

## ISIS and the Taliban: Writing on the wall for Afghanistan

Written by Administrator

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Afghans sleepwalked to the polls to replace Karzai, with a choice between a US-educated ex-World Bank official Ashraf Ghani (and his warlord VP Dostum), or the Tajik Abdullah Abdullah who threatens chaos if he loses. Iraq's April elections, the first national elections since the US declared 'success' and left in 2011, provide an indication of what could be in store for Afghans. Rather than confirming the new order, they precipitated a 'surge' by Sunni insurgents, who quickly capture a third of the country, discrediting the whole US-imposed electoral process.

Plans for consolidating Iraq and Afghanistan as pro-US regimes appear to have collapsed with ISIS's capture of Mosul, facing virtually no resistance. The Kurdish Peshmurga militia took control of Kirkuk, and in the south, Iraq's Shia brace to resist ISIS. Iraqis are now living through the 1990s Afghan scenario, when the Taliban quickly took over a country in the grips of sectarian violence with the promise to disarm militias and provide security. In Iraq's Sunni majority areas, a population exhausted by war and violence is now faced by the same prospect of accepting a harsh rule by Sunni extremists who promise security.

### From AQI to ISIS

The Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham/ Syria (ISIS, ISIL) is the heir to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), formed as a direct result of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, successor to AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (d. 2006) and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (d. 2010), has suddenly emerged as a figure who is attempting to shape the future of Iraq, Syria and the wider Middle East along the lines proposed by Osama Bin Laden.

In 2006, AQI created an umbrella organization, the Mujahideen Shura Council, in an attempt to

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unify Sunni insurgents in Iraq, and AQI spokesman Abu Ayyub al-Masri declared the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) as a front which included the Shura Council factions. AQI was at a low point in its fortunes in 2010, as the resistance of the US occupation was supposedly collapsing due to the US surge of 2007–2008. But the US decision to disband the Iraqi army and ban Saddam Hussein's Baath Party in 2003 also meant the destruction of the Iraqi state, which meant that the insurgents merely had to wait till the occupying troops departed.

AQI's transformation into a homegrown organization covering the Levant is reflected in its name change to ISIS in April 2013. The Syrian Jabhat al-Nusra (Support Front, 2012) functioned in parallel to ISIS, and supposedly merged with it in 2013. ISIS leader Baghdadi is arguably the real heir to Bin Laden, rather than Ayman Zawahiri, who in vain told Baghdadi to leave Syria to Nusra, and has shown no real initiative since Bin Laden's assassination in 2011.

It was Baghdadi who took the initiative to avenge Bin Laden, which included

- 24 attacks near Baghdad immediately afterwards
- a wave of ISI suicide attacks beginning in Mosul in August 2011 resulting in 70 deaths
- a series of coordinated car bombings and IED attacks in Baghdad in December 2011, killing 63 just days after the US completed its troop withdrawal from the country.

How far Baghdadi is directly responsible for the military strategy and tactics of ISIS is uncertain. Former Iraqi army and intelligence officers from the Saddam era are said to play a crucial role. AQI nonetheless follows the al-Qaeda logic of terror against civilians who oppose their program, a spin-off of quietist Saudi Wahhabism, but with Wahhab's militancy restored, the so-called neo-Wahhabis. (Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab inspired the Saudi tribal leaders to rebel against the Ottomans, eventually founding the Saudi state.)

### Dilemma for the US

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, there was no equivalent of the Islamist movements which offer a genuine alternative to Saudi Wahhabism—the Muslim Brotherhood or the Iranian Islamists led by Ayatollah Khomeini, which meant that the collapse of the secular regimes—Afghanistan in the 1990s and Iraq in 2003—quickly gave way to extremist neo-Wahhabi insurgencies, which initially found common cause with al-Qaeda.

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This relationship soured in Afghanistan with 9/11, which the Taliban were not party to, but the US invasion of Afghanistan again gave the Taliban and al-Qaeda common cause. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the collapse of Sunni political power opened the door to al-Qaeda there.

US strategy after invading in both cases was to promote a “surge” (Iraq 2007–2008, Afghanistan 2010–2012) to defeat the insurgencies. It is clear in both cases that the surge was unsuccessful, merely providing a breathing space for the US to withdraw its troops, *a la* Vietnam in 1975.

Iraq’s present crisis is an indication of what is in store for Afghanistan, where a resilient Taliban aim to reassert control. The US can no longer prevail in either country, as the neo-Wahhabis gain strength. It is only a matter of time before angry Saudi citizens recreate the same dynamic in the kingdom itself.

The only realistic option to prevent this is for the US to push its Saudi ‘ally’ to work with Iran and Russia to achieve a negotiated settlement of the Syrian civil war, and with Iran in Iraq and Afghanistan to support the elected governments.

The alternative is to let Iraq disintegrate into Sunni, Shia and Kurdish states, and to allow a similar disintegration of Afghanistan into Tajik, Pushtun and Shia states—after hundreds of thousands more deaths.

Can Obama reverse the nightmare of the past decade, or is this scenario what the US intends?

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