

The early days of ISIL seem far off now. Near three years we have lived with the proto-state that Da'ish/ISIL has come to represent. In 2012 and early 2013, ISIL was a whisper; the mention of an extremist group that was growing in success and riches, gradually spreading its control and taking fighters from other groups. The ink-blot of their control spread out quickly in summer 2013 with their breakneck charge down through the spine of Iraq, culminating in the declaration of the Caliphate. Suddenly, all things seemed possible. Could the group take Baghdad? And could the Caliphate become permanent?

Stopped on the outskirts of Baiji, by the herculean efforts of Iraqi soldiers, the Caliphate stabilised for a while, transforming control of the land and pumping out propaganda on their pure Islamic rule. And the rumours of massacres we heard while they took town after town gradually transformed into the group's trademark slickly edited torture and killings, garnering them international attention that their rule alone never could. All the while, the ink-blot carried on spreading.

Now, under pressure and retreating, with Mosul Airport the latest key area to fall, the analysis of the ISIL's rise and fall in Iraq is beginning.

An oft-repeated question is what comes after ISIL because, presumably, those brutalised and scarred governorates they once ruled cannot return to what they once were. But if we are to predict what comes next, then what came before ISIL is critical to understand. A recent Transparency International report on corruption across the Middle East is the first to do so, nailing that ISIL and others are products of the economic and political circumstances (particularly corruption) they were birthed in, not some inherent impulse of Islamism. If we understand this, and how ISIL came to be, it gives us at least the chance to understand how to avoid their rise again, under a different flag and guise.

All terrorism is political, even ISIL they simply could not have existed without the right circumstances. In Syria, that was the complete and utter fragmentation of the country, the regression to force and the craving for order. But in Iraq, it was more insidious. ISIL's victory here was as much political as military, and it relied on the failings of the Iraqi state to steal away its citizens and eviscerate its territory. ISIL did not rise to popularity in Iraq because of their eschatological ideology, millinerianbrutality or force of arms, nor from an innate darkness in Islam or humanity. Instead, they arose from the cracks in the society they found themselves in the pervasive marginalisation and disenfranchisement of Sunni tribes, the endemic corruption, the poverty, the embedded, ubiquitous sectarianism, the lack of opportunity. And, once in those cracks they blew them apart to create a brand new society. In Iraq, that was a society of Sunni chauvinism, standing up for a people who had been pushed aside by the Shi'a triumphalism of post-Saddam Iraq.

Contrary to the image ISIL liked to project, this society had historical antecedents. Long before ISIL, there was Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, pushing themselves to the forefront of Iraqi insurgency from 2004. As they embedded in the burning Sunni heartlands of Iraq, reaching out to Sunni tribes, their political ambitions took shape as the Mujahideen Shura Council in 2006, and the Mutayibeen Coalition, allying with other Sunni tribes to pledge "to rid Sunnis from the oppression of the rejectionists (Shi'ite Muslims) and the crusader occupiers ... to restore rights even at the price of our own lives". They grew to dominate Anbar and Diyala Provinces, sharing an anti-Shi'a and anti-Occupationist stance with the Sunni tribes around them.

Their religious fanaticism and brutality proved too much for the tribes then. And as discontent grew, the US-sponsored tribal Awakening dampened AQ's ardour, and the surge of US troops took their key leaders. But the impulse remained. Numerous iterations of AQ-I came and went, and as Syria burned, the multiple failures of the Iraqi state to provide any form of equality of outcome or opportunity in the wake of the Awakening provided every opening that ISIL needed.

As Iraqi soldiers dropped their weapons and fled in the front of their advance, so they bedded down and spun a fantastical narrative of the restoration of Sunni pride, and their belief in equality, justice and piety. Kiosks on street corners under their control pumped out a narrative of Sunni triumphalism, the righteousness of ISIL rule and the economic and social opportunities emerging under ISIL rule to a population desperate for a protector. Of course, ISIL never kept their true nature in check. Within weeks, reports of the brutal rule of "liberated" areas of the Caliphate emerged, and ISIL kept the international media whirring with their slickly edited videos of military glory and utter depravity.

The eschatological, puritanical ideology of ISIL must be hard to love. Their endemic violence and brutality even more so. Fear alone cannot have kept people loyal. But the mix of fear and their internal narrative could. And the success of that internal narrative emerged from the memories of what came before ISIL. Even now, when their loss in Mosul is obvious, the international media still speaks of pro-ISIL districts close to the front line driven mostly by their memories of what came before, and what will come next as the Iraqi Shi'a state liberates the areas they live.

Perversely, for an organisation claiming to restore Sunni morale, ISIL benefits more when Sunni morale is degraded. Frustration and disappointment continue to be oxygen to them. And when the fighters of ISIL meet their end in Mosul, Raqqa and the hardscrabble countryside surrounding them, the political problems that birthed ISIL will still be there, and worse than ever. In Mosul now, the foreign fighters will find it hard to do anything but die in the lands they chose to make their own. But the Iraqis whose discontent and disenfranchisement birthed Da'ish will still exist. And the state that they feel so alienated from that they sought succour in acquiescing with the most extreme, debauched Islamism will also still exist, but even weaker and less capable of meaningful reconciliation than before.

Taken together, the advance of Mosul, and the report from Transparency International are necessary counter-balances, highlighting the flaws in Western policy approaches, but also the often prosaic circumstances in which extremism takes root. Both hold important lessons for the future of the Middle East, and Europe. For now, we must defeat ISIL the threat they pose to our security, and the security of the Middle East is too great. But in their defeat, we must recognise that even as we erase them from the land, the same conditions exist for a re-emergence of the impulse that birthed them.

To trade on a cliché it is not just the war that we need to win, but the peace too. And working with the Iraqi state and others to build a more equitable system that gives benefits and opportunities to all Iraqi citizens is a challenge far greater than defeating ISIL in battle. Nevertheless, even with all the difficulties identified by Transparency International, it is one we must engage in, accepting that progress is slow and the risks high, but that dis-engagement will only turn the fight against ISIL into a repeated, generational one. The battle to defeat ISIL is drawing to a close. But the war to save Syria and Iraq has only just begun.

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