENA region.

Crucially, this was a rejection of the very *raison d'être* on which the Jihadists recourse to brutal violence was predicated, and as the regimes teetered or toppled, the Jihadists appeared more and more like impotent bystanders witnessing history from the sidelines.

In a sense, the Arab Spring initially appeared to represent the death knell for jihadists. The fact that the Arab uprisings had been able to oust entrenched dictators like Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak in less than a month, while Jihadist violence had proven unable to significantly affect the balance of power in any Arab country after a decades long struggle, was incontrovertible.¹

So compelling was this account of dismal failure that commentators intimated that 'the organisation might not survive'.² These sorts of sentiments were widespread in the immediate euphoric aftermath of the revolutions, but ultimately proved somewhat naïve and short-sighted. The structural conditions created by the revolutions were to prove more telling for the fate of the jihadist movement than the 'Arab Spring' itself.

¹ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 111.

² Byman, 'Al Qa'ida's Terrible Spring Why the Organization Might Not Survive'.

It was certainly true that in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the jihadists were rhetorically floored. A cross-sectional analysis of over 500 jihadist statements released onto forums and via social media between 2010 and 2015, was conducted as part of this study, with texts coded for key themes. This analysis showed that immediately prior to the uprisings, hyperbole and bragging from AQ-inspired ideologues had reached its zenith; one internet forum writer claiming in late 2010 that:

The reality today is that the empire of America is near to collapse and Al-Qai'da is on its way to regain the Islamic Caliphate the Almighty God has promised to the nation of monotheism.³

However, the braggadocio and self-aggrandisement that had become a prominent feature of AQ's discourse after 9/11, all but disappeared by the start of 2011. In its place, the jihadist forums were awash with attempts to interpret and reframe political events to suit Jihadist narratives, desperate to somehow retain relevance. As one forum post in late 2011 argued:

...toppling of regimes is not a change by itself but it is a blessed step to achieve this change. The ummah's current battle against its enemy is more critical than its battle against the toppled regimes.⁴

These convoluted attempts to reframe and appropriate events as their own were remarkably unconvincing. The challenge for the jihadists during this period appeared greater than simply the questions of whether or not peaceful protest made their violent methodology unnecessary; it was more a fundamental problem of how they might meaningfully engage with the complex political reality around them, which bordered on an existential crisis. Jihadists were drawn into detailed political commentary and fairly esoteric ideological discussions on these issues. These efforts to radically reframe political events according to jihadist ideology opened up the risk of inconsistencies and contradictions. Many forums, for example, were awash with vociferous debates over whether jihadists should critique the uprisings or support them. One forum

³ Forum participant, 10 December 2010, retrieved 16 January 2011 from <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=50676>. Unless stated, all direct Arabic translations are the authors'.

⁴ Forum participant, Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum, 21 December, 2011 retrieved 9 January 2012 from <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=482941>.

participant earnestly appealed for aiding the ‘glorious revolutions’, recognising the protestors as fellow ‘youth of the ummah’:

What then are you waiting for? Save yourselves and your children! The time is ripe, especially after the youth of the ummah took upon themselves the burden of their glorious revolutions, enduring the bullets and tortures of the tyrants.⁵

Others offered more tentative support, pragmatically arguing that the uprisings might be co-opted for their cause:

Since the land is in chaos and Qaddafi is helping through his reactions and actions to increase the hatred of the population against him, it will be easier for us to recruit new members....There is lots of work to do....we have to help the people fighting and then build an Islamic state.⁶

Some, however, were far more condemnatory, taking ‘principled’ stances against the engagement with democratic change:

Many people in Egypt and in other countries have been misled to the point that many of them do not realise that democratic rule is contrary to Shari'ah.⁷

A Jordanian who had fought in Iraq under al-Zarqawi, was adamant that the uprisings were destined to fail, and the Jihadists would then step into the void, reaping the benefits of failure and soured idealism:

At the end of the day, how much change will there really be in Egypt and other countries? There will be many disappointed demonstrators, and that’s when they will realize what the only alternative is. We are certain that this will all play into our hands.⁸

⁵ Forum participant, Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum, February 8 2011 retrieved 15 February 2011 from <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=87389>.

⁶ Shane, ‘Al Qa’ida Finds Itself at a Crossroads - News Analysis’.

⁷ Forum participant, Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum, February 8 2011 retrieved 15 February 2011 from <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=87389>.

⁸ Shane, ‘Al Qa’ida Finds Itself at a Crossroads - News Analysis’.

Irrespective of the jihadists' fundamental ideological disconnect from the vast majority of the secular protestors in Tahrir Square and elsewhere, or equivocal attitude towards the uprisings themselves, there was no escaping the fact that these events were the most important to have taken place anywhere in the world for a generation of jihadists. Whatever response they might merit, they certainly could not be ignored. Indeed, Jihadist forums and literature over this early period responded rapidly, but not very effectively, to developments on the ground.

