

Middle East: A Brief History of the Islamic State (ISIS)

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ISIS emerged out of the dashed hopes of the Arab Spring.

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In the wake of the November 13 attacks in Paris, much of the Left has linked the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to the deepening imperialist violence in the Middle East.

War and imperialism, on one side, and the growing reach of jihadist terrorism, on the other, are said to be locked together in a mutually reinforcing embrace of violence and destruction. “Imperialist cruelty and Islamist cruelty feed each other,” the French Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) argued shortly after the Paris attacks [[1](#)]. In order to break this nihilistic death grip, we need to oppose foreign intervention, put an end to imperialist violence, and halt the ongoing plunder of wealth from countries in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere.

The basic logic of this argument is undoubtedly sound. But in terms of explanatory value, this kind of analysis does not go far enough. It suffers from too much generality and abstractness — telling us little about the specificity of this particular moment, or the nature of ISIS as a movement. By attributing a kind of automaticity or natural mirror between ISIS and imperialism, we can miss the all-important context and history that has shaped the remarkably rapid rise of the organization.

Why does the response to Western aggression and the calamitous situations in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere across the region take this particular ideological and political form? What explains the support that ISIS finds on the ground in both the Arab world and Europe? In short: why now? And why like this?

The real genesis of the Islamic State’s rise needs to be seen in the trajectory of the Arab uprisings that erupted throughout 2011 and 2012. These uprisings represented enormous hope, a hope that must continue to be defended. They were met with repression and reversal, unable to move forward in any fundamental sense. It was into this breach that Islamist groups stepped, their rise closely calibrated to the pushback against the revolts and the popular democratic aspirations that they embodied.

There was no inevitability to this. Rather, the difficulties the uprisings faced created a vacuum that

was necessarily filled by something else.

ISIS's worldview is an ideological expression of this new reality. To be clear, ISIS's rise cannot be explained as simply an outcome of ideology or religion, as many Western commentators appear to believe. There are very real social and political roots that explain the organization's growth.

But taking the ideological expression seriously helps us understand how various intersecting factors — the destructive spread of sectarianism, the devastating repression in Syria and Iraq, and the interests of different regional and international powers in the Middle East — have acted to incubate the rise of ISIS.

It is a dialectic of retreat: the growth of ISIS has reinforced, and has simultaneously fed off, an inability to achieve the aspirations of 2011 as the region has become mired in multiple, deepening crises. While ISIS's ideological framing of these crises is obviously false, it is nonetheless one that appears for some to resonate with lived experience, a comprehension of the world that makes sense of the apparent chaos and destruction. The mutually reinforcing aspects of this process are what make the current situation so dangerous.

The Ghosts of 2011

The upheavals that began with the protests in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011, and subsequently reverberated through the entire region, were the most significant revolts the Middle East had seen in over five decades. It is important to remember the initial promise embodied in these movements at a time when too many are quick to dismiss them as doomed from the outset — or worse, some kind of plot stirred by external conspirators.

These protests drew millions into mass political action for the first time in generations, seriously shaking established state structures and the grip of repressive, Western-allied regimes. Most significantly, that these movements were regional in scope pointed to the commonalities and shared experiences of people throughout the Middle East. Their impact on political consciousness and forms of organization continue to be felt across the world.

From the beginning of these uprisings it was clear that the issues at stake went far beyond the simplistic caricature of “democracy versus dictatorship” that many commentators assumed. The underlying reasons drawing people into the streets were deeply connected to forms of capitalism in the region [2] in places such as Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan. Coupled with this economic continuity, indeed a prerequisite for it, was the rolling out of new laws and emergency orders that banned protests, strikes, and political movements.

Simultaneously, political and military intervention in the region rapidly expanded. The fracturing of Libya following direct Western military intervention [3], and the Saudi-led crushing of the Bahrain uprising were two key moments of this process. Egypt's military coup in July 2013 also marked a critical point in the reconstitution of old state structures, and confirmed the pernicious role of the Gulf States [4] in pushing back Egypt's revolutionary process.

Perhaps most significantly, the social and physical devastation wrought by the Assad regime in Syria, including hundreds of thousands of deaths and the millions of people displaced across and within borders, further reinforced a region-wide sense of despair that came to replace the initial optimism of 2011.

