

# Islamic State: Unidentified Terrorist Object

Xavier Raufer<sup>A</sup>

## Threats and Consequences

The media had been in a frenzy since 2014, as the green stain of the “Islamic State” spread out over the map of the Near East like a hideous cancer. Worse, the self-proclaimed “caliphate” was gaining more and more ground. Then, abruptly, the media message changed in summer 2016. The Islamic State was in serious trouble, close to being annihilated.

But the threat has not gone away. A change in organization, or management in business school parlance, shouldn't be confused with disappearance. The “caliphate” does seem to have been well and truly weakened, but the question is why? Is it because it is being defeated militarily, or is it because, more profoundly and subtly, it has played its part? A part assigned to it long ago by certain players—perhaps one could call them its puppeteers?

This is a complex matter that requires much closer examination. Let's begin by looking at the following reality: slowly and surely, the daily flood of information and the increasing manipulation of this data stream have robbed the defense and security apparatus of its vital ability to understand the nature of the enemy. Faced with the very real dangers of our times, this blindness even worries the ideologues of the American military colossus. A researcher for the U.S. Army War College stated that, “We are faced with a whirlwind of crime and war which doesn't fit any familiar model. It's so unlike our conception of the world it ends up by driving everyone crazy. The result is that our thinking is behind the times, as are our institutions and our laws.”<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that what defines all the hostile elements that have appeared since the fall of the Berlin wall is that they are no longer self-explanatory. In Europe, from the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century up until the colonial wars, it was always easy to identify the enemy. For the French, depending on the issue or the period, it was the Catholics or the Protestants, the English or the Germans. But for the last 30 years, we have been deprived of this age-old familiarity; the only thing in common amongst the people who kill in the very heart of our capital cities is that they are anything but self-evident.

Faced with this unpleasant reality, the defense and security apparatus reacts by burying their heads in the sand. Ignoring the old adage “know your enemy,” the institutions imagine they know the enemy and haven't bothered to carry out the

---

<sup>A</sup> CNAM Paris

<sup>1</sup> Ioan Grillo, *Gangster Warlords. Drug Dollars, Killing Fields and the New Politics of Latin America*, Bloomsbury (NY), 2016. The researcher referred to is Robert Bunker.

diagnosis.

But can one really predict human hostility? Can one imagine future confrontations and enemies? Well, yes, one can, and sometimes even well in advance. In 1938, Carl Schmitt described the global unrest of the future in the following terms: “A global war, largely asymmetric, lacking any kind of control or legal limitations, in which a great neo-imperial power doesn’t so much deploy its forces against individual states as against groups of global partisans (Kosmospartisanen) that operate worldwide using the means and pursuing the objectives of a civil war.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, today, a body of “global partisans” called “Islamic State” (hereafter IS), “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,” ISIS, ISIL, “Daesh,” or the “tafkiris.”<sup>3</sup> has been wreaking havoc amidst a huge media din. In this article, I aim to show that, whilst we are fed with stories of their atrocities, of terrifying figures of its weapons stockpiles and the size of its “armies,” and whilst we are informed daily of its victories or its defeats—we have not yet answered the main question: what is, at bottom, the “Islamic State”? What is its nature?

First of all, what do we understand by the “nature of IS”? To find out, it helps to compare it with Hezbollah. Hezbollah, the “party of God,” is child’s play to define: Lebanese Shia militia, designed as a paramilitary, occasionally terrorist, organization; equipped, trained, and directed by the special forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Three lines provide one with the essentials. By comparison, the indefinable IS is far from self-explanatory.

### Nearly 30 Years of History

Let’s remind ourselves that this is neither a fleeting phenomenon nor some fundamentalist shooting star. Quite the opposite in fact. Under a succession of different names, IS has, in fact, existed for nearly 30 years. We will see below that this longevity has had far-reaching strategic consequences, but first, a reminder of some dates:

In 1989, the predecessor of IS was founded in Jordan under the name of “Jund al-Sham” (Soldiers of the Levant) by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for an objective which remains unchanged today: to combat the enemies of Islam—whether they be secularists or nationalists (such as Saddam Hussein or el-Sisi) or most importantly Shia Muslims, who, for Zarqawi, are a kind of proto-Christian cult polluting Islam. Jund al-Sham vowed to restore a caliphate which, when God wishes (insh’Allah), will bring all the Muslims in the world together.

In 1999, in Herat in Afghanistan, Jund al-Sham became “Jamaat al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad” (Congregation of Monotheism and Jihad). In 2004, it was renamed in Iraq during American occupation, this time as “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia.”

---

<sup>2</sup>Carl Schmitt, *Guerre discriminatoire et logique des grands espaces*, Krisis, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>De Takfir wa’l Hijra is an Egyptian terrorist group which advocates an extreme form of Salafism, according to which most Muslims have descended into apostasy and thus deserve death.

Zarqawi was killed in June 2006, and, in October, the Mujahedeen Shura Council in Iraq (Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and its local satellites) founded IS in Iraq.

In April 2013, IS in Iraq and some Syrian Salafi belonging to the “Front for the victory of the peoples of the Levant” (Jabhat al-Nosra al-Sham<sup>4</sup>) created the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.”

On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr proclaimed the caliphate and became caliph and “commander of the believers.” Winning over the allegiance of all the Sunni in the world needs an army so the name was shortened to IS thereafter. This, in brief, is the history of the current IS.

But under the surface, beyond the image that IS projects of itself—wild Salafism, the cult of violence, paranoia—there are highly curious and improbable phenomena. One example is as follows: for Salafi, led by Zarqawi, Shia Iran, and “Alawite” Syria are the strongholds of apostasy. And yet, IS and its leaders have long been welcome in those countries.