The jihadist ideologues became preoccupied with political commentary – sometimes supportive and others critical of the events – but left unable to form a consistent and decisive narrative frame that could make sense of the events for the jihadist worldview.

Islamism, democracy and jihadism

The uprisings in both Tunisia and Egypt were not only instrumental in removing entrenched dictators from power, but also brought about unprecedented electoral successes for Islamist groups like Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood. As much as they might have wanted to, jihadists could not have conceivably accepted or even shown tacit support for this successful democratic transition by their co-religionists, without appearing deeply hypocritical.

As early as 1991, Zawahiri had penned his first book, *The Bitter Harvest*. This was a vicious denunciation of Islamist groups for embracing democracy; a reprehensible system of governance as it rejected both the absolute sovereignty of God (*hakimiyya*), and principles of loyalty to the believers and disavowal of disbelievers (*al-wala wal-bara*).

Jihadist attitudes towards the democratic victories of the Arab Spring's Islamists were a little more ambiguous and conflicted. The official ideologues of al-Qa'ida obstinately rejected any concession towards democracy, which of course they viewed as an anathema to jihadism. On the other hand, they were also acutely aware of the danger of being rendered obsolete by the tremendous new successes enjoyed by the non-violent Islamists.

Fortunately for the jihadists, this apparent quandary was soon resolved by events in Egypt, where the Arab Spring quickly turned to a winter of discontent, paving the way for the old military guard to usurp power through a 'counter-revolution'. If the Arab Spring had been a

setback for Al-Qa‘ida and jihadists everywhere, the Egyptian military’s overthrow of the elected Muslim Brotherhood government on 3 July 2013 would prove to be their saving grace; a powerful validation of everything they had warned against.

Western policy-makers, themselves frustrated by President Mohammed Morsi’s leadership, and acutely sensitive to the risk of being accused of interference, acquiesced to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s (to some degree popular) coup against Morsi’s democratically elected government.

For jihadists everywhere, this was irrefutable proof that democracy was a ruse and would never bring about true Islamic political power. Even if believers sold their very souls to win democratic elections, their victories would be meaningless. Only violence therefore could bring about real change. Just days after the coup against President Morsi, in a series of tweets from its official Twitter account, al-Shabaab castigated the Muslim Brotherhood for attempting to gain power and impose sharia by following the democratic process:

It’s time to remove those rose-tinted spectacles and see the world as accurately as it is, change comes by the bullet alone; NOT the ballot’

They should perhaps learn a little from the lessons of history and those “democratically elected” before them in #Algeria or even #Hamas⁹

Al-Zawahiri, behind the curve, made a similar appeal a month later, on 4 August 2013 reiterating many of al-Shabaab’s arguments.¹⁰ Indeed, Morsi’s removal in Egypt provided a lifeline for jihadists everywhere, exonerating their interpretations of events: that the ‘near enemy’ (local dictators) could never be defeated whilst they were being propped up by the ‘far enemy’ (the US or the West); the West would never allow believers to come to power, even if they operated legitimately within the existing frameworks; sufficient change could not come through political processes alone without violent jihad; and democracy remained a dangerous illusion and a threat to Islam.

Establishment of the ‘Caliphate’

⁹ HSMpress (@HSMpress1), Twitter post, 04 July 2013, https://twitter.com/HSMpress_1.

¹⁰ Bill Roggio, ‘Zawahiri Rebukes Muslim Brotherhood for Trusting Democracy’, *The Long War Journal*, 3 August 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/08/zawahiri_rebukes_muslim_brothe.php.

While most commentators and analysts opined that the Arab Spring might represent the death knell for jihadism, there were some early ominous signs of the secular uprisings potentially being subverted. In late 2011, the black flag of the *khilafah* (the Islamic shahadah in white text written on a black background), began appearing frequently in peaceful protests across the MENA region, sometimes alongside other potent Jihadist imagery.¹¹ At the time – in a prevailing atmosphere of hope that the Arab uprisings might still represent a Spring – it was unclear what this black flag phenomenon represented. In hindsight, it was an ominous early portent of things to come; of an era that became less about democratic hope, than about the violence of an emergent group calling themselves the Islamic State.

After Morsi's removal and the return of military rule in Egypt, ISIL were able to take up the re-framist jihadist narrative, without being dogged by the contradictions that had beset AQ ideologues for the preceding two years. In August 2013, ISIL spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani argued:

Today, our precious Ummah is living in slavery and humiliation. The evidence of this is what is known as the Arab Spring revolutions, in which people went out demanding freedom and dignity. For the armies of the tyrants have humiliated the Muslims and made them slaves to unjust pagan laws.¹²

This worrying trajectory came to a head on 29 June 2014, when ISIL brazenly announced the re-establishment of the Caliphate - the religio-political entity that had historically governed vast swathes of the Islamic world, but which in this new incarnation would now straddle parts of Syria and Iraq:

As for you, oh soldiers of the Islamic State, then congratulations to you. Congratulations on this clear victory, congratulations on this great triumph.... Now the caliphate has returned, humbling the necks of the enemy.

