

Ahmad Fadhil was eighteen when his father died in 1984. Photographs suggest that he was relatively short, chubby, and wore large glasses. He wasn't a particularly poor student—he received a B grade in junior high—but he decided to leave school. There was work in the garment and leather factories in his home city of Zarqa, Jordan, but he chose instead to work in a video store, and earned enough money to pay for some tattoos. He also drank alcohol, took drugs, and got into trouble with the police. So his mother sent him to an Islamic self-help class. This sobered him up and put him on a different path. By the time Ahmad Fadhil died in 2006 he had laid the foundations of an independent Islamic state of eight million people that controlled a territory larger than Jordan itself.

The rise of Ahmad Fadhil—or as he was later known in the jihad, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—and ISIS, the movement of which he was the founder, remains almost inexplicable. The year 2003, in which he began his operations in Iraq, seemed to many part of a mundane and unheroic age of Internet start-ups and a slowly expanding system of global trade. Despite the US-led invasion of Iraq that year, the borders of Syria and Iraq were stable. Secular Arab nationalism appeared to have triumphed over the older forces of tribe and religion. Different religious communities—Yezidis, Shabaks, Christians, Kaka'is, Shias, and Sunnis—continued to live alongside one another, as they had for a millennium or more. Iraqis and Syrians had better incomes, education, health systems, and infrastructure, and an apparently more positive future, than most citizens of the developing world. Who then could have imagined that a movement founded by a man from a video store in provincial Jordan would tear off a third of the territory of Syria and Iraq, shatter all these historical institutions, and—defeating the combined militaries of a dozen of the wealthiest countries on earth—create a mini empire?

The story is relatively easy to narrate, but much more difficult to understand. It begins in 1989, when Zarqawi, inspired by his Islamic self-help class, traveled from Jordan to “do jihad” in Afghanistan. Over the next decade he fought in the Afghan civil war, organized terrorist attacks in Jordan, spent years in a Jordanian jail, and returned—with al-Qaeda help—to set up a training camp in Herat in western Afghanistan. He was driven out of Afghanistan by the US-led invasion of 2001, but helped back onto his feet by the Iranian government. Then, in 2003—with the assistance of Saddam loyalists—he set up an insurgency network in Iraq. By targeting Shias and their most holy sites, he was able to turn an insurgency against US troops into a Shia–Sunni civil war.

Zarqawi was killed by a US air strike in 2006. But his movement improbably survived the full force of the 170,000-strong, \$100 billion a year US troop surge. In 2011, after the US withdrawal, the new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, expanded into Syria and reestablished a presence in northwest Iraq. In June 2014 the movement took Mosul—Iraq's second-largest city—and in May 2015 the Iraqi city of Ramadi and the

Syrian city of Palmyra, and its affiliates took the airport in Sirte, Libya. Today, thirty countries, including Nigeria, Libya, and the Philippines, have groups that claim to be part of the movement.

Although the movement has changed its name seven times and has had four leaders, it continues to treat Zarqawi as its founder, and to propagate most of his original beliefs and techniques of terror. The New York Times refers to it as “the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.” Zarqawi also called it “Army of the Levant,” “Monotheism and Jihad,” “al-Qaeda in Iraq,” and “Mujihadeen Shura Council.” (A movement known for its marketing has rarely cared about consistent branding.) I will simplify the many changes of name and leadership by referring to it throughout as “ISIS,” although it has of course evolved during its fifteen years of existence.

The problem, however, lies not in chronicling the successes of the movement, but in explaining how something so improbable became possible. The explanations so often given for its rise—the anger of Sunni communities, the logistical support provided by other states and groups, the movement’s social media campaigns, its leadership, its tactics, its governance, its revenue streams, and its ability to attract tens of thousands of foreign fighters—fall far short of a convincing theory of the movement’s success.

Emma Sky’s book *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*,¹ for example, a deft, nuanced, and often funny account of her years as a civilian official in Iraq between 2003 and 2010, illustrates the mounting Sunni anger in Iraq. She shows how US policies such as de-Baathification in 2003 began the alienation of Sunnis, and how this was exacerbated by the atrocities committed by Shia militias in 2006 (fifty bodies a day were left on the streets of Baghdad, killed by power drills inserted in their skulls). She explains the often imaginative steps that were taken to regain the trust of the Sunni communities during the surge of 2007, and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s alienation of those communities again after the US withdrawal in 2011 through his imprisonment of Sunni leaders, his discrimination and brutality, and the disbanding of Sunni militias.