ISIS and its earlier incarnations were basically irrelevant to the first phases of these uprisings, the

massive demonstrations, strikes, and creative protest movements that rocked all Arab countries during 2011. Indeed, the only comment ISIS (at that time known as the Islamic State of Iraq) could muster following the overthrow of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak was a statement warning against secularism, democracy, and nationalism, urging Egyptians not to “replace that which is better with that which is worse.”

Yet as the initial aspirations for real change appeared to be increasingly thwarted, ISIS and other jihadist groups emerged as a symptom of this reversal, an expression of the apparent retreat in the revolutionary process and the growing sense of chaos. In order to better understand why this was the case, it is necessary to take a brief detour through ISIS’s ideology and worldview.

Authenticity, Brutality, Utopia

Islamic fundamentalism is often defined as the desire to bring back the ways of a magnificent past, supposedly modeled (in the Sunni account) on the first few generations of Islamic rulers that came after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. The Islamic State professes this goal, and in terms of social practice and religious law this is how it purports to rule.

But to reduce ISIS to a simple seventh-century irredentism would be a serious mistake. The organization takes seriously the project of state building, devoting much effort toward the establishment of various financial, legal, and administrative structures across the territories it now controls. Although the borders of these areas are in constant flux and there are differing assessments of what is meant by “control,” [5] ISIS has an extensive territorial reach, by some estimates ruling over 10 million people [6].

As part of this very modernist project, the organization has placed a high priority on developing a sophisticated media and propaganda network, setting it qualitatively apart from other examples of Islamic rule such as Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, where television-adorned trees and the “execution” of computers remain lasting images of the 1990s and early 2000s [7].

One researcher has estimated that the ISIS media unit generates just under forty unique pieces of media each day, including videos, photo essays, articles, and audio programs in many different languages. This level of programming rivals any TV network, and stands in contrast to the older al-Qaeda model that relied on grainy VHS tapes smuggled from the mountains of Afghanistan to Al Jazeera, where they were held hostage to the vagaries of hostile news producers and intelligence agencies.

The decentralized network through which ISIS propaganda is disseminated is also unique, using an army of Twitter accounts and anonymous websites such as justpaste.it and archive.org to host their media. Abdel Bari Atwan, an Arab journalist whose account of the rise of ISIS draws upon well-placed insiders, claims that the organization controls over one hundred thousand Twitter accounts and sends a daily barrage of fifty thousand tweets [8]. This and other forms of social media are the conduits through which ISIS both recruits and disseminates its messages.

ISIS’s tech-savvy side has been widely acknowledged, most recently in Obama’s facile description of them as “a bunch of killers with good social media.” [9] But the Islamic State’s effective use of technology and social media needs to be seen as much more than an issue of technical skills, or simply a response to conditions of secrecy and constant surveillance. Rather, the high priority ISIS places on social media and technology points to the organization’s obsessive concern with performativity and self-representation.

Indeed, it is difficult to think of any other political or religious entity in the region that takes so seriously the question of “branding” and projecting a certain self-image to the outside world.

Within this ideological messaging, three key tropes stand out. The first of these is a self-evident feature of any fundamentalist movement: religious authenticity, or the need to continually claim and demonstrate fidelity to religious text. In this context, what constitutes “authenticity” is something that must continually be asserted, performed, and defended in front of rival perspectives.

There are many examples of ISIS’s preoccupation with this question. Several commentators, for example, have noted the group’s apparently strange emphasis on the small and rather insignificant town of Dabiq, located in northern Syria. Dabiq possesses no military utility or natural resources. Nonetheless, ISIS’s online magazine is named after the spot, and the group reported a large influx of recruits when it announced the battle to take the town.

The reason? Dabiq holds a particular position in Islamic eschatology, as the site of a future battle with infidel armies that will herald the beginning of the apocalypse. By taking hold of this small Syrian town, ISIS could project itself as faithfully following a path that had been foretold centuries ago. In a similar vein, the group’s announcement of the town of Raqqa as its Western headquarters resonated strongly among Arab Muslims. The town had been the home of Harun al-Rashid, the fifth caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, which many view as a golden age of Islam.

The second core feature of ISIS propaganda is the well-known “brutality” meme: the live decapitations, executions, and other shocking content that have splashed the group across television and computer screens throughout the world. The deliberately horrifying material has guaranteed wall-to-wall media coverage and instant fame.