¹¹ William McCants, 'Slideshow: Black Flag', *Foreign Policy*, 7 November 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/slideshow/black-flag/>.

¹² Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 'Whose Religion Is Peaceful', August 2013, retrieved September 2013 [<http://www.muslim.org/vb/showthread.php?518859>]

Now hope is being actualized. Now the dream has become a reality.¹³

Evincing global pretensions, IS declared that it was now incumbent on all Muslims worldwide (al-Qa‘ida and other Jihadists included), to swear fealty to their new religio-political leader, Caliph Ibrahim, as the self-aggrandising Baghdadi demanded he be addressed.

Many evinced shock at the rapid ascension of IS and establishment of a caliphate, dumbfounded by both the alacrity and sheer audacity of this event. However, in hindsight we might note that whilst this turn of events may have elicited astonishment, it was not entirely unexpected. Rather, both ISIL and its progenitors – AQI and ISI – having already established a number of ‘emirates’ in the political vacuum of post-Saddam Iraq, and more recently, in civil war riven Syria, had long articulated the desire to secure political territory as one of their principle goals. The establishment of a more expansive Caliphate was therefore assumed to be the inevitable next step. For many years, al-Qa‘ida had itself pointed to an aspirational future Caliphate as their utopian end goal — one which allowed them to justify their violent excesses in the here and now. Islamic State, abetted by the insecurity and tumult in the wake of the Arab uprisings, managed to turn that abstract aspiration into a dystopic reality.

It would be myopic to lay the blame for IS’s emergence solely at the feet of the failed Arab Spring. Of course, the uprisings were central to the rise of IS, particularly in the wake of the Syrian uprising, civil war, and brutal suppression by Syrian dictator, Bashar Al-Assad. However, the rise of IS also stems in very large part from the emergence of AQI and ISI in Iraq, which of course saw no such uprising. Consequently, the emergence of IS cannot be understood without understanding the fallout from invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003; the destruction of the country’s infrastructure in its wake; the dismantlement of its military and security apparatus which left insecurity and power vacuums; the rule of a divisive, sectarian Shiite political administration in Baghdad. All of these issues are central to explaining the rise of IS’ rapid ascendancy.

Irrespective of what the combination of structural causal factors may have been, IS managed to hijack not only the failing Arab Spring, and the chaos and insecurity of the region, but also

¹³ Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani, *This is the Promise of Allah*, 29 June 2014, available at <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html>

the floundering jihadist narrative along the way, breathing new life into the global Salafi-Jihadi movement. The audacious establishment of a caliphate in 2014 represented a new era for Jihadism and allowed Islamic State to claim to be the rightful new heirs to the Jihadist mantle.

CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE IN THE NARRATIVE

Whilst it is abundantly clear that the momentous events of the last five years have fundamentally shifted jihadist narratives and discourses, an exclusionary focus on the rupture and change within these narratives, would belie the significant continuity that remained within Jihadist worldviews. Consequently, some key precepts of the Jihadist meta-narrative have endured, linking both pre-Arab Spring worldviews with those that developed in the post-Islamic State context; whilst other themes have emerged within the narrative which serve to highlight the clear disconnect between the two.

Historical themes

At the heart of the narrative remains the view that contemporary conflicts are part of a wider historical global attack on Islam and Muslims by the non-believers. This notion of a war on Islam has been present since the earliest AQ statements.¹⁴ The adversary in this ‘war on Islam’ is often blurred into the ‘West’ or the ‘crusaders’, drawing on particular historical themes and collective memory. Indeed, the invocation of the Crusades is a constant refrain in the jihadist narrative. AQ have referred to the Americans and their allies almost exclusively as the ‘Zionist-Crusader Alliance’. Indeed, one of al-Qa’ida’s earliest statements to the outside world in 1998, was presented under the banner of the *World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders*.¹⁵ Much of AQ’s later propaganda literature continued to perpetuate this narrative – note for example, the *Result of Seven Years of Crusades*, which received a huge circulation after it was released in 2008 on the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.¹⁶ Concomitantly, Jihadists have long sought to portray themselves as chivalrous medieval knights, at the head of

¹⁴ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qa’ida and the Road to 9/11*, 1. Vintage Books ed, National Bestseller (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007).