So what is this IS and what is the thinking underlying its actions? What influences is it subject to? Or, perhaps, who is its puppeteer? As there is no officially sanctioned mission statement for the group, let us proceed by seeking the answers to four questions:

- What do we know about the career trajectory of the leaders of the IS, starting with its founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi?
- What exactly has IS done on the ground? Why? And with what results?
- According to the evidence, who associates with and really supports the IS?
- Which states in the region infiltrate and manipulate the terrorist groups, even (or above all) when they seem hostile to them?

### Impossible to Define

*Is IS a conventional “terrorist group”?* The answer is no; no terrorist group in the present day or in the past has ever possessed more tanks than the French army. In addition, since IS has been active in Iraq, there have been fewer attacks than previously. So, IS successes on the ground in 2014–2015 were clearly of a military and not a terrorist nature.

What is more, IS is active in the Middle East, where the unwritten regional rule is that all terrorist bodies inevitably mutate (rapidly) into state terrorism. This has been the rule for 50 years and there is no known exception. One recalls the cases of Abu Nidal (Fatah—Revolutionary Council) backed by Syria and then Libya; Ahmed Jibril (PFLP—General Command) backed by Syria, and ASALA, backed

---

<sup>4</sup>The majority of the leadership and fighters of Jabhat al-Nosra al-Sham rejected the merger and remained faithful to Al-Qaeda.

also by Syria.

Hezbollah itself is proof of this, as Pierre Razoux demonstrates in “Iran-Iraq War,”<sup>5</sup> which reveals numerous terrorism-based “indirect strategies.” In 1985, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia made a goodwill gesture towards Iran and “as if by chance,” in Beirut, Hezbollah released the Saudi consul, kidnapped there several months earlier by the Shia militia. Conversely, in the same year, Mikhail Gorbachev resisted Teheran’s approaches and “in the absence of any reaction from the Kremlin, the Iranian leaders decided to switch up a gear, and on 30 September 1985, four Soviet diplomats were kidnapped in Beirut.” Pierre Razoux adds that this was a strategy employed by all the leaders of Islamic Iran, whether they were in favor of opening up to the West or not. “For the former, the attacks against France were a means of forcing Paris to the negotiating table, whilst for the latter, they were aimed at punishing the “little Satan.”<sup>6</sup>

Even Al-Qaeda hasn’t been able to withstand the irresistible allure of state terrorism for long. It is now known that during his long stay in Abbottabad in Pakistan, Osama bin Laden lived under the close surveillance of the country’s special services and was attended to by Major Amir A, a military doctor in active service, lodged for greater ease in the neighboring villa.<sup>7</sup> So is it really possible to believe that, by some miracle, IS has been able to dodge this unwritten rule for over 27 years.

*Is IS a guerrilla army?* Even less so; contrary to the tried and tested rules of “little war,” IS doesn’t retreat after an attack but digs in, controls territories, and confronts regular armies. To our knowledge, this strategy is unprecedented in the region.

*IS, the strong arm of Sunni fundamentalism?* In a matter not lacking in mysteries, this is a huge mystery. The supreme authority of Sunni Islam is al-Azhar, which is both the mosque of Cairo and a center of theology. Always prudent and considered, Al-Azhar condemns terrorism, whether Islamist or not, from a distance and with careful ambiguity. In 2010, the Secretary General of its Council deigned to certify the fatwa issued by Dr. Muhammad Tahir ul-Quadri (a Pakistani sufi), which limited itself to rejecting terrorism in general as anti-Islamic. But al-Azhar, or even one of its individual leaders, has never openly called a body of any sort “an apostate group,” which would be tantamount to a death sentence. The response to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda was silence, even after September 11, 2001.

In 2015, however, there was an abrupt volte-face: “Sheikh al-Azhar,” the supreme leader of the institution, launched a verbal attack against the “oppressors and corrupt who combat God” and called to “crucify and dismember the ISIS terrorists.” Why all of a sudden this violent condemnation of a type which al-Azhar

---

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, Harvard University Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Abbottabad is the Pakistani equivalent of Saint-Cyr-Coëtquidan and is crawling with military personnel—not exactly the ideal location to lead a life in hiding. See “ISI Controlled Osama Bin Laden’s Abbottabad Compound”, *Press Trust of India*, 28 April 2016; and Seymour Hersch, *The Killing of Osama bin Laden*, London and New York, Verso, 2016.

had avoided ever since the foundation of IS?<sup>8</sup> There is convincing evidence that this was a response to the Saudi turnaround, which will be discussed below.

Lastly, it is worth noting that in “its” territories, its “caliphate,” the administration adopted by the IS (control of the population, counter-espionage, etc.) has precious little which can be described as religious, as in Saudi Arabia, for example,<sup>9</sup> but in most matters is quite the opposite, modeled on the secular Ba’ath party dual system of surveillance and compartmentalization.

In their excellent book *Syrie: anatomie d’une guerre civile*, Gilles Dorronsoro and his co-authors have compiled numerous reports from the field, and they all describe this strange mixture of a fundamentalist or Salafist superstructure with the typical structure of “Arab Socialism”: “Security practices inherited from the Ba’ath party...,” “The presence of former Iraqi soldiers at the heart of the Islamic State...,” “The same methods as during Saddam’s dictatorship...,” “The Ba’ath vision of the state plays a key role in understanding the organization of the caliphate...,” “The Security Office is the equivalent of the former Iraqi régime’s Intelligence Services,” etc.<sup>10</sup>

## The Strategic Context

Owing to its special role in the region, the United States is the country most concerned by IS. It is also definitely the country the world is looking to for a strategy, a counter-offensive. Yet, first in Iraq and Syria, and then in the IS territory, the United States has long struggled to come up with a workable concept.