Compare this with al-Qaeda, which took decades and the September 11 attacks to become a household name. Brutality, however, is much more than just a headline-grabber. It is also intentionally used to generate fear.

This strategy has been incredibly successful — as ISIS approached the town of Mosul in June 2014, the Iraqi army simply stripped, dropped their weapons, and ran, allowing the jihadists to capture untold arms and military transport vehicles, as well as a reported \$400 million from the Iraqi Central Bank (although this latter story [has been disputed](#)).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the application of excessive violence is a conscious element of what ISIS describes as its strategy of “polarization” — one aimed at exploding the bloody sectarian wars that underpin the expansion of ISIS across the region.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the stereotype propagated by Western media, the main content of ISIS propaganda is actually much more mundane than the violence for which the group is best known. This is the third of the group’s ideological tropes: utopic themes aimed at showing the supposed pleasures of civilian life in the “caliphate,” among them bountiful economic activity, beautiful scenery, and stability of life.

One exhaustive study that documented all media produced by the organization from mid-July to mid-August 2015 found that more than half of the material was focused on these themes of utopia. Similarly, the aforementioned magazine, *Dabiq*, is heavily infused with these subjects. This is the most misunderstood element of how the group projects itself in the Arab world, and arguably the most important. It is an orientation that seems particularly directed toward Arab audiences.

A glance through ISIS-related Twitter accounts in Arabic shows constant chatter aimed at emphasizing the seemingly inane, boring, everydayness of life in the Islamic State: water pipes

getting fixed, markets bustling with colorful fruit and vegetables, fresh bread, and new dental clinics.

This observation points to the undeniable fact that ISIS consciously choreographs itself as an island of stability and peace amid a region of chaos, war, and upheaval. This is important to understanding the pull that ISIS presents to some layers of the population. In a moment of deep crisis, the promise of some level of security is part of what makes ISIS attractive (or, at the very least, a less-worse option).

Recognizing this utopic promise is an important clue to understanding how the organization has managed to expand over the past year. This is not to suggest that ISIS rule is not brutal or repressive, particularly for those at the receiving end of its sectarian violence, but rather that it is precisely in the hollowness of its utopic promise that some measure of hope can be found.

Managing “Savage Chaos”

This triptych of ISIS propaganda — religious authenticity, brutality, and utopia — is itself a reflection of a wider eschatology: a periodization of history and future based on the imminence of end times. It is a major difference between ISIS and other jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda.

Unlike al-Qaeda, the Islamic State tends to emphasize much more the sequential unfolding of historical phases associated with prophetic moments (the example of Dabiq is one illustration of this). This is why the question of authenticity figures so heavily in the group’s propaganda. Less obviously, however, this eschatology also provides an explanation for both the brutality and utopia tropes discussed above.

The clearest reflection of this can be found in a popular reference point for jihadist strategy: the book *Administration of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through which the Islamic Nation Will Pass* (AoS), first published on the Internet in Arabic in 2004, under the nom de guerre Abu Bakr Naji. The book should not be thought of (as it has been in some journalistic accounts) as a step-by-step playbook or strategy manual for jihadist groups; it is rather a text whose very popularity in these circles reveals something about the worldview that informs jihadist thinking.

Succinctly, the key goal of AoS is to explain the steps that they need to take in order to end the domination of “great powers” (principally the United States) over the region and establish a state in accordance with Islamic principles. AoS delineates two distinct historical phases that must be passed through before an Islamic state can be established.

The first, the phase of “vexation and exhaustion,” is the stage that the author believed the Arab world was passing through at the time of writing (early 2000s). During this stage, the task was to harass and destabilize the enemy through “vexation operations,” including actions such as bombing tourist resorts and economically significant areas (particularly those associated with petroleum).

These actions would force Arab governments to disperse their security forces across wide areas, an expensive undertaking that would inevitably leave new targets exposed. Moreover, the apparent ability of groups to undertake these actions with impunity would act as a kind of propaganda by deed and help attract new recruits.