¹⁵ Available at: <http://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>

¹⁶ Akil N Awan and Mina Al-Lami, ‘Al-Qa’ida’s Virtual Crisis’, *The RUSI Journal* 154, no. 1 (2009): 60, doi:10.1080/03071840902818605.

the vanguard, opposing these ‘neo-Crusaders’. Indeed, the appeal to the valiant holy warrior or chivalrous knight is a recurring trope in much Jihadist literature, with Ayman al-Zawahiri’s famous text, *Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi* (Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner), representing one of the earliest and most important examples.¹⁷

Recent Islamic State propaganda has also perpetuated these Crusades analogies, and has taken them to a new level. Issue 4 of its flagship magazine, *Dabiq*, released in October 2014 for example, was entitled *The Failed Crusade*, and contained the feature length article ‘Reflections on the Final Crusade’. In a striking illustration of the anachronism represented by Islamic State’s worldview, the magazine quoted IS spokesman Mohammed al-Adnani’s infamous threat against ‘Rome’s Crusaders’,¹⁸ juxtaposed against a photo-shopped image of Islamic State’s flag fluttering atop the Holy See in the Vatican. In the official IS statement claiming responsibility for the 13 November Paris attacks they referred to France as being at “the forefront of the Crusader campaign”.¹⁹

Religious identity

Religious identity is another central constant tenet within the Jihadist narrative, used tirelessly to dehumanise enemies, as well as delineate insider-outsider status. Jihadist ideologues have always made use of the traditional conservative Salafi theological concept of *al-wala w’al-bara* - association with believers and disavowal of disbelievers, particularly when raising the spectre of the corrupting unbelievers. However, *Takfir* - the pronouncing of disbelief or excommunication of other Muslims – has also been a persistent theme, required to justify deaths of innocent Muslims while still claiming to be fighting for Islam. So pervasive is this desire to demarcate the contours of belief and disbelief, that critics of Jihadists often refer to them pejoratively as takfiris (excommunicators).

Whilst caustic sectarianism, aligned with the belief that other Muslims are beyond the pale, has always been a prominent part of jihadist ideology, jihadist leaders have often taken a more ambivalent or pragmatic attitude to minorities in the past, sometimes downplaying difference in order not to risk alienating audiences and constituencies. Indeed, al-Zawahiri tentatively

¹⁷ Awan, ‘Spurning “this Worldly Life”: Terrorism and Martyrdom in Contemporary Britain.’, 245.

¹⁸ Available at: <http://media.clarionproject.org/files/islamic-state/islamic-state-isis-magazine-Issue-4-the-failed-crusade.pdf>

¹⁹ 14 November 2015 [https://twitter.com/abo_m_50/status/665479953568432128].

rebuked al-Qa'ida in Iraq's leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for fomenting internecine conflict with the Shiite in Iraq in 2005. Pointing out how senseless and counter-productive these actions were, he asked, 'Can the mujahideen kill all the Shia in Iraq? Has any Islamic state in history ever tried that?'²⁰

IS and the Syrian conflict has replaced AQ's often pragmatic and ambivalent approach to terrorist targeting, with a much more caustic and acrimonious attitude toward sectarian differences. With battle-lines being drawn against the 'Shiite crescent', represented by Assad's Alawite regime, Hizbullah, and Iranian backed Shiite militias, religious sectarian fervour has reached fever pitch. IS have taken the criterion of religious identity to a whole new extreme, inventing a whole new lexicon to denigrate the Shiites as part of their internecine war.²¹ The observable difference between AQ's and IS's attacks on the Shiites is perhaps not particularly surprising, considering that IS' progenitors were participants and instigators of the brutal sectarian civil war of 2006-7 in Iraq. Moreover, IS' current success in controlling territory in both Iraq and Syria is predicated in part on tacit support from Sunnis in both Iraq and Syria, who were disillusioned by the highly corrupt and sectarian Shiite government in Baghdad, or chafing under the brutal regime of an Alawite dictator in Damascus.

On 23 Jun 2015, Islamic State spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, appealed to Sunni grievances at the violence that was occurring against them, in the context of the Iraqi government failing to bring them into the political process:

Be keen to conquer in this holy month [of Ramadan] and to become exposed to martyrdom...[bringing] calamity for the infidels - Shi'ites and apostate Muslims.

The Sunni people are now behind the jihadists...the enemies have been petrified by the daily pledges of allegiance by the chiefs of tribes to the Mujahideen... Needless to say, you all know the kidnappings, evictions, and killings of Sunnis that happen every day in Baghdad'.²²

²⁰ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, July 9 2005, The Office of the Director of National Security, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm>

²¹ Aaron Zelin and Phillip Smyth, 'The Vocabulary of Sectarianism', *Foreign Policy*, 29 January 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/29/the-vocabulary-of-sectarianism/>.

²² Ali Abdelaty and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, 'Islamic State Urges Followers to Escalate Attacks in Ramadan', *Reuters*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/23/us-mideast-crisis-ramadan-idUSKBN0P31YH20150623>.

Thus by peddling and perpetuating sectarian rivalries, IS were able to portray themselves as the crucial vanguard against oppression and disbelief. As one forum participant argued in 2014: ‘[IS] stands alone in Iraq against the armies of infidelity’.²³

Schisms

Osama bin Laden, as both friends and foes alike willingly concede, was an able, charismatic and much-respected leader, the like of which we are unlikely to see again. His death left a gaping void in the movement that was unlikely to be filled by any potential successor. Zawahiri’s succession did nothing to ease the loss, and rather reinforced how central bin Laden had been to the whole enterprise. The stark juxtaposition between the lofty, articulate warrior-cleric, who eloquently recited poetry in classical Arabic, with the dour, humourless eye doctor, who spoke haltingly in his guttural Egyptian dialect, made for a rather unflattering comparison for Zawahiri, doing little to endear him to the movement.