But many other insurgent groups, quite different from ISIS, often seemed to have been in a much stronger position to have become the dominant vehicles of “Sunni anger.” Sunnis in Iraq initially had minimal sympathy with Zarqawi’s death cult and with his movement’s imposition of early medieval social codes. Most were horrified when Zarqawi blew up the UN headquarters in Baghdad; when he released a film in which he personally sawed off the head of an American civilian; when he blew up the great Shia shrine at Samarra and killed hundreds of Iraqi children. After he mounted three simultaneous bomb attacks against Jordanian hotels—killing sixty civilians at a wedding party—the senior leaders of his Jordanian tribe and his own brother signed a public letter disowning him. The Guardian was only

echoing the conventional wisdom when it concluded in Zarqawi's obituary: "Ultimately, his brutality tarnished any aura, offered little but nihilism and repelled Muslims worldwide."

Other insurgent groups also often seemed more effective. In 2003, for example, secular Baathists were more numerous, better equipped, better organized, and more experienced military commanders; in 2009, the militia of the "Sunni Awakening" had much better resources and its armed movement was more deeply rooted locally. In 2011, the Free Syrian Army, including former officers of the Assad regime, was a much more plausible leader of resistance in Syria; and so in 2013 was the more extremist militia Jabhat-al-Nusra. Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss show in *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, for example, that al-Nusra formed far closer links to tribal groups in East Syria—even marrying its fighters to tribal women.

Such groups have sometimes blamed their collapse and lack of success, and ISIS's rise, on lack of resources. The Free Syrian Army, for example has long insisted that it would have been able to supplant ISIS if its leaders had received more money and weapons from foreign states. And the Sunni Awakening leaders in Iraq argue that they lost control of their communities only because the Baghdad government ceased to pay their salaries. But there is no evidence that ISIS initially received more cash or guns than these groups; rather the reverse.

Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss's account suggests that much of the early support for the ISIS movement was limited because it was inspired by ideologues who themselves despised Zarqawi and his followers. The al-Qaeda cash that launched Zarqawi in 1999, for example, was, in their words, "a pittance compared to what al-Qaeda was financially capable of disbursing." The fact that it didn't give him more reflected bin Laden's horror at Zarqawi's killing of Shias (bin Laden's mother was Shia) and his distaste for Zarqawi's tattoos.

Although the Iranians gave Zarqawi medical aid and safe haven when he was a fugitive in 2002, he soon lost their sympathy by sending his own father-in-law in a suicide vest to kill Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, Iran's senior political representative in Iraq, and by blowing up one of the most sacred Shia shrines. And although ISIS has relied for more than a decade on the technical skills of the Baathists and the Sufi Iraqi general Izzat al-Douri, who controlled an underground Baathist militia after the fall of Saddam, this relationship has been strained. (The movement makes no secret of its contempt for Sufism, its destruction of Sufi shrines, or its abhorrence of everything that Baathist secular Arab nationalists espouse.)

Nor has the leadership of ISIS been particularly attractive, high-minded, or competent—although some allowance should be made for the understandable revulsion of the biographers. Mary-Anne Weaver, in a 2006 Atlantic article, describes Zarqawi as “barely literate,” “a bully and a thug, a bootlegger and a heavy drinker, and even, allegedly, a pimp.” Weiss and Hassan call him an “intellectual lightweight.” Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger in *ISIS: The State of Terror* say this “thug-turned-terrorist” and “mediocre student...arrived in Afghanistan as a zero.” Weaver describes his “botched operation[s]” in Jordan and his use of a “hapless would-be bomber.” Stern and Berger explain that bin Laden and his followers did not like him because they “were mostly members of an intellectual educated elite, while Zarqawi was a barely educated ruffian with an attitude.”

If writers have much less to say about the current leader, al-Baghdadi, this is because his biography, as Weiss and Hassan concede, “still hovers not far above the level of rumor or speculation, some of it driven, in fact, by competing jihadist propagandists.”