The ultimate goal of these operations is to generate a situation of tumult and breakdown of state structures, which the author described as the phase of “savage chaos.” This period corresponds to a profound increase in individual and social insecurity, a lack of basic social provisions, and a rise in

all forms of social violence. It is conceived as a natural outcome of the withdrawal and collapse of state structures; moreover, its arrival is viewed as positive for the jihadist group. By stepping into the subsequent chaos, the responsibility of jihadists would be to take charge of the situation and “manage or administer savagery.”

Concretely, this means the supply of services such as “food and medical treatment, preservation of security and justice among the people who live in the regions of savagery, securing the borders by means of groups that deter anyone who tries to assault the regions of savagery, as well as setting up defensive fortifications.”

This side to the “management of savagery” clearly mirrors how ISIS views its current role in the Arab world (particularly in Iraq and Syria), and helps us understand why the utopic theme is so prominent in its propaganda.

Moreover, within the AoS schema, the role of violence is also elemental. Echoing the ways in which ISIS employs brutality, AoS recommends that violence be deliberately excessive and highly performative. “Massacring the enemy and making him frightened” would serve “to make [enemies] think one thousand times before attacking.” This would include so-called “paying the price” actions, aimed at deterring enemies from attacking due to the fear of subsequent reprisals.

Likewise, all actions should aim to create societal “polarization” through the use of disproportionate violence. As the author of AoS notes:

“Dragging the masses into the battle requires more actions which will inflame opposition and which will make the people enter into the battle, willing or unwilling, such that each individual will go to the side which he supports. 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.”

There is an irresistible dénouement to this formula: the worse the situation gets the better it is. The author recognizes (and applauds) this self-fulfilling logic, noting that even if the jihadist group was to fail in the immediate administration of savagery, then the results would actually still be positive: failure, it is said, “does not mean end of the matter; rather, this failure will lead to an increase in savagery.”

There is established, in short, an inevitable teleology that thrives in profoundly negative situations, where the very existence of mutually reinforcing and ever-worsening cycles of violence become themselves the evidence for the correctness of the schema.

Sectarianism and Post-Invasion Iraq

The link between ISIS’s worldview and the disastrous rise in sectarianism throughout the region is clear. Although the author of AoS and the leaders of earlier jihadist groups were careful to avoid religious sanction for intra-Muslim violence, and condemned any deliberate targeting of other Muslims, this was to change with the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) during the mid-2000s.

Led by the Jordanian Abu Musab Zarqawi, AQI came to understand the bombing of religious ceremonies and institutions as one of the most stunningly effective tools of polarization. In Iraq, Zarqawi consciously sought to ignite a civil war between Shi’a and Sunni through a methodical series of devastating attacks on Shi’a communities.

Such activities, coupled with the gruesome beheading videos that earned him the appellation

“Sheikh of the Slaughterers,” provoked increasing anger among the older al-Qaeda leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Indeed, the latter penned a famous letter to Zarqawi in 2005 [10] upbraiding the Jordanian, in which he described the “the scenes of slaughtering the hostages” and Zarqawi’s attacks on Shi’a in Iraq as tactics that would alienate al-Qaeda from their necessary support base.

Nonetheless, despite Zawahiri’s protestations, a range of factors that had little to do with Zarqawi provided a fertile environment for sectarianism. First, the notorious de-Ba’athification policy implemented by US occupation forces following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to a profound marginalization of the country’s Sunni population. Under this policy, any person who had been a member of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party was summarily dismissed from their job, denied public-sector employment, and barred from accessing their pensions.

As many analysts pointed out at the time, this was a recipe for disaster. Ba’ath party membership had been an expectation for virtually any state job, so the policy led to the mass dismissal of thousands of teachers, doctors, police, and low-ranking civil servants. By eviscerating the state in this way, the United States virtually guaranteed a collapse of basic social services — a catastrophic prospect for a society emerging from over two decades of sanctions and war.

Sunni marginalization was not simply felt in the economic sphere. American forces frequently led attacks against Sunni-populated towns and villages, and tens of thousands of prisoners were locked away in US-run prisons where isolation, torture, and the “Taylorized bureaucracy of detention” [11] were routinely used to bolster the occupation.

The most notorious of these prisons was the Abu Ghraib detention facility, which exploded into Western consciousness in 2003 following the release of photographs showing US military personnel torturing prisoners. In the wake of this scandal, many detainees were transferred out of Abu Ghraib to another prison, Camp Bucca. It was here that one detainee, later known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, came to establish a strong relationship with a coterie of former Ba’athist military officers who had spent time in Abu Ghraib.