To Zawahiri’s credit, he was a better leader than many analysts assumed he would be. Indeed, Zawahiri managed to successfully transfer the various al-Qa‘ida affiliates’ oaths of allegiance from bin Laden to himself, in the months following his death, including those of important offshoots like Al-Qa‘ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Qa‘ida in the Maghreb (AQIM). Moreover, he later also increased al-Qa‘ida’s ambit by receiving new pledges of allegiance from al-Shabaab in Somalia and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, or opening new fronts, like that of the new offshoot in the Indian sub-continent.

Nevertheless, these successes were not enough to engender loyalty in all, particularly amongst those groups that had shown secessionist tendencies even whilst bin Laden had been alive. Primarily, these were the rebellious Zarqawite strains in Iraq who would later go on to become IS. The first serious schisms and fissures began to appear after Abu Bakr Baghdadi, leader of the ISI chose to export his particular brand of violence over the border to Syria in August 2011, following the outbreak of civil war. Baghdadi’s deputy in Syria, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani,

²³ Forum writer, 3 February 2014, <<http://alplatformmedia.com/vb/showthread.php?t=37073>>, retrieved 18 February 2014.

proved highly adept at recruiting and training fighters, and soon established an eminently capable military unit – Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).²⁴ Baghdadi, however, soon fearing irredentist ambitions, announced that ISI and JN would merge under the new moniker, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Joulani was incensed that he had not been consulted and sensing his power might wane, formally complained to Zawahiri, who, seeing the opportunity to reassert his significance, decided to mediate between the two. Zawahiri ruled against the merger, ordered the disbanding of ISIL and allocated the Syrian front to JN as al-Qa‘ida’s official affiliate in Syria. He also appointed an emissary, a veteran of the movement, Abu Khalid al-Suri, to ensure his wishes were carried out, and to oversee the establishment of cordial relations between the various factions. Baghdadi, showing complete contempt for al-Qa‘ida Central’s authority, not only rejected the order, but promptly ordered al-Suri’s assassination in a suicide bombing which would mark the beginning of a brutal internecine war between the various jihadist factions in Iraq and Syria, and drew battle lines amongst Jihadists the world over.

The jihadist media space over the past four years has reflected this dispute between those aligned with AQ and those with IS. Schisms and internecine conflict has spread globally, with groups as far afield as North Africa and Indonesia fracturing and declaring their allegiances along IS and anti-IS lines.

The Celebration of Savagery

On 3 February 2015, IS released a video entitled *Healing of the Believers’ Chests*, in which Muadh al-Kasasbeh, a captured Jordanian fighter pilot who participated in airstrikes against IS positions, is shown standing in a steel cage.²⁵ Clad in an orange Guantanamo-esque jumpsuit, he stands accused of incinerating civilians during the aerial bombardment. Apparently heavily sedated, his face betrays no emotion as his punishment is announced; *lex talionis*, he is to be burnt alive. The video documents the punishment in excruciating detail, as the flames first engulf and then consume al-Kasasbeh, until finally his smouldering corpse collapses to the ground. The video voyeuristically lingers on Kasasbeh’s charred face, frozen in a death-mask

²⁴ Rania Abouzeid, ‘The Jihad Next Door’, *Politico*, 23 June 2014.

²⁵ ‘Healing of the believers’ chests’, al-Furqan Foundation, 3 February 2015

of agony. The brutality of what takes place is particularly jarring juxtaposed against the slick production values of the video.

From beheadings of bound victims with hunting knives, to fighters playing football with decapitated heads; and from throwing homosexuals to their deaths from rooftops, to dragging victims to their deaths behind pick-up trucks, brutal yet meticulously staged savagery has become a hallmark of IS' violence. Later media productions feature even more egregious examples of barbarity, as if increasingly desensitised viewers needed ever more taboo content, in their steady diet of this pornography of violence. In the 23 June 2015 production, *But If You Return, We Shall Return*,²⁶ for example, three separate groups are accused of being spies before they are accorded their horrific punishments: one group is submerged in a steel cage until they drown; the second group are graphically burned alive in their vehicle; the final group are beheaded with explosives.

Although AQ's narrative has always justified extreme violence and attacks that kill thousands, part of their narrative generally demands theological justifications for violence. From the perspective of AQ leaders, violence is an important part, but only a part nonetheless, of the broader ideology. Understandably, they were wary of the creation of a generation of Jihadists who understood little more than violence, but more importantly, could not contextualise that violence as a 'necessary' aspect of the broader struggle, as opposed to simply revelling in the violence itself.²⁷ Al-Zawahiri, criticising the youthful Jihadist following of al-Zarqawi for their pre-occupation with bloodshed and brutality, wrote in 2005:

Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable, also, are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the Sheikh of the slaughterers.²⁸

²⁶ Nineveh Province Media Office, 'But if you return, we shall return', 23 June 2015.