Nor is ISIS’s distinctive approach to insurgency—from holding territory to fighting regular armies—an obvious advantage. Lawrence of Arabia advised that insurgents must be like a mist—everywhere and nowhere—never trying to hold ground or wasting lives in battles with regular armies. Chairman Mao insisted that guerrillas should be fish who swam in the sea of the local population. Such views are the logical corollaries of “asymmetric warfare” in which a smaller, apparently weaker group—like ISIS—confronts a powerful adversary such as the US and Iraqi militaries. This is confirmed by US Army studies of more than forty historical insurgencies, which suggest again and again that holding ground, fighting pitched battles, and alienating the cultural and religious sensibilities of the local population are fatal.

But such tactics are exactly part of ISIS’s explicit strategy. Zarqawi lost thousands of fighters trying to hold Fallujah in 2004. He wasted the lives of his suicide bombers in constant small attacks and—by imposing the most draconian punishments and obscurantist social codes—outraged the Sunni communities that he claimed to represent. ISIS fighters are now clearly attracted by the movement’s ability to control territory in such places as Mosul—as an interview in Yalda Hakim’s recent BBC documentary *Mosul: Living with Islamic State* confirms. But it is not clear that this tactic—although alluring, and at the moment associated with success—has become any less risky.

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Reuters

A still from the video released by ISIS on April 19, which appears to show the execution of Ethiopian Christians by members of Wilayat Fazzan, another affiliate of ISIS, in southern Libya

The movement's behavior, however, has not become less reckless or tactically bizarre since Zarqawi's death. One US estimate by Larry Schweikart suggested that 40,000 insurgents had been killed, about 200,000 wounded, and 20,000 captured before the US even launched the surge in 2006. By June 2010, General Ray Odierno claimed that 80 percent of the movement's top forty-two leaders had been killed or captured, with only eight remaining at large. But after the US left in 2011, instead of rebuilding its networks in Iraq, the battered remnants chose to launch an invasion of Syria, and took on not just the regime, but also the well-established Free Syrian Army. It attacked the movement's Syrian branch—Jabhat-al-Nusra—when it broke away. It enraged al-Qaeda in 2014 by killing al-Qaeda's senior emissary in the region. It deliberately provoked tens of thousands of Shia militiamen to join the fight on the side of the Syrian regime, and then challenged the Iranian Quds force by advancing on Baghdad.

Next, already struggling against these new enemies, the movement opened another front in August 2014 by attacking Kurdistan, driving the Kurdish forces—who had hitherto stayed out of the battle—to retaliate. It beheaded the American journalist James Foley and the British aid worker David Haines, thereby bringing in the US and UK. It enraged Japan by demanding hundreds of millions of dollars for a hostage who was already dead. It finished 2014 by mounting a suicidal attack on Kobane in Syria, in the face of over six hundred US air strikes, losing many thousands of ISIS fighters and gaining no ground. When, as recently as April, the movement lost Tikrit and seemed to be declining, the explanation appeared obvious. Analysts were on the verge of concluding that ISIS had lost because it was reckless, abhorrent, over-extended, fighting on too many fronts, with no real local support, unable to translate terrorism into a popular program, inevitably outmatched by regular armies.

Some analysts have, therefore, focused their explanations not on the movement's often apparently self-defeating military strategy, but on its governance and revenue, its support from the population, and its reliance on tens of thousands of foreign fighters. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, a fellow of the Middle East Forum, has explained in recent blog posts how in some occupied cities such as Raqqa in Syria, the movement has created complicated civil service structures, taking control even of municipal waste departments. He describes the revenue it derives from local income and property taxes, and by leasing out former Iraqi and Syrian state offices to businesses. He shows how this has given ISIS a broad and reliable income base, which is only supplemented by the oil smuggling and the antiquity looting so well described by Nicolas Pelham in these pages.²

ISIS's power is now reinforced by the staggering arsenal that the movement has taken from the fleeing Iraqi and Syrian army—including tanks, Humvees, and major artillery pieces. Reports from The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Reuters, and Vice News over the last twelve months have shown that many Sunnis in Iraq and Syria now feel that ISIS is the only plausible guarantor of order and security in the civil war, and their only defense against brutal retribution from the Damascus and Baghdad governments.