Today, of course, al-Baghdadi is the leader of ISIS, and those same Ba’athist officers now serve as his closest deputies and advisors. In this manner, the experience of Sunni detainees at the hands of the US military not only further entrenched the country’s emerging sectarian divisions, but also, in a concrete sense, actually forged the Islamic State itself.

Sectarian rifts continued to deepen from 2006 onwards, as the US, in tacit agreement with Iran, came to institutionalize a Shi’a-dominated state backed by a range of Shi’a militias. This situation only worsened following the formal departure of US troops from Iraq in 2011. Coupled with unparalleled levels of socioeconomic insecurity, Sunni marginalization produced a real social base whose attraction to ISIS goes beyond religious or ideological factors.

A large proportion of the mid-ranking cadres of ISIS are former Ba’athist functionaries drawn to the organization partly through economic incentives. Financial rewards are also appealing at the rank-and-file level. Pay for an ISIS fighter, for example, is estimated to be around \$300 to 400 per month, more than double that provided by the Iraqi army. The truck drivers and smugglers who today ship ISIS-produced oil from Syria to Iraq [12] are motivated primarily by the chance to make a living. For all its religious pretensions, the ISIS state-building project has a very material grounding.

Many commentators writing about Iraq often chalk this outcome up to the stupidity and hubris of the Bush administration, and the succession of obvious policy errors made following the occupation. Such an approach assumes that the United States actually sought a stable and united Iraq.

Yet a non-sectarian, unified Iraq led by a government with strong popular support would have been a disaster for US interests in the Middle East. Without this possibility ever seriously in the cards, it is not hard to see that from the outset, the fragmentation of Iraq along sectarian lines was the most likely outcome of US occupation (particularly since this also coincided with Iranian interests). Divide and rule has long been a preferred method of colonial domination.

These are the actual material and political roots of the region's current sectarian turn. Despite what ISIS, Saudi Arabia, or Iran might claim, sectarianism is not the result of ever-present doctrinal or ethnic schisms, existing since time immemorial and persisting unchanged into the contemporary era.

It has always been, as the Lebanese communist Mahdi Amel argued decades ago [13], a modern technique of political power, a means through which ruling classes attempt to establish their legitimacy and social base, while fragmenting the potential for any kind of popular opposition. Post-invasion Iraq and the subsequent rise of ISIS provide a tragic confirmation of this thesis.

Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the Islamic State

The utility of religion in shoring up earthly powers has, of course, a lengthy pedigree in the region. It is now widely acknowledged that the organizational roots of Islamic fundamentalist movements (including the progenitors of ISIS) have their origins in an alliance between the US and the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, through the 1960s and 1970s [14].

Faced with growing left-wing and nationalist political movements in the region, the sponsorship of Islamism was seen as an effective and disarming counterweight. By the 1980s, this policy was applied most systematically through US and Saudi support for Arab Islamist fighters in Afghanistan. It was here that preparations for armed jihad received their first practical boost.

This longstanding instrumentalization of Islamic fundamentalism has led some observers to argue that ISIS is a tool of the Gulf States. At first glance these claims would appear to make sense. Ideologically, there are close commonalities between the Saudi regime and the Islamic State. Both share a particularly restrictive interpretation of Islamic punishments (*hudud*). Indeed, the signature beheadings and amputations seen in ISIS-controlled areas are found nowhere else in the region except for Saudi Arabia. When ISIS was looking for textbooks to use in the schools they govern, the only appropriate versions were felt to be those taken from Saudi Arabia.

There is also undoubtedly sympathy for ISIS among large portions of the Saudi population, including those who contribute financially, or volunteer to fight. Yet — while weapons supplied by Saudi Arabia (and Qatar) to Syrian groups have likely ended up in the hands of ISIS through defections or capture — there is little convincing evidence that ISIS is directly funded, or armed, by Saudi Arabia or any other Gulf state.

At a rhetorical level, the relationship between the two is one of profound antipathy and hatred. ISIS considers the Saudi monarchy to be one of its most despised enemies, and the overthrow of the al-Saud ruling family is one of the group's principal aims. The Saudi monarchy will countenance no other claimant to global Islamic leadership, and fears the threat ISIS presents to its own rule.