²⁷ Awan, Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, *Radicalisation and the Media*. PP??

²⁸ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, July 9 2005

In this pointed criticism, Zawahiri was in fact referring to Zarqawi's pioneering of the brutal videotaped beheadings, which he correctly predicted would in fact repulse the Muslim masses on whose behalf the jihadists claimed to serve as the crucial vanguard.

In contrast, the IS narrative, which is the heir to the Zarqawite strain of Jihadism, does not appear to share this ends justify the means logic, or share concern for legitimacy of targets. In many instances, it almost appears as if death and violence is an end in itself. Ideology and thought are far less important than the act.

Understandably, AQ attempted to dissociate itself from IS's propensity for seemingly mindless violence, disavowing the 'shedding of protected blood'.²⁹ In May 2014, Al-Zawahiri released a statement calling on Al-Baghdadi to 'put an end to this bloody carnage and be fully devoted to fighting the enemies of Islam and the Sunnis'.³⁰

However, a closer reading of IS' unfettered violence, reveals a twisted logic that should not have come as a surprise to Zawahiri. *The Management of Savagery*,³¹ published in 2004 by the al-Qa'ida theoretician Abu Bakr Naji – a tome that was characterised by NPR as 'al-Qaida's playbook',³² appears to hold the key to explaining IS' rationale for brutality. The text calls for the administration of abominable savagery, and massacres of the enemy in order to terrorise them:

We must make this battle very violent, such that death is a heartbeat away, so that the two groups will realize that entering this battle will frequently lead to death....Our enemies will not be merciful to us if they seize us. Thus, it behooves us to make them think one thousand times before attacking us.'

So the purpose of the violence is not whimsical, random or crazed, but deliberate, strategic and didactic;³³ it terrifies the enemy, whilst simultaneously polarizing audiences of the violence.

²⁹ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26016318>>.

³⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri statement posted 2 May 2014, retrieved 15 May 2014 from <www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=678239>.

³¹ Available at: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/Management_of_Savagery.pdf.

³² [<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5516640>].

³³ Alistair Crooke, 'The ISIS' "Management of Savagery" in Iraq', *The Huffington Post*, 30 June 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/iraq-isis-alQa'ida_b_5542575.html.

All of this is germane to the ultimate aim of Naji's text – the establishment of an Islamic State, and his tactics appear to have greatly influenced IS. The text is not only part of the organisation's curriculum, but is widely read among provisional commanders and senior fighters as a way to justify beheadings as not only religiously permissible, but commendable acts.³⁴ There is little doubt that IS' brutal reputation for savagery was central to the widespread defections amongst the Iraqi security forces, such as those witnessed in Mosul in 2014, even though the Iraqis vastly outnumbered the IS fighters advancing on their positions.

Eschatology, the Realised Caliphate and Utopian Project

Some analysts have argued that AQ is an irrational actor, lacking any coherent strategy; captured in Jean Elshtain's claim that, 'there is a nihilistic edge to terrorism: It aims to destroy, most often in the service of wild and utopian goals that make no sense at all in the usual political ways.'³⁵ Whilst their idea of the global caliphate may have seemed utopian and unachievable, AQ were never nihilistic actors. AQ needed potent religio-political discourses to sustain and legitimise their ideology, which was heavily dependent on acceptance of the achievability of their distant utopian vision. Failure to achieve legitimacy, al-Zawahiri warned, will cause the jihadist movement to be 'crushed in the shadows, far from the masses who are distracted and fearful.'³⁶ Consequently, AQ narratives always sought to create a narrative gap for their audiences, by pointing out grievances that the entire Muslim *ummah* must respond to, and why AQ were best placed to provide this response.³⁷ But these narratives, and the clear lack of efficacy in AQ's response, left open more questions than they resolved.

The advent of IS's Caliphate by contrast, has helped fill that narrative gap for the jihadist movement. IS play on similar grievances to AQ, but in a way that often rejects complex ideological justifications in favour of action. IS's focus is on creating the utopia in the here and now, and they have provided ample evidence of both tangible goals, but also unprecedented material success. This is perhaps the most fundamental divergence in the ideology of Al-Qa'ida

³⁴ Hassan Hassan, 'Isis Has Reached New Depths of Depravity. But There Is a Brutal Logic behind It', *The Guardian*, 8 February 2015, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/08/isis-islamic-state-ideology-sharia-syria-iraq-jordan-pilot>.

³⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War on Terror*, (New York: Basic Books, 2003) p. 19; Cindy Coombs, *Terrorism in the Twenty First Century*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2006), preface.