In October 2011, when the American ambassador Robert Ford left Damascus, he was in the process of recruiting people for an (imminent post-Assad) government. At that time, American officials believed they had found the magic formula for régime change: the “Libyan model,” according to which Washington supervised and provided the air attack, leaving operations on the ground and control of insurgents to the British and French special services.

But the East is complicated, and in December 2014, General Michael Nagata, commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, confessed he “didn’t even understand the idea” of IS. In September 2014, President Obama, the primary user of U.S. intelligence, called IS the “Al-Qaeda B team”—a major misjudgment.<sup>11</sup> The American intelligentsia hasn’t done any better than the government: Between March and August 2015, the *New York Review of Books* and *The Atlantic*, two outstanding

---

<sup>8</sup> The pretext was a video of a Jordanian pilot being burned alive, but IS had committed worse atrocities many times before, and al-Azhar had not been moved to react.

<sup>9</sup> Inspired by the administration of Koranic schools, madrassas, etc.; or the *maktabi* model advocated by the Iranian Islamic revolutionary Ali Shariati. Xavier Raufer, *La Nébuleuse : le terrorisme du Moyen-Orient*, Fayard, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, *Syrie : anatomie d’une guerre civile*, CNRS EDITIONS, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Literally “Jayvee team of Al-Qaida.” In sporting jargon: *Junior Varsity team* = B team.

journals, published three studies on IS.<sup>12</sup> Revealing a fascination with the finer detail, the articles are an example of “Salafism for dummies” and include the gory details of Jihadism, all the propaganda churned out to terrify, the return of slavery, foreign combatants, and so on.

On the other hand, there is no surprise about the nature and the aims of the group, which is quite unlike any other. What is this IS for? Who does it serve? Where does it really come from? What are its real intentions? These questions aren’t even raised.

It is generally believed that the Gulf petro-monarchies, above all Saudi Arabia, support IS. Commentators have even suggested recently that Saudi Arabia is an “Islamic State” itself, having succeeded in founding a homeland, the Wahhabism of the Kingdom being no more than a variant of the Salafism conceived in the thirteenth century by Ibn Taymiyyah.<sup>13</sup> Up until 2014, this collusion was undeniable. In a secret internal note on December 30, 2009 (published by Wikileaks), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemned the Saudi financing of Sunni terrorism.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Riyadh’s support for jihadis is logical: it’s a question of combatting Iranian influence in the region and weakening, even toppling the Shia regime in Baghdad—anathema to the Wahhabis. But in 2014, the attitude of Riyadh changed. In March, it branded IS a terrorist body—doubtless as a result of American and European recriminations. Thereafter things deteriorated, especially following the death of King Abdullah, announced on January 23, 2015.

The change in Riyadh was rapidly picked up by IS, who took action on the Yemeni front. On December 6, 2015, a car bomb killed General Jaafar Saad, Governor of Aden and confidant of the (pro-Saudi) president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. And on December 25, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi broke his 7-month silence, denouncing Saudi Arabia as a traitor to Salafism and an ally of the “crusaders.”

Since then, Saudi Arabia has cracked down on IS, with activists thrown into prison, networks dismantled, etc. The situation is particularly delicate for Riyadh as its theologians are divided on the matter—a tremendous risk for a theocracy. Some, including Sheikh Adel al-Kalbani (Imam of Mecca, the first African in the position) see IS as truly Salafist, but criticize its acts, not its doctrine; others, such as the sheikh Saad bin Nasser al-Shatri, a personal advisor to King Salman, describe IS as an “atheist gang, worse than the Jews and the Christians, who are fighting against God and his prophet, and whose members should be executed.”

There is clearly a breach here between Riyadh and Mecca—which no Saudi power can tolerate. But did the Saudi turnaround come about willingly or was it

---

<sup>12</sup> “What is the Islamic State?”, *The Atlantic*, March 2015; “Inside the Islamic State” and “The Mystery of ISIS”, *New York Review of Books*, 9 June and 13 August 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Ultra-purist Salafist-Habali theologian of Kurdish origin, died in 1328 in prison in Damascus.

<sup>14</sup> “... Donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide... Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for Al-Qaida, etc.” (Memo—“Terrorist finance—action request for senior level engagement on terrorist finance”, 30 December 2009, signed by Clinton).



brought about by force? Was Riyadh passed over or was control wrenched from it? These are issues which leave the question of the current collusions with IS wide open. In a region where all terrorist action is connected to states, who is now supporting IS? Let us now look at what is happening on the ground.

### Surprising Actors, Strange Practices

“Abu Musab al-Zarqawi” was the founder and leader of IS, and is always praised as such in IS propaganda. His original name was Ahmad Fadeel Nazal al-Khalayleh and he was born in 1966 to a clan of the same name belonging to the Bani Hassan Bedouin tribe. When he became a jihadi, he adopted the nom de guerre “Abu Musab” in homage to his symbolic mentor and model, Musab bin Umair, companion of the Prophet, and “al-Zarqawi” from the Jordanian city of Zarqa where he was born. Al-Zarqawi is not a Salafist knight in shining armor, rather a dysfunctional Lee Harvey Oswald type: a video store assistant from provincial Jordan, a tattooed and alcoholic thug. He was imprisoned in the 1980s for drug addiction and sexual assault, and his family sent him for detoxification (through purification and prayer) to the al-Hussein ben Ali Salafist mosque in Amman. The success of the treatment exceeded his family’s wildest hopes, as around 1988 the young Ahmad Fadeel founded the jihadi group Jund al-Sham, a murderous micro-sect. Zarqawi then left for Afghanistan (after the end of the anti-Soviet jihad). He was based in Hayatabad, near Peshawar, on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, then in Khost in Afghanistan. He returned to Jordan in 1992 where, known as “The Afghan,” he was closely monitored by the General Intelligence Directorate (GID). In March 1994, he was arrested with a stockpile of arms in his possession and sentenced to 15 years in prison, but then released in March 1999 under an amnesty following the death of King Hussein and the accession of the new king.