On the other hand, the growing strength of ISIS does have a clear link to the repression directed by the Assad government against the Syrian uprising. A few months into the uprising, Assad released hundreds of prisoners (among them well-trained jihadists), many of whom became leaders and fighters in Islamic fundamentalist groups. Former high-ranking Syrian intelligence agents have claimed that this was a deliberate attempt by the regime to stoke sectarian discord and paint the

uprising in an Islamist light [15].

The Assad government has a long record of attempting to manipulate such groups [16], including a prisoner release in the early 2000s and the facilitation of thousands of jihadist volunteers across the border to join up with Zarqawi network in Iraq. Indeed, by February 2010, Syrian intelligence officials were attempting to market their infiltration and manipulation of jihadist groups as a basis for deepening security cooperation with the US in the region [17].

It is hardly surprising that when Syrian protesters were faced with the barrel bombs, tanks, and indiscriminate aerial attacks of Assad's military, it was to the well-trained, battle-hardened jihadist groups that some began to turn. These groups included Jabhat al Nusra (JaN), an organization established after the Islamic State in Iraq dispatched fighters to Syria in late 2011 and which made its public debut in January 2012.

During 2013, as the violence and displacement worsened, JaN suffered a bitter split with its parent group over strategic direction: whether to focus on confronting the Syrian military and deemphasizing sectarian divisions, or to prioritize territorial control, based on Islamic law and the pursuit of a strategy of polarization against all other groups. Islamic State in Iraq chose the latter path, announcing the expulsion of recalcitrant JaN cadres on April 9, 2013 and the formation of the newly configured ISIS.

Reflecting these strategic priorities — and contrary to popular belief — ISIS has largely avoided direct confrontation with the Assad government [18]. Instead, taking advantage of its control over smuggling routes and the border crossings that straddle Iraq and Syria (allowing it strategic depth and the safety of retreat denied to any other armed organization), ISIS has primarily sought territorial expansion.

In this endeavor, the military counsel of former Ba'athist generals from the days of Camp Bucca has been key to its success — the emphasis being on dominating access and supply routes that connect strategic nodes rather than an obsession with fixed points per se, securing oil fields, and controlling core infrastructure (particularly water and electricity generation).

This strategy has not only made the organization fabulously rich (holding at least nine lucrative oil fields in Syria and Iraq estimated to be worth over \$1.5 million per day in oil sales). It has also made the rest of Syrian territory (whether government- or opposition-controlled) heavily dependent on ISIS for their energy and power needs.

Coupled with vast amounts of money amassed from kidnapping, extortion, the sale of antiquities, smuggling, and taxes, ISIS is unlike almost all actual states in the Middle East — independently wealthy, financially self-sufficient, and operating within borders that deliberately transgress the boundaries established by colonial powers in the early twentieth century.

More Intervention?

In these circumstances, calls to ratchet up Western military intervention in the region will only provide further sustenance for the organization. Precisely because war and occupation have laid such a fertile ground for Islamic State to grow, it is patently obvious that this kind of response will only worsen the situation. Indeed, in line with its strategy of polarization, the recent ISIS attacks have been explicitly aimed toward this outcome, and to drawing more Western intervention into the region as a means to deepen the sense of crisis and chaos.

Opposition to foreign intervention is not simply a demand that needs to be directed against the US or European states. Despite official claims of targeting ISIS, the Russian aerial bombardment of Syria that began on September 30 has largely avoided ISIS-controlled areas, focusing instead on areas where non-ISIS opposition groups are located.

These Russian attacks — supported on the ground by Hezbollah, Iranian troops, Iraqi Shi'a militias, and the Syrian army — have primarily sought to bolster the position of Assad in the lead up to what appears to be an emerging deal between the major regional and international players in Syria. In this context, the presence of ISIS actually serves to reinforce Assad's claim to be "resisting terrorism," a function that is clearly illustrated by the numerous [Western states](#) that have now swung over to supporting his government as a supposed necessary evil.

Of course, the Russian military orientation may change in the wake of the Sinai, Beirut, and Paris attacks, but the fact is that the longstanding unspoken détente [\[19\]](#) between Islamic State and the Assad government has until now served the interests of both sides.

In these circumstances there are few easy answers for the Left. Yes, we need alternative, radical visions grounded in democratic demands, social and economic justice, and a rejection of sectarianism. But this also requires a sober assessment of the balance of forces and some kind of accounting of what went wrong over the last few years.

We need to be wary of analyses that attribute some kind of automatic reflexivity to the rise of ISIS and the machinations of war and imperialism. There was nothing inevitable about this outcome. It was in the reversals of the 2011 uprisings — and their failure to fundamentally challenge autocratic rulers — that ISIS found an ecosystem in which it could prosper and grow.

Politics abhors a vacuum, and with the setbacks for popular and democratic mobilizations over the last three years, the Islamic State was one of those forces that came to reap the fruits of retreat. In parasitic fashion, the organization has latched onto the explosion of sectarian violence deliberately cultivated by rulers across all countries in the region, finding a host first in Iraq and later in Syria. In both these states, the group encountered (and helped bring into being) a reality that macabrely fit its "administration of savagery" schema.

Yet despite the apparent bleakness of the situation, there are grounds for hope. Local forces are confronting the Islamic State in extraordinarily difficult circumstances — most importantly, Kurdish movements (simultaneously facing the Turkish government's repression [\[20\]](#)), as well as the non-ISIS opposition forces in Syria.

At the same time, courageous social and political movements in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere continue to defy the logic of sectarianism and demonstrate that the struggle for a progressive alternative remains alive.

ISIS may project a utopic promise of stability and prosperity, but this is far from the reality on the ground. We can be absolutely certain that it will experience its own internal revolts, as similarly declarative examples of Islamic "states" have faced in the past.

Moreover, if we understand the rise of ISIS through the prism of retreat, we can take some confidence in knowing that the organization does not offer any effective answer to the region's current predicament. It does not represent any kind of anti-imperialist response, or plausible route to a Middle East free of domination or repression, whether foreign or local.

Despite all the setbacks of the last few years, the potential growth of a genuinely left alternative has not been extinguished and, most importantly, has never been more necessary.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 12.3.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/isis-syria-iraq-war-al-qaeda-arab-spring/>

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* The new issue of Jacobin, centering on development and the Global South, is out now. To celebrate its release, new subscriptions start at only \$14.95.

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 36357), [13 November Paris attacks : The cruelty of imperialist wars results in the the cruelty of terrorism](#).

[2] <http://www.haymarketbooks.org/pb/Lineages-of-Revolt-->: decades of neoliberal economic restructuring, the impact of global crises, and the ways in which Arab states were governed by autocratic police and military regimes long backed by Western powers.

These factors need to be seen in their totality, not as separate or divisible causes. Protesters did not necessarily explicitly articulate this totality as the reason for their anger, but this underlying reality meant that the profound issues facing the Arab world would never be solved through the simple removal of individual autocrats.

It was to prevent any such challenge to political and economic structures that elites, supported by Western powers and their regional allies, quickly stepped in and attempted to quash the possibility of change. This took place through a variety of means, with a range of political actors coming to shape the counterrevolutionary processes differently in each country.

At the level of economic policy, there was little alteration, with Western donors and international financial institutions insisting on the continuity of neoliberal reform packages

[[<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13530194.2015.973199>

[3] See on ESSF (article 35379), [NATO's 2011 Intervention: The Disaster in Libya](#).

[4] See on ESSF (article 34743), [On the powerful Gulf States: A Petrodollar and a Dream](#).

[5] <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/22/the-pentagon-s-isis-map-is-so-wrong.html>

[6] <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a.html#axzz3smV19RUE>

- [7] <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/23/automobiles/autos-on-friday-international-trucks-of-the-taliban-durable-not-discreet.html>
- [8] <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520289284>
- [9] <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/22/obama-addresses-isis-social-media-power>
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- [11] <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=21640>
- [12] <http://ig.ft.com/sites/2015/isis-oil/>
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- [14] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/united-states-saudi-arabia-isis/>
- [15] <http://www.thenational.ae/world/syria/assad-regime-set-free-extremists-from-prison-to-fire-up-trouble-during-peaceful-uprising>
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- [20] See on ESSF (article 36267), [Turkish election: Erdoğan's Victory by Violence](#).