But here too the evidence is confusing and contradictory. Yalda Hakim's BBC documentary on Mosul makes rough brutality the secret of ISIS's domination. In his book *The Digital Caliphate*, Abdel Bari Atwan, however, describes (in Malise Ruthven's words) "a well-run organization that combines bureaucratic efficiency and military expertise with a sophisticated use of information technology."³ Zaid Al-Ali, in his excellent account of Tikrit, talks about ISIS's "incapacity to govern" and the total collapse of water supply, electricity, and schools, and ultimately population under its rule.⁴ "Explanations" that refer to resources and power are ultimately circular. The fact that the movement has been able to attract the apparent support, or acquiescence, of the local population, and control territory, local government revenue, oil, historical sites, and military bases, has been a result of the movement's success and its monopoly of the insurgency. It is not a cause of it.

In *ISIS: The State of Terror*, Stern and Berger provide a fascinating analysis of the movement's use of video and social media. They have tracked individual Twitter accounts, showing how users kept changing their Twitter handles, piggybacked on the World Cup by inserting images of beheadings into the soccer chat, and created new apps and automated bots to boost their numbers. Stern and Berger show that at least 45,000 pro-movement accounts were online in late 2014, and describe how their users attempted to circumvent Twitter administrators by changing their profile pictures from the movement's flags to kittens. But this simply raises the more fundamental question of why the movement's ideology and actions—however slickly produced and communicated—have had popular appeal in the first place.

Nor have there been any more satisfying explanations of what draws the 20,000 foreign fighters who have joined the movement. At first, the large number who came from Britain were blamed on the British government having made insufficient effort to assimilate immigrant communities; then France's were blamed on the government pushing too hard for assimilation. But in truth, these new foreign fighters seemed to sprout from every conceivable political or economic system. They came from very poor countries (Yemen and Afghanistan) and from the wealthiest countries in the world (Norway and Qatar). Analysts who have argued that foreign fighters are created by social exclusion, poverty, or inequality should acknowledge that they emerge as much from the social democracies of Scandinavia as from monarchies (a thousand from Morocco), military states (Egypt), authoritarian democracies (Turkey), and liberal democracies (Canada). It didn't seem to matter whether a government had freed thousands of Islamists (Iraq), or locked them up (Egypt), whether it refused to allow an Islamist party to win an election (Algeria) or allowed an Islamist party to be elected. Tunisia, which had the most successful transition from the Arab Spring to an elected Islamist government, nevertheless produced more foreign fighters than any other country.

Nor was the surge in foreign fighters driven by some recent change in domestic politics or in Islam. Nothing fundamental had shifted in the background of culture or religious belief between 2012, when there were almost none of these foreign fighters in Iraq, and 2014, when there were 20,000. The only change is that there was suddenly a territory available to attract and house them. If the movement had not seized Raqqa and Mosul, many of these men might well have simply continued to live out their lives with varying degrees of strain—as Normandy dairy farmers or council employees in Cardiff. We are left again with tautology—ISIS exists because it can exist—they are there because they're there.

Finally, a year ago, it seemed plausible to attach much of the blame for the rise of the movement to former Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki's disastrous administration of Iraq. No longer. Over the last year, a new, more constructive, moderate, and inclusive leader, Haider al-Abadi, has been appointed prime minister; the Iraqi army has been restructured under a new Sunni minister of defense; the old generals have been removed; and foreign governments have competed to provide equipment and training. Some three thousand US advisers and trainers have appeared in Iraq. Formidable air strikes and detailed surveillance have been provided by the United States, the United Kingdom, and others. The Iranian Quds force, the Gulf states, and the Kurdish Peshmerga have joined the fight on the ground.

For all these reasons the movement was expected to be driven back and lose Mosul in 2015. Instead, in May, it captured Palmyra in Syria and—almost simultaneously—Ramadi, three hundred miles away in Iraq. In Ramadi, three hundred ISIS fighters drove out thousands of trained and heavily equipped Iraqi soldiers. The US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter observed:

The Iraqi forces just showed no will to fight. They were not outnumbered. In fact, they vastly outnumbered the opposing force, and yet they failed to fight.

The movement now controls a “terrorist state” far more extensive and far more developed than anything that George W. Bush evoked at the height of the “Global War on Terror.” Then, the possibility of Sunni extremists taking over the Iraqi province of Anbar was used to justify a surge of 170,000 US troops and the expenditure of over \$100 billion a year. Now, years after the surge, ISIS controls not only Anbar, but also Mosul and half of the territory of Syria. Its affiliates control large swaths of northern Nigeria and significant areas of Libya. Hundreds of thousands have now been killed and millions displaced; horrors unimaginable even to the Taliban—among them the reintroduction of forcible rape of minors and slavery—have been legitimized. And this catastrophe has not only dissolved the borders between Syria and Iraq, but provoked the forces that now fight the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen.