By then notorious as an *agent provocateur* and a paid killer, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan with his followers. On his arrival, he was based near Kabul, in a sector controlled by Emir Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a leader of the Pashtun tribal-Islamist Hezb-i-Islami party, his protector at that time.<sup>15</sup> In the year 2000, Zarqawi established himself in Herat, a town on the frontier with Iran teeming with agents of all kinds, and trained for terrorism with his gang.

Then followed the September 11, 2001 attacks, and on October 8, the United States began its purge of the Taliban and other terrorists. As a result of the offensive, foreign mujahidin fled to Pakistan. Not al-Zarqawi, who took refuge with 300 of his men...in Iran (for Salafis, the country of the “apostate Shia”). He lived there until spring 2002, under the continuing protection of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

---

<sup>15</sup>The ferocious Sunni former Afghan Prime Minister, G. Hekmatyar fled Kabul on the arrival of the Taliban in September 1996 and took refuge in Iran between 1997 and 2002, then returned discreetly to Afghanistan. Since then, his public statements have betrayed his pro-Iranian sympathies. In June 2006 (Associated Press – Peshawar) he paid tribute to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had just been killed, and made an appeal to drive the Americans out of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Iran, he was spotted in Zahedan, Isfahan, and Teheran. There is also mention by deserters of a training camp near Mehran. At the time, the Jordanian GID discovered that the “special operations” branch of the Guardians of the Iranian Revolution, the pasdaran al-Quds division, was providing him with arms, uniforms, and equipment.

Was this his personal initiative? Was the group commanded by Hekmatyar or by Iran? Zarqawi then took his first steps in international terrorism. In April 2002, the German special services dismantled one of his cells which was preparing anti-Jewish attacks. The German media published very specific information: pseudonyms, addresses, and phone and fax numbers. Faced with the outcry from Berlin, the Iranian authorities arrested Zarqawi and his accomplices. Evacuated to Syria and then to the Iraq–Iran Kurdish border, they waited there for the American invasion. This stay in Syria is noteworthy, hosted by (for Salafis) heretic “Alawites,” worse even than the Shia. Who was sheltering them? Why? In exchange for what? To this day, this mismatch has raised remarkably little interest.

### From Decline to a Rapid Escalation of Power

Absent from any analysis of IS is one glaring incongruity. Abu Bakr “al-Baghdadi” (native of Baghdad) is not the first IS emir to use this nom de guerre. The previous one was called Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and was the first leader of a body then called “Islamic State of Iraq,” officially created in October 2006 by Zarqawi’s successor.<sup>16</sup>

Hamid Dawud Mohamed Khalil al-Zawi, known as “Abu Omar al-Baghdadi”, (1947–2010), was a general in Saddam Hussein’s famously secular police force—a curious background for a Salafist emir. Yet when he was killed near Tikrit in June 2010, the Iraqi press (which knows what it is talking about...) unanimously called “Islamic State of Iraq” a “small group.” The same month, general Stanley McChrystal, American Joint Special Operations Commander in Iraq, noted that IS was in its death throes; its general staff had lost 34 of its 42 members and it was cut off from its Al-Qaeda power base, holed up in the mountains of the Pakistan–Afghan border.

Yet 3 years later (April 2013), this haphazardly armed bloodthirsty gang had morphed into Dawla al-Islamiyya fi’il Iraq wa’l Sham (IS in Iraq and the Levant). Between January 2014 (the capture of Fallujah) and June 2014 (when it entered Mosul), this “state,” with its hundreds of armored vehicles taken from the fleeing Iraqi army, conquered the northern third of Iraq—over 150,000 km<sup>2</sup>. According to military experts, this formerly “small group,” cut off from Al-Qaeda, was “capable

---

<sup>16</sup>When Zarqawi was killed in Baqouba on 7 June 2006 by an American strike, Abu Ayub al-Masri, known as “Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, close to Zarqawi since 2003, assumed leadership of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. In order to localize the uprising, in October 2006, he created Islamic State in Iraq, which brought together local guerilla groups and entrusted the emirate to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. Both men were killed in a military operation close to Tikrit on 18 April 2010.



of encircling or isolating enemy units, sabotaging general staffs and enemy supply lines.” It could “mount coordinated and simultaneous attacks” and its anti-aircraft capabilities were “serious” (helicopters downed). The little group even had drones and river gunboats. Its chains of command were effective, like its commando units and its intelligence (infiltration, recruitment, penetrations, murders, and attacks). It also had enormous stockpiles of weapons and munitions.

One should note that the United States, despite its vast resources, has invariably failed to construct anything like credible national armies... So how can this miracle be explained? How can one account for this sudden mutation of a small group into an army of conquest?

### Who is in Command?

The conquest of northern Iraq in the first 6 months of 2014 stunned the world. The previously “small” group had undergone a mutation without anybody noticing—except those pulling the strings, and they certainly weren’t going to boast about it. The United States, the Europeans, and the states in the Arab Peninsula and the Gulf, though directly threatened, hadn’t seen it coming.