³⁶ Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, July 9 2005

³⁷ Akil N Awan, 'Success of the Meta-Narrative: How Jihadists Maintain Legitimacy', *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 11 (2009).

and Islamic State; and the reason for the competitive advantage of the latter in terms of global recruitment over the past several years. Their goal is to contribute to a concrete state, and not an abstract eschatological vision, and since as early as 2006, when the successors to Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi – the former leader of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq declared the formation of an Islamic state in Iraq, this strain of jihadist ideology began to focus far more obsessively on the task of establishing a physical state and of using any means necessary to achieve this.

While ISIL/IS established territorial emirates in Iraq and later Syria, AQ central leadership continued to talk, hypothetically, about the notion of a caliphate. Indeed, IS’ forebears were, in one sense, putting into practice what AQ-Central was preaching. In his tenth Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our People in Egypt, AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri discussed the concept, providing a useful summary of how it is often understood in AQ texts. Most often, it takes the shape of a historical reference – ‘the Jewish occupation of Palestine would not have taken place without the occupation of Egypt and the fall of the Islamic Caliphate’³⁸ – or as a theoretical or ideological construct – ‘the West seeks to lead people away from the fundamentals of the Islamic Caliphate and what leads to it’.³⁹ Al-Zawahiri’s 2012 statement on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks combined both with a millenarian vision:⁴⁰

...we should work to establish the Caliphate that does not recognise the national state, national religions, borders that were put in place by the occupiers. We should establish a righteous Caliphate that follows the path of the Prophet and believes in the unity of Muslims’ lands, encourages brotherhood between Muslims in their religion, makes everyone equal, removes borders that were put in place by the enemies, spreads justice, imposes Sharia, supports vulnerable people, and liberates all Muslim countries, including the usurped Palestine, and the threatened al-Aqsa.

This more abstract, eschatological version of the Caliphate, without a clear or tangible set of goals, was evident for example in Zawahiri’s early attempts to reconcile what was happening in Iraq and Syria in 2012 with AQ’s framework.

³⁸ Ayman Al- Zawahiri, Message to the People of Egypt, 10, June 2012. Retrieved 27 June 2011 <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=63970>.

³⁹ Ayman Al- Zawahiri, Message to the People of Egypt, 10. <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=63970>.

⁴⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri, statement 13 September 2012, retrieved 15 from <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=70528>.

This will melt all groups and coalitions of jihad in one pot and turn them into the Shari'ah framework and the solid nucleus of the state of the rightly guided Caliphate, God willing.⁴¹

This statement was striking in that it bore very little relation to what was actually happening on the ground. Further, by giving credence to the idea of the Caliphate, Zawahiri and other writers sympathetic to AQ were inadvertently only preparing the groundwork for ISIL's more concrete plans. Meanwhile, ISIL continued to concern itself with the Caliphate's material manifestation. A typical statement from ISIL spokesman al-Adnani in July 2013:

we hereby congratulate the dear homeland for the great victory achieved by the heroes of the Islamic State in Baghdad of the Caliphate during the Vanquish the Tyrants raid, the latest such raid carried out as part of the Tearing Down the Walls campaign.⁴²

As AQ saw the jihadist mantle slipping from its grasp, in autumn of 2013, Zawahiri felt the need to define the concept of the Caliphate. He attempted to re-shift the narrative in AQ's favour, presenting them as magnanimous losers in the race towards the Caliphate, whose ultimate aims had only ever been the Ummah's eventual success:⁴³

Al-Qa'ida wants a Caliph who is chosen by the ummah with consensus and free will. If the ummah established an Islamic rule in any of its regions before establishing the Caliphate system, we will be the first to accept whoever the Muslim ummah chose as the imam who fulfils the sharia requirements and rules in accordance with the Qur'an and the prophet's sunnah. This is because we have no interest in power; we only seek the establishment of an Islamic rule.

ISIL meanwhile, were busy turning the abstract millenarian notion of the Caliphate, propounded by AQ and others, into a present, tangible reality. Central to understanding the

⁴¹ Abu Sa'ad al Amili, forum post 15 October, 2012, Retrieved 18 October 2012 from <www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=72712>.

⁴² Al-Adnani al-Shami statement posted 30 July 2013, retrieved 2 August 2013 from <www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=324301>.

⁴³ Ayman al-Zawahiri, Statement released 12 September 2013, retrieved 30 September 2013 from <www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=678239>.

difference between IS and previous jihadi movements therefore is their differing eschatology. IS propaganda uses popular apocalyptic literature in order to present itself as the fulfilment of divine destiny, to an extent and in a way that had not previously been possible. The name of IS's official magazine, Dabiq, is chosen for its significance in apocalyptic literature. As the first edition of the magazine stated, the name:

is taken from the area named Dabiq in the northern countryside of Halab (Aleppo) in Sham. This place was mentioned in a hadith describing some of the events of the Malahim (what is sometimes referred to as Armageddon in English). One of the greatest battles between the Muslims and the crusaders will take place near Dabiq.⁴⁴

IS propaganda videos have quoted Abu Musa'b al-Zarqawi saying in 2004 that, 'The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify... until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq'⁴⁵. Dabiq's first issue describes how this will be the first step to the conquest of the world, drawing on classical and contemporary apocalyptic traditions.⁴⁶

IS have therefore shifted the jihadi movement from an abstract future eschatology, to one realised in the here and now, claiming that 'the signs of victory have appeared'. In doing so, they tend not to engage in detailed political commentary or explanations of ideological subtleties, instead focusing on how the material facts of conquering territory, securing loyalty and support, and amassing wealth, bear out the realisation of divine prophecy. It is this combination that was used in a statement entitled, *This is the Promise of Allah*, which announced IS's Caliphate on 29 June 2014. After reeling off a list of IS' apparent material successes, including implementing the Shari'a punishments, and introducing the jizya tax, IS spokesman *Adnani* stated that there was only one religious obligation that remained, and which could no longer be neglected:

The signs of victory have appeared. Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of monotheism, rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyalah. The

⁴⁴ Dabiq, Issue 1, p. 4. Michael W. S. Ryan, "Dabiq: What Islamic State's New Magazine Tells Us about Their Strategic Direction, Recruitment Patterns and Guerrilla Doctrine", Terrorism Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation, August 2014.

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42702#.VmQbvOOyOk0].

⁴⁵ "Why Islamic State chose town of Dabiq for propaganda" [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-30083303>].

⁴⁶ Ryan, "Dabiq".

frontlines are defended....There only remained one matter, a collective obligation that the ummah sins by abandoning. It is a forgotten obligation. It is the caliphate. It is the caliphate – the abandoned obligation of the era.

In light of the fact that the Islamic State has no legal constraint or excuse that can justify delaying or neglecting the establishment of the caliphate.⁴⁷

Keenly aware that AQ, or indeed other Jihadist groups in Syria, were unlikely to meekly accept this self-aggrandising proclamation and assertion of leadership, Adnani attempts to demonstrate the legitimacy of the declaration, hoping to expose the hypocrisy of those who might choose to reject such an ostensibly self-evident case for a legitimate caliphate.

We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of caliphate, it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the Caliph Ibrāhīm and support him. The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the caliphate's authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.

The Caliph Ibrāhīm has fulfilled all the conditions for the caliphate mentioned by the scholars. He was given bay'ah [oath of allegiance] in Iraq by the people of authority in the Islamic State...The land now submits to his order and authority from Aleppo to Diyala. So fear Allah, O slaves of Allah. Listen to your caliph and obey him.

So rush O Muslims and gather around your caliph, so that you may return as you once were for ages, kings of the earth and knights of war.⁴⁸

In light of these exhortations, which had shrewdly built on the very narrative AQ had propounded for years, Zawahiri could do little but look on in impotent rage at his increasing obscurity. Back in his 2001 autobiography, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, Zawahiri had argued that AQ's most important strategic goal was to seize control of a state or part of territory, as 'without achieving this goal our actions will mean nothing'.⁴⁹ Now that IS was doing precisely that, Zawahiri had been hoisted on his own petard. Finding himself increasingly

⁴⁷ Adnani, "This is the Promise of Allah", available at [<https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html>].

⁴⁸ Available at <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html>

⁴⁹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* (2001) Available at: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/6759609-knights-under-the-prophet-banner.pdf>

irrelevant and acknowledging his profound weakness, around early 2015 he appeared to strike a more conciliatory tone:

Despite the big mistakes of ISIL, if I were in Iraq or Syria I would cooperate with them in killing the crusaders and secularists and Shia even though I don't recognise the legitimacy of their state, because the matter is bigger than that.⁵⁰

Most significantly, this shift to an eschatology of the here and now means that IS are purporting to sell a chance to participate in building the promised utopian state. These narratives move beyond appeals to violence, and provide other more nuanced motivations to joining the Jihadist cause, including state-building, joining a community, escaping persecution, and enjoying religious freedoms.

Seen as a totality, these are the main shifts that have taken place in the global jihadist narratives in response to a tumultuous 5 year period. The picture is however far from uniform across the globe, and the chapters that follow dissect the particularities of how jihadism has transformed in key regions. Chapters two and three explore in more depth aspects of the history and leadership of Islamic State, and their divergence from AQ. Chapters then consider areas of the world where IS have been on the ascendancy in the global battle of ideas (Egypt, Tunisia, Nigeria), other areas where AQ-affiliates have maintained their lead and needed to respond to the challenge of IS (Yemen, the Maghreb), and South Asia, where the Taliban-led jihadist movement has been challenged. In each case, the global jihadist brands have needed to respond and adapt to complex local markets in a time of upheaval. A number of broad themes, sectarianism, radicalisation in the West and IS' visual media, are then explored in the final three chapters.

⁵⁰ See Moar Fahmy, "Al Qa'ida calls Islamic State illegitimate but suggests cooperation", Reuters, 9 September 2015 [<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-zawahri-idUKKCN0R91LC20150909>].