The clearest evidence that we do not understand this phenomenon is our consistent inability to predict—still less control—these developments. Who predicted that Zarqawi would grow in strength after the US destroyed his training camps in 2001? It seemed unlikely to almost everyone that the movement would regroup so quickly after his death in 2006, or again after the surge in 2007. We now know more and more facts about the movement and its members, but this did not prevent most analysts from believing as recently as two months ago that the defeats in Kobane and Tikrit had tipped the scales against the movement, and that it was unlikely to take Ramadi. We are missing something.

Part of the problem may be that commentators still prefer to focus on political, financial, and physical explanations, such as anti-Sunni discrimination, corruption, lack of government services in captured territories, and ISIS's use of violence. Western audiences are, therefore, rarely forced to focus on ISIS's bewildering ideological appeal. I was surprised when I saw that even a Syrian opponent of ISIS was deeply moved by a video showing how ISIS destroyed the "Sykes-Picot border" between Iraq and Syria, established since 1916, and how it went on to reunite divided tribes. I was intrigued by the condemnation issued by Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar—one of the most revered Sunni clerics in the world: "This group is Satanic—they should have their limbs amputated or they should be crucified." I was taken aback by bin Laden's elegy for Zarqawi: his "story will live forever with the stories of the nobles.... Even if we lost one of our greatest knights and princes, we are happy that we have found a symbol...."

But the "ideology" of ISIS is also an insufficient explanation. Al-Qaeda understood better than anyone the peculiar blend of Koranic verses, Arab nationalism, crusader history, poetic reference, sentimentalism, and horror that can animate and sustain such movements. But even its leaders thought that Zarqawi's particular approach was irrational, culturally inappropriate, and unappealing. In 2005, for example, al-Qaeda leaders sent messages advising Zarqawi to stop publicizing his horrors. They used modern strategy jargon—"more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media"—and told him that the "lesson" of Afghanistan was that the Taliban had lost because they had relied—like Zarqawi—on too narrow a sectarian base. And the al-Qaeda leaders were not the only Salafi jihadists who assumed that their core supporters preferred serious religious teachings to snuff videos (just as al-Tayeb apparently assumed that an Islamist movement would not burn a Sunni Arab pilot alive in a cage).

Much of what ISIS has done clearly contradicts the moral intuitions and principles of many of its supporters. And we sense—through Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss's careful interviews—that its supporters are at least partially aware of this contradiction. Again, we can list the different external groups that have provided funding and support to ISIS. But there are no logical connections of ideology, identity, or interests that should link Iran, the Taliban, and the Baathists to one another or to ISIS. Rather,

each case suggests that institutions that are starkly divided in theology, politics, and culture perpetually improvise lethal and even self-defeating partnerships of convenience.

The thinkers, tacticians, soldiers, and leaders of the movement we know as ISIS are not great strategists; their policies are often haphazard, reckless, even preposterous; regardless of whether their government is, as some argue, skillful, or as others imply, hapless, it is not delivering genuine economic growth or sustainable social justice. The theology, principles, and ethics of the ISIS leaders are neither robust nor defensible. Our analytical spade hits bedrock very fast.

I have often been tempted to argue that we simply need more and better information. But that is to underestimate the alien and bewildering nature of this phenomenon. To take only one example, five years ago not even the most austere Salafi theorists advocated the reintroduction of slavery; but ISIS has in fact imposed it. Nothing since the triumph of the Vandals in Roman North Africa has seemed so sudden, incomprehensible, and difficult to reverse as the rise of ISIS. None of our analysts, soldiers, diplomats, intelligence officers, politicians, or journalists has yet produced an explanation rich enough—even in hindsight—to have predicted the movement's rise.

We hide this from ourselves with theories and concepts that do not bear deep examination. And we will not remedy this simply through the accumulation of more facts. It is not clear whether our culture can ever develop sufficient knowledge, rigor, imagination, and humility to grasp the phenomenon of ISIS. But for now, we should admit that we are not only horrified but baffled.