Subsequently, the powers active in the region did what they could to find out more about this mutant. Their efforts did finally produce a picture of IS, which was vague, but was nevertheless useful. Yet this picture differed so much from what the states concerned or the media thought they knew; and the story coming back from the terrain was so incredible that the main reaction was denial, everyone clinging to their old commonplaces, and nobody, at that time, incorporating the worrying discoveries into their strategies.

Reports coming from the ground were as follows: like all politico-military organizations, the IS apparatus had a pyramid structure, with the mujahidin at the base and the emirs at the tip. Yet, a painstaking analysis of the Who’s Who of the real IS leaders (undertaken in Baghdad by the anti-IS coalition) revealed that at the head of this fanatic Sunni body, *there were no Islamists*.

Two points need to be made before continuing:

- Firstly, we know what a typical Islamist emir (warlord) looks like: he will have spent years fighting wars on jihadist fronts, in Afghanistan, in Somalia, and elsewhere; his exploits and his preaching will have been circulated on the Internet, in videos, and in forums, etc. If he is now middle-aged, his childhood exploits, his commitment, his conversion to the holy war, his entire hagiography will be clear to see: his youth in sin, the conversion, joining the jihad—all in preparation for his final martyr’s death.
- Secondly, even if they were still incapable of predicting events, the immense electronic apparatus deployed in the Middle East was able to put together a trustworthy organigram of the IS military machine

within several months. It was possible to see the chains of command; the information that came up from the bases and the information that went down again made it possible to establish the pyramid referred to above.

Yet, the combination of these bodies of information indicates that the IS leadership is the prerogative of former officers of the Iraqi army and cadres from the Ba'ath party. More than 150 of Saddam Hussein's officers have been identified as IS personnel, in charge of intelligence, arsenals, and "special programs" (chemical weapons, etc.).

It should also be pointed out that, influenced by the origins of the "socialist" Ba'ath party, Saddam Hussein's army and party were paranoid bureaucracies bogged down in red tape; they kept thick dossiers on their personnel, Stasi-style, most of which survived the spring 2003 war.

The archives mined by the official experts have delivered up the following information: at the head of IS, the military leaders, or chiefs of intelligence and other technical functions (logistics, etc.), all come from the Iraqi army or from the Ba'ath party; their files reveal that before joining IS, they were secular or agnostic, living Western lives. On photos, their wives are bare-headed. Many of them were close to Uday, one of Saddam's two sons. In fact, their functions in the army and the party were such that if the painstaking controls they were constantly subjected to had revealed, not that they were Salafi but simply practicing Sunni, they wouldn't have survived long in their posts.

Between the defeat in 2003 and 2009, these members of the military resistance saw the inside of the prisons and camps of the American occupying forces: Abu Ghraib, Camp Bucca<sup>17</sup>, and the little-known but key Tasfirat prison in Tikrit.<sup>18</sup> There they approached the Al-Qaeda fundamentalists who, until then, they had fought against or avoided like the plague. But in the Middle East, more than anywhere, the enemy of my enemy very easily becomes my friend.

Since 2014, the IS has been run by Ba'ath party cadres or Saddam's officers. Have they all seen the light, in some miraculous, collective conversion? Or are they mercenaries, previously bought by the dollars of the petro-monarchies and now... we'll deal with this key issue below. As it would be too long (and tedious) to name them all, here are some of the most well-known:

**Waleed Jassem al-Alwani**, known as "Abu Ahmad," Iraqi ex-officer, a member of the IS military council (majlis al-Askari) (probably killed in an air strike at the end of 2014).

**Fadel Ahmed Abdullah Al-Hiyali**, known as "Abu Muslim al-Turkmani"

---

<sup>17</sup> Military camp near the Iraqi town of Umm Qasr. The American occupying army maintained a (one hopes, unintended) "terrorist incubator" for years there.

<sup>18</sup> In September 2012, a sophisticated attack by what was then known as Al Qaeda in Iraq freed about a hundred rebels held at the prison. On the foundation of Islamic State seven months later, a number of them would become part of the structure.

or “Abu Mutazz al-Quraishi,” member of the military council, officer in the special forces of the Iraqi army, and colonel of Saddam’s military.<sup>19</sup>

**Najem Fadel Adnan Ismail** known as “Abu Abderrahman al-Bilawi,” from the huge Bedouin tribe of the Dulaïmi, officer in Saddam’s presidential guard; in July 2013, he escaped from Abu Ghraib, reached the military council, and died in June 2014 outside Mosul.

**Adnan Latif Hamid al-Sweidawi** known as “Abu Abdul Salem” and also “Abu Ayman al-Iraqi,” colonel in Saddam’s army, member of military council (killed in 2014).

And also “**Abu Ali al-Anbari**,” formerly major general in Saddam’s army, chief of military operations in Syria; **Taher Tawfiq al-Ani**, former Iraqi colonel<sup>20</sup>, and many more.

Amongst the general staff and administration, where are the good, old-fashioned Islamists? Nowhere. Strange for a fundamentalist Sunni caliphate.

### What Exactly Did IS Do in Iraq?

Let us now take a look at what IS did in Iraq, then in Syria, and the real consequences of their actions.

First one should remember that the Iraqi Shia remained largely faithful to Saddam during the Iraq–Iran war. Despite their emotional connection and reverence for Iranian Shi’ism and its holy places, they take objection to any “fraternal aid” coming from Teheran, which too often resembles the Soviet Union’s help to Poland during the Cold War. When the supreme authority of Iraqi Shia, Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, returned from exile in Iran to the Iraqi holy city Nadjaf, he was expected to be fiercely opposed to American occupation, but he turned out to be conciliatory, ready even to engage in limited cooperation with the occupiers.

Let us now look at the actions of Zarqawi, who arrived in Iraq (via Kurdistan) at the beginning of 2003. The invasion of the country was completed on April 9 of the same year and on May 1, beneath the self-satisfied banner “Mission accomplished” on the Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier, president George W. Bush stated: “Our forces and those of our allies have prevailed in Iraq.” 111 days later, Zarqawi struck: on August 19, 2003 at 17:30, a booby-trapped truck destroyed the UN headquarters in Baghdad, killing 22 people, including the UN special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello. The explosion was heard 20 kilometers away.

On August 7, as an omen of what was to come, a car-bomb had destroyed the Jordanian embassy, leaving 14 dead. These attacks stunned the intelligence services

---

<sup>19</sup> Supposedly killed in a drone attack near Mosul in northern Iraq on 18 August 2015 (according to Reuters, “The White House confirms the death of the Islamic State second in command”, 21 August 2015).

<sup>20</sup> During the chaotic beginnings of the American occupation, Tawfiq al-Ani seized large quantities of arms and munitions, which were then handed over to IS.

active in Baghdad at the time, who had not seen them coming. The result was that Iraq froze, companies and international organizations fled or were paralyzed; reconstruction and a return to normal life became impossible. Iraq was plunged into chaos, a chaos which lasted until 2016.

On August 29, Zarqawi moved on to anti-Shia terrorism. In Nadjaf, a huge bomb was used to murder Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim and about a hundred of his co-religionists. The attack was claimed by Zarqawi, but experts read the signs of a special operation under jihadi cover. Worse still, on February 22, 2006, a huge attack laid waste to the Al-Askari shrine (the final resting place of Ali al Naqi and Hassan al-Askari, the 10th and 11th of the 12 Shia imams) in Samarra (destroying the dome, amongst other things).<sup>21</sup>

This final provocation by Zarqawi (after numerous others in 2004 and 2005) unleashed a Sunni-Shia civil war, leading to the murder of thousands of believers from both camps. Iraqi Shia, now obliged to beg for help and protection from Iran, were thrown into the arms of their “big brother.” They had become vassals of Teheran. In Baghdad, the Iranian general Qasem Suleimani gained an important say in affairs and a rank akin to that of a consul.<sup>22</sup>

Between 2007 and 2009, the American *surge* was unleashed on Iraq, with 170,000 American soldiers in combat. It cost hundreds of billions of dollars a year, but was in vain. On December 18, 2011, the last U.S. army operational unit left Iraq.

### What Exactly Has IS Done in Syria?

The Syrian civil war started in a low-key manner in Spring 2011, when the “Free Syrian Army” set out to conquer the “liberated areas.” And then a branch of Al-Qaeda was established in Syria, under the name of Jabhat (Front) al-Nosra.

The *kataeb* of the IS entered Syria from the province of al-Anbar in Iraq at the end of 2011. One would suppose that they came to fight against their *bête noire*, the Alawite Bashar el-Assad, a faithful ally of Shia Iran, but in fact, as soon as they arrived in Syria, IS forces hurled themselves against the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nosra, and, under some specious religious pretext, occupied their positions, cut their leaders’ throats, and massacred any militia refusing to swear allegiance to the caliphate. Compared to IS, the behavior of Bashar even looked acceptable. Hard on the heels of IS came general Suleimani and shortly afterwards, Shia militia, led by Hezbollah, arrived to bring succor to the Syrian regime. In turn, the Kurdish militia attacked IS, taking the pressure off Damascus.

In February 2014, Abou Khaled al-Suri, a Syrian leader of the coalition composed of Ahrar al-Cham and Jabhat al-Nosra, was killed in an IS suicide attack

---

<sup>21</sup> Built in 944 AD, the mosque received its golden dome in 1905, a gift from the then Shah of Iran. According to witnesses, the people who destroyed the mosque were wearing Iraqi ministry of the Interior uniforms.

<sup>22</sup> The greatly-feared general Suleimani commands the “Al-Quds force”, a unit of pasdaran Iranians responsible for special operations in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

in Aleppo. This bloody war between Islamist bodies caused thousands of deaths: focusing their efforts on “useful Syria” during this time, the Syrian army was keeping score. In August 2015, al-Nusra abandoned the north of Syria, following a wave of IS suicide attacks, causing 40 deaths. At the beginning of September, IS attacked the pro-American rebels on the outskirts of Damascus—and so it goes on.

From 2003 to this day, from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, this is how the IS has been operating in Iraq and in Syria. But to what end?

### Indirect Strategy: Key Strategy in the Middle East

Before considering the individual players, it is worthwhile looking at how the different armed groups active on the ground form, reform and break up, creating a kaleidoscope of mercenary groups. This dumbfounds European and American leaders today, but was actually long practiced in Europe, from the “free companies” of the Middle Ages to the *lansquenets* of the Wars of Religion.

In a warrior system resembling the football transfer market, shifty *kataeb* switch allegiance, camp, or activity (from guerrilla war to pillage or vice-versa) when they don’t get what they want. In autumn 2015, for example, an IS *katiba* active in Mosul learned that their salary was being dropped from \$400 a month to \$200, and they immediately deserted and joined Jabhat al-Nusra, who was still being paid the “traditional” way—from the ample pockets of the petro-monarchies.

Trustworthy observers of these regional practices can confirm that transfers like this take place every week. And in IS itself, not to mention the more chaotic groups, numerous local commanders claim to have 250 fighters when they only have half as many, in order to pocket the fictional wages.

Phantom soldiers, disappearing armed groups, *kataeb* to the highest bidder, all this makes it very difficult for the European, particularly French, leaders to discriminate between “good” anti-Assad fighters (who are given arms) from “bad” Islamists from the IS (who are bombed), when these bands switch time and again from one camp to the other, simply for more money.

And it can be worse than that: at the end of 2015, Abu Fatima al-Tounsi, emir of Deir Ez-Zor, disappeared with all the mujahidins' pay, leaving them the following message on Twitter: “What state? What caliphate? What a bunch of idiots...”<sup>23</sup>

### Teheran's Lengthy Experience

In June 2006, specific information regarding Iran’s strategy in Iraq was revealed by *The Atlantic*. According to an intelligence officer in a country bordering Iraq, “The Iranians have a strategy: they want to control Iraq. They are therefore aiding Zarqawi tactically but not strategically. They give him arms, uniforms, and

---

<sup>23</sup> “ISIS falls prey to “ghost armies” who fight on both sides of the battleground”, *Financial Times*, 21 December 2015.

military equipment, from the days of Ansar al-Islam.<sup>24</sup> And now (2006) they are letting Al-Qaeda operate there as well. Iran's war (in Iraq) is aimed at the United States; they will eliminate Zarqawi and his band when the Americans have left."<sup>25</sup>

In 2006, the American Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq also revealed that Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Pasdaran special forces were cooperating in secret, the idea being to exacerbate the chaos in Iraq in order to drive out the Americans.

In September 2013, the *New Yorker* published a special report on General Suleimani, stating that, "At the beginning of the war in Iraq, Suleimani encouraged the head of intelligence for the Assad regime to facilitate the movement of Sunni extremists through Syria to fight the Americans. Al-Qaeda was also allowed a certain freedom in Iran. Kurdish leaders say that Suleimani's objective has always been to keep Iraq's parties divided and unstable, ensuring the country stayed weak."<sup>26</sup> As is evident, there are exceptions to the supposed unforgiveable enmity between Sunni and Shia.

All this Western intelligence has been confirmed by the leadership of IS itself. On May 2014, Abu Mohamed al-Adnani al-Shami, a founder and spokesman for IS, issued an audio-message containing a tirade aimed at "Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, emir of Al-Qaeda." It was, in fact, a break with Al-Qaeda, entitled "Our apologies, emir of Al-Qaeda." Adnani reproached Zawahiri bitterly for having forced IS to spare Shia Iran "in order to protect its interests and its logistics in Iran. This makes Iran indebted to Al-Qaeda."<sup>27</sup>

### The Damascus Virtuosi

What is described below would remain unknown were it not for Wikileaks, which at the end of November 2010 posted more than 250,000 State Department diplomatic dispatches.<sup>28</sup> On February 18, 2010, Daniel Benjamin, State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, met with Faisal Mekdad, the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister, together with the Syrian ambassador to Washington.

Surprisingly, Ali Mamlouk, the discreet director general of the Syrian intelligence service, was also present. It is important to note that the presence of Ali Mamlouk at the meeting was unprecedented in Syria. He was there on the orders of Bashar al-Assad, who was seeking to develop a closer relationship with President

---

<sup>24</sup> First called Jund al-Islam, then Ansar al-Islam, the armed Arab-Kurdish group was active between 2000 and 2002 in Iraq-Iranian Kurdistan. Composed of Afghan jihadi veterans, the Salafist group was fighting against Saddam Hussein's Iraq—and for that reason were aided by Iran. In 2002, Zarqawi's Tawhid group was active within Ansar al-Islam. Subsequently, the survivors of the group joined Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and then Islamic State in Iraq.

<sup>25</sup> "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi", *The Atlantic*, July 2006.

<sup>26</sup> "The Shadow Commander", *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013.

<sup>27</sup> <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/new-audio-message-by-isis-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami-apologies-amir-al-qaida>.

<sup>28</sup> US Department of State Cf. study sources.



Obama. General Mamlouk extolled the counter-terrorist expertise of Syria, which had been fighting the Muslim Brotherhood for some 30 years. But Damascus has a different approach to Washington. “Normally,” said Mamlouk, “we don’t attack them, we don’t kill them directly. We infiltrate them first (‘a complex process,’ stressed the general), and we don’t act until the time is right.”

Still bogged down in Iraq, would the United States put up with the infiltration of foreign soldiers? Washington should let Damascus get on with it, suggested Ali Mamlouk, as they knew a whole lot more about the takfiris. “We have wide experience. We know them. We are on home ground. Let us deal with it” to the benefit of both parties. “Of course,” he concluded, “we would like to be taken off the list of states which sponsor terrorism and we also need spare parts for our aircraft... But these are modest requests.”

In brief, help us to help you. This was a friendly proposal, certainly, but also a subliminal threat, as who can *really* say where infiltration finishes and manipulation begins? And what easier than to eliminate a danger that one has created oneself? The following spring, civil war broke out in Syria, the American ambassador left Damascus in October 2011, and it came to nothing. This does, however, provide a striking insight into Syrian, and by the by, Iranian, indirect strategy in the region.<sup>29</sup> What follows are some specific examples of Mamlouk’s method.

- In September 2007, an American commando killed “Abu Muthanna al-Ansari,” leader of the “Sinjar” organization, which takes its name from the Iraqi town in the province of Nineveh which neighbors Syria. During the operation, the commandos seized the (spring 2006 to summer 2007) archives of Abu Muthanna’s Iraq–Syria operations. They turned out to be a treasure trove: detailed books of accounts, logistics, and administrative inventories, and personal files on 576 foreign jihadi travelling through to Iraq—212 of them on “suicide operations.” All Al-Qaeda’s “import-export” and “human resources” bureaucracy is recorded: infiltrations and exfiltrations, funding, smuggling, etc.<sup>30</sup> The documents show that, in the full knowledge of the Syrian special services, the following jihadi passed through the country: 237 Saudis, 111 Libyans, 46 Syrians, 44 Yemeni, 41 Algerians, 36 Moroccans, and 11 Jordanians.
- On October 20, 2008, in the Syrian frontier town of Abu Kamal, an American Joint Special Operation Command, which had come into the country from Iraq, killed “Abu Ghadiya,” an Iraqi Al-Qaeda cadre.

---

<sup>29</sup> And the strategy has a long history: Hafez al-Assad, Bashar’s father, was constantly engaged in this manner during the entire Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).

<sup>30</sup> “*Treasury designates members of Abu Ghadiya’s network facilitates flow of terrorists, weapons and money from Syria to al-Qaeda in Iraq*” (US Department of the Treasury, 28 February 2008).

Originally called Badran Turki Hisham al-Mazidih, this Iraqi from Mosul had run Al Qaeda's cross-border logistics operation since 2004. From Syria (which was supposedly tracking the jihadis), his logistics operation was supplying Zarqawi, and then his successor, Abu Ayub al-Masri, with money, arms, men, counterfeit papers, guides, and hideouts, etc. Yet here the document also revealed Abu Ghadiya's close links with Assef Shawkat, at that time leader of the Syrian military intelligence service and Bashar el-Assad's brother-in-law.

- And lastly, there is this recent and troubling report by Mohamed Qassim, a moderate opponent of the Damascus régime, and previously prosecutor in the Syrian town of Tadmur. In April 2015, this level-headed lawyer saw the Syrian army abandon the city, which shortly after was seized by IS. The aim of the withdrawal strategy was to bring IS into direct contact with the Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) rebels in the neighboring region of Qalamoun, so that IS could destroy them.

### Who Is Pulling the Strings?

The IS is clearly a mercenary army. It is neither an uprising nor a guerilla army—least of all a terrorist group. But can one be a mercenary in one's own service? Of course not. And hence the fundamental question: who are they serving? Or, rather, as the region defies any simplistic analysis, who is able "to influence" this machine in its own interests and who is in a position to do so?

On this point, Saudi Arabia is now on the sidelines—or has had its *pitbull* stolen. And the other Gulf petro-monarchies are incapable of conducting such weighty, long-lasting, and complex operations. Who else is there in the region? Who might be responsible? Who would be in a position to do so? Because such indirect and bloody strategies are complex to mount, and even more complex to conduct with any degree of finesse.

One of the plausible candidates is the Islamic Republic of Iran. It certainly has a long and rich track record of terrorist indirect strategies:

- The Sunni Tunisian Fouad Ali Saleh was recruited and trained by the Iranian services for the 1985–1986 Paris attacks.
- During the 1990s, Ankara military intelligence created a Turkish Hezbollah, in reality a Kurdish gang in Turkey, in order to eliminate the personnel belonging to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). But then the Iranian special services gained control of this local Hezbollah and used it to kill dozens of government opponents in Teheran, in Turkey, and in surrounding countries. The affair caused quite a stir at the time; there were trials in Turkey and a number of publicly available

documents exist on this ignominious affair.

Let us now look at the states in the Shiite arc, which stretches from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, through to Southern Lebanon. All of them clearly have dreams of putting Sunni extremism out of action. Some of them have considerable resources and skillful operators at their disposal, and have engaged in indirect strategies for many years. And for the leaders of the countries in this arc, the IS is a propaganda and communication gift: a media calamity...throat-slitting...butchers...rape of slaves...appalling destruction of heritage. What better to horrify the planet? And Muslims too. And once IS is eliminated, who would dare advocate Salafism in the decades to come?

Even if it meant discreetly embellishing Salafist-jihadist ideology, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, an Al-Qaeda dissident called Abu Musab al-Suri (“the Syrian”), is the ideologue of neo-jihad, and has written a ‘bible’ on the subject in English, entitled “Call for worldwide Islamic resistance,” which serves as the operational framework for IS operations abroad. But where did al-Suri write his work? According to a November 2016 article in the *New York Review of Books* by Ahmed Rashid entitled “Seeing the despair of jihad,” he wrote it “in Iran, where he was a refugee at the time.”

That is not all. The main character in the middle-eastern game is, of course, the United States. Its strategy was to pursue two goals in order to extricate itself from the disasters of the Bush years. In Syria, it sought to create a “modest” opposition to Bashar el-Assad, leading to regime change in Damascus. In Iraq, it sought to create a government which could make the Sunni-Shia religious war a thing of the past.

And who but IS has kicked these two projects, the mere mention of which now brings a smile to the face, well into touch? And what option has been left to the White House to avoid regional checkmate? It has little option but to follow Teheran’s lead, the capital of the empire which invented the game of chess.

We know that in the Middle East, state terrorism has the intangible goal of appealing to the adversary of the moment to negotiate or to evolve. This type of terrorism is not designed to punish or to exact vengeance. So when an attack originates in the Middle East, any country which is a victim should ask itself very quickly: Whose toes have I trodden on by mistake? What blunder have I committed? What is the message? Who can explain it to me? Because these terrorist missives are never marked “return to sender.” When you don’t know where it comes from, the attack is so much more terrifying.

Is it not now time to dedicate our efforts to the work of deciphering the messages? Not in order to capitulate, of course, but in order to *understand*. A close scrutiny of the “influences” to which the succession of “Abus” at the head of IS are subject would probably be the best way to illuminate the present and throw light on the future of Islamist terrorism, in the Middle East of course, but above all, in Europe.

This is a quest which doesn’t seem entirely futile.