

The Rise of ISIS

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Summary by James Byrne

It currently seems impossible to discuss any topic related to terrorism without a group known as ISIS being a part of the discussion. For most of us, ISIS is best understood as a new player in an old game. However, the roots of this dangerous and violent group reach back to the late 1980s in Afghanistan, to the beginnings of a more familiar name in the realm of Islamist extremism: al-Qaeda.

Among the influx of young Arab men into Afghanistan who were going to fight the USSR was a man named Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi's vision that he formulated in Afghanistan all those years ago is exactly what ISIS is putting into practice today. When Zarqawi left Afghanistan and returned to his home country of Jordan, he immediately tried to start up new militant groups and put his plan into motion. After failing and spending time in a Jordanian prison, he returned to Afghanistan to find al-Qaeda growing and expanding. Zarqawi immediately demonstrated fundamental differences from the al-Qaeda leadership, which caused the heads of al-Qaeda not to trust Zarqawi. While al-Qaeda was focused on fighting corrupt Sunni regimes and the United States, Zarqawi was mainly focused on fighting Shi'a Muslims. After some time, al-Qaeda agreed to support a separate training site in Afghanistan for Zarqawi to use, but they did not invite him to join the organization, nor did he request to do so. After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Zarqawi ended up in Iraq and eventually joined al-Qaeda in an official capacity. He was ultimately killed by a U.S. bombing in 2006.

The new leader of this group was also taken out by a joint U.S.-Iraqi raid, and that left a man by the name of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in charge. Al-Baghdadi spent nearly a year in the Camp Bucca prison, where he became hardened and further radicalized. He also claims to be a direct descendant from the Prophet Muhammad. Before al-Baghdadi made any statements regarding the future of the organization, an event occurred that would change the region in a way that is truly difficult to overstate. In 2010, a fruit cart vendor in Tunisia named Mohammad Bouazizi decided to protest the seizure of his cart by setting himself on fire in the middle of the street. This sparked an event now referred to as the Arab Spring where enraged citizens upset with their governments rose up to overthrow their leaders. This happened in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria. The Syrian leader, Bashar al-Assad, refused to step down, which is the root cause for the ongoing civil war in that country today.

As noble as overthrowing a dictator is, unfortunately, this has not seemed to give the people of those countries the better life they were hoping for. Many of them believed their problems would go away by taking their oppressive leader out of power, but now that the revolutionary excitement is dying down, it is ever apparent that political violence will continue in this volatile region. It seems like the people of the Middle East are becoming more accepting of violence than they were a decade earlier and many may believe ISIS offers them a utopic answer to their desperate problems.

Al-Baghdadi publically announced the existence of the Islamic State in May of 2011 in one of his rare public speeches. Its ultimate goal is to form a caliphate, a term that harkens back to the origins of the Muslim faith and the rule of Muhammad's first four successors. The ISIS plan is to follow the same "top-down" approach it has been using, which involves announcing

that something exists, then putting plans in place to match the rhetoric. While this is essentially the exact opposite of how al-Qaeda operates, it seems to be working for ISIS. It is now carrying out thousands of attacks each year. It is also in the midst of an incredibly successful social media recruiting campaign. It has all but broken down the border between Iraq and Syria and has announced nine provinces as members of the caliphate, including countries as far west as Nigeria and as far east as Pakistan. Furthermore, the United States has been attacking ISIS with seemingly endless airstrikes, yet ISIS is stronger today than it was when the strikes began.

This incredibly dangerous organization will likely continue to grow in size and power and will continue to destroy historical monuments in an attempt to cleanse the landscape of non-Islamic artifacts. It will also continue to accept a large flow recruits every day, as well as encourage those who cannot travel to the Islamic State to take the fight to their local areas and carry out “lone wolf” attacks in the name of ISIS in countries such as the United States, Canada, UK, Australia, Germany